

**DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE**  
**Book Two**

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## **Dedication**

*To Christopher D. Smith for giving me a place the Imperial Order and changing my life forever.*

*Also to all the wonderful people of M.I. and ISOC – Thank you.*

*And to Wanderhomies wherever you now are- you were the greatest community and server of them all and I shall forever miss you.*

## **Prologue**

*They say that time heals all wounds but I don't always believe that. It has been my experience that time also allows wounds to fester and rot. Instead of finding peace one finds darkness and learns to hate slowly, evenly. Lord Vader was one of those men who hated in the dark. His anger was a slow burning acid that gnawed its way through his soul. He never forgot and as far as I knew, he never forgave but once in a while he relented, just a little.*

## **Chapter 1**

My exile on Tatooine ended suddenly when Lord Vader contacted me via holo transmission and told me that I could return to Coruscant and resume my duties to him there. It was a short, one sided conversation with no explanations, no apologies and no chance for me to ask questions but after almost a year of being banished from his sight I welcomed his terse words despite the fact it meant I would, once again, have to leave my home and my family. Saying my farewells was hard. The night before the return journey to Coruscant we had a big family gathering. It was bitter sweet. For the first time in my life I really understood what it meant to have such a good family and I knew that this time the goodbyes would be even more heart wrenching than before. Fortunately, Uncle Vahlek had made it a little easier by asking if I would drop him off on Corellia which was directly on the way to Coruscant. It meant that I was not alone for much of the trip which was mostly his intent. We spent a great deal of the time talking and I was grateful for his company. Only for the last few hours of my journey was I alone.

Coruscant never changed. It was loud, cold and busy, a shiny polished planet without a soul. It felt very strange to be back. I had gotten used to being home and I liked it there despite all the peculiar things that had happened this time around. Now it was back to all the noise, all the light, the single sun, weather controlled planet, palace intrigue and everything else that I hated here. Even my flat seemed unfriendly to me and part of me wished I had taken up my uncle's offer of one of Kahvi's kittens to keep me company. At least the cleaning droids had done a decent job of keeping the place more or less dust free and clean but compared to the joy and the warmth of my family home in Mos Eisley this spacious, beautiful flat was unwelcoming and lonely. I unpacked my things with a hollow lump in my throat and wandered about the place like a lost child. Then after I stopped feeling sorry for myself I did something I had not done in a very long time. I soaked for several hours in a bath tub full of hot bubble filled water, a luxury which I had sorely missed on Tatooine.

I had returned at a quiet time of the year. Winter Fete celebrations had happened eight weeks prior and I wasn't complaining that things were in the usual after New Year's lull. Shiv had pounced on me two days after my return and regaled me with all the crazy gossip that I had missed. Some things just never changed and I had laughed at his descriptions of who was sneaking around with whom, about the fights that had broken out, as they did every year, and about the various promotions that had been awarded. Sitting in a quiet, expensive café in the fashion district listening to him spin tales about the life in the imperial court that I had missed, I remembered the good side of being back. Shiv had a gift for gossip and storytelling and through his words I felt as though I was not only catching up but seeing it all through his eyes. In return I had shared stories about Tatooine and life at a docking bay, much to his shock and horror. He considered anything outside of the

Core to be entirely too provincial and Tatooine was his worst nightmare. I just laughed when he wrinkled his nose in disgust. I loved my home now even more so than before.

Work kept me busy and for that I was grateful. Lord Vader's needs, to-do lists and schedule were more insane than ever, making him more demanding than usual. I didn't mind his moods because I was happy to be back in his good graces, if there was such a thing. While I had kept on top of most things during my time on Tatooine, I still had a lot to catch up with. For the most part I liked my job. It was a challenge. My days were filled with conference calls, schedule adjustments, shouting matches and running around doing errands for the dark Lord. My evenings were spent working out, reading, studying Cheunh or hanging out with Shiv and the gang. Although Thrawn was still deployed in the Unknown Regions, his letters arrived fairly regularly, brightening my day completely. Sometimes I found it hard to believe that so much time had passed since we had last actually seen each other.

Two weeks after my return a bouquet of flowers consisting of rare Nubian Sunset roses and Corellian Moon-bursts was delivered to my office. The delivery girl had smiled as I signed for them and made a comment about me being lucky to have such a thoughtful admirer. I just gave her a smile that said, 'I know' and a nice tip for her troubles.

There was a small card tucked deep within the flowers that simply said;  
*Welcome back, I trust you are settling in.*

How Thrawn kept so well informed was beyond me. There had been no time to get word to him that I was heading back to the Imperial Center yet he had known. I had asked Jarack about this when he dropped off Thrawn's latest letter to me but all he had said was; "*The Admiral always knows where you are, Miss.*" And had given me one of those secret smiles reserved for those in the know not telling a person who wants to know the very thing that has aroused the curiosity in the first place. I had just made a face and he had laughed as he left the office. If I didn't know any better I would have half suspected Thrawn of having some tracking device tacked to me somehow.

For some time now he and I had been corresponding only in his native language. While at first this presented quite a challenge for me, under his guidance my use of Cheunh improved greatly and in the space of nine months, give or take, I had become quite fluent at least with the written side of things. He had provided me with the most amazing dictionaries and data bases with sound files and pronunciation help but it was one thing to practice with the computer programme and quite another to speak with a native. I was looking forward to seeing him again so I could get in some practical lessons. The other two languages he had suggested I learn and given me information for had presented less of a challenge and on Tatooine I had found several traders and a few pilots who were fluent in both Minnisiat and Sy-Bisti, neither were hard for me to pick up.

I enjoyed the challenge of learning a new language but Cheunh was by far the hardest I had ever set my mind to. It had taken a very long time before I could read his letters without constantly consulting the extensive data base he had given me. Once I could read his words without help, I usually savoured them in the quiet of my flat, with a cup of tea and no distractions. I would often reply to him the same night while his thoughts and stories were still fresh in my mind. It was easy to get side tracked if I put off answering him right away. His latest letter was still playing catch up with me because it had been written while I was still on Tatooine and having to deal with the Imperial governor there. It was fun to read it.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*It is always a delight to read your letters and I am quite sure that Jarack gets a great deal of enjoyment from watching me try to contain my smile as he hands me your latest missive.*

*Your latest adventure in Bestine sounded quite frustrating, for the most part and I truly wonder sometimes how it is that such people end up in the employ of the Empire. I can only imagine that you try their patience greatly by not actually doing any real work in the office you have been given. They probably think that you have been sent to spy on them and report back to Lord Vader. I can only imagine that this makes them nervous. I do feel inclined to reiterate my previous words to you and tell you to be careful. Tour Aryon is not someone to mess about with and as she already despises Lord Vader. You might want to tread just a tad more lightly around her. It is not that I think she, herself, would actually attempt to do you any physical harm but it has been my experience that petty kings, or queens, of their own little hills have a tendency to want to maintain their feeling of superiority and you upset that when you show up at the office there. I know of your delightful habit of speaking your mind so, please for the sake of my own peace of mind, watch your step.*

*You asked about my current work, in truth it is not that interesting. Primarily, we are responsible for mapping and exploration of the Unknown Regions. Space is big, as you well know and out here on the edge of things it is even larger and wilder. I rather like it, being out here is a lot more honest than working the palace political intrigue one is generally forced into when one works on Coruscant. I am sure you know exactly what I am speaking about. Most recently we have been in the Gradilis Sector looking at a red star and its sole satellite, a most interesting arboreal world. There is an ancient fortress on this world, left behind from some long ago culture. It is most intriguing, hidden away in the middle of a very lush, very beautiful forest. We have been looking for places to establish long range bases so who knows, perhaps we have found something suitable.*

*Now, my dear, I am hoping you will clear up a mystery for me. For the last few months I have been under the impression that there is something weighing heavily on your mind. I have tried to read between the lines but your grasp on my language is remarkable for one so newly schooled in it and I cannot make head nor tail of what it is that is weighing you down. Are you unhappy to be back on Tatooine or is it your not so recent disagreement with Lord Vader that is the source of what worries at you? You were not specific as to the nature of your fight with him but I get the impression it was very unpleasant. The fact that he did not kill you is a fairly major indication that you are of use to him, if that is what is on your mind? I know you get tired of me pestering you about your ability to keep secrets but I should like to think that I am more than just a language coach or passing interest. As a friend I am hoping you trust me and feel that you can talk to me about anything that troubles you. I assure you I am remarkably good at keeping confidences.*

*On a lighter note I did laugh at the story of Bel arguing with the book dealer. How is it that she always manages to find someone to have a heated discussion with? I must say that her skills for debate are quite amazing. While I am still uncertain if I should find a way to get back at you for leaving me alone with her during our brief stay on Tatooine, I was very impressed by her argument for the rather unusual theory behind the Kischi painting. You know the one that hangs in your family home living room, behind the green chair. I am beginning to wonder if I should not consider hiring her as a part of my team. She is quite something. Please tell her that she is not the only one who thinks that Kischi had several students who could emulate his work most effectively so it is entirely possible that the painting in your living room was completed by one of them, hence the slight difference in the brush stroke structure. I have a small treatise to send her on the subject that I think she would rather enjoy. I sent it to her directly as I thought she might enjoy getting mail of her own. Did she eventually buy any of the Book seller's wares or was she just playing with him? Poor bastard probably had no idea what hit him, and for reasons I cannot explain this image makes me laugh.*

*Now, Sj'iu' Tekari, I must end this. I know it is a short letter and I apologise but we are currently running exercises to see if we cannot increase our proficiency on surprise attack drills. Jarack will be here in a few moments to pick this up and take it to you. I hope you will forgive my lack of interesting stories to tell, I promise, next time I will be more engaging.*

*In the mean time, look after yourself and try to stay out of trouble. I look forward to hearing from you. Your letters always brighten my day.*

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

I laughed at the comments about Bel. She had argued with the antique book dealer for almost two hours before buying a small first edition of a book of poems by the famous poet Tiveria Sekanis. I hadn't known at the time but the book was a birthday gift for me and I had cried when I had unwrapped it. I was certain that when he came back, it was one of the books Thrawn would very much enjoy looking at. Then, I had sighed at his almost eerie ability to read between my inability to spit it out, wondering then as I balanced my tea cup on the arm of my seat how I would answer the one question I had been dreading since the day I had found out who my birth parents were. With a sigh, I got up to refresh my tea and then settled down answer Thrawn because I had told Jarack I would have a letter for him to pick up in the morning and I didn't want to waste his time.

*Mia e'Tekari,*

*Coruscant never sleeps do you know that? It is a pretty planet, all lit up like a Boonta Eve street festival, but it's terribly restless and utterly soulless. We had a very impressive micro storm earlier on and I wished you could have seen the lightening as it danced about the sky scrapers. I turned the lights off so I could watch and in the darkness I realised how fragrant the flowers are that you sent. I am not sure how to thank you for such a beautiful and thoughtful gift. The moment I unwrapped them they reminded me of home because the roses are the colour of a Tatooine sunset, and the Corellian Moon blossoms are almost the same colour as the planet's moons' light, which I am certain was the effect you were going for. I am quite sure it was not a coincidence that they arrived at the same time I got hit by a really bad bout of homesickness.*

*Shiv was very impressed and although I commented to him that they could have been from anyone when he admired your thoughtfulness, he just laughed. He said and I quote 'Highly doubtful beautiful flowers such as this would come from anyone else, since most of the scyks that have been on your tail do not have the forethought or taste to send you such a beautiful combination.'*

*I had to laugh because he is such a designer at heart, after going on about how expensive the roses must have been to get them shipped at this time of year, he suggested that I should ask Cati to make me a dress using the same combination of colours, then he took a blossom sample from each one so goodness knows what he plans. He said to tell you that you win points for class and making me smile.*

*You mentioned in your last letter that you felt I had something weighing on my mind. I wonder sometimes how you know these things, and if I should start looking over my shoulder for spies or something. As you have guessed, there is something I have wanted to tell you for months now but have not been able to find words for. I must have started the letters trying to talk about it a dozen times but words seem pale in comparison to that actual event so I have decided to just say it.*

*While I was home, I had a strange encounter in Mos Espa with a woman called Rikka Blane. To make a long story short she told the following. I was born on Tatooine in her house, the illegitimate child of a Jedi named A'kali L'uanna and a clone soldier, a*

commander I think. I spent almost the first year of my life in Rikka's care before my mother came back and took me away to be hidden from those hunting Jedi. Rikka showed my holo-images of my birth mother and I look just like her. It was quite a shock to see. This first visit with this woman who looked after me for the first year of my life was unnerving. I don't quite know what to tell you about it all really, I am still trying to sort it all out myself. I went back to see Rikka twice more to talk to her and to learn more about the woman who gave birth to me. It was a bitter sweet thing, more pain and sorry than joy or happiness and despite this woman's warmth and compassion I was always glad to get away from her, the house and the memories she carried. I wonder if I have ever met anyone who was so sad before. I learned a lot about the woman she had called friend but I don't know that I learned a lot about the woman who gave birth to me, if that makes sense. I can't seem to think of her as my mother somehow, and her face is just an image of someone who looks an awful lot like the reflection I see in the mirror. I can't quite connect the dots. This knowledge doesn't make me whole, it just makes me melancholy. I mostly try not to dwell on it all to be honest, but it does answer some of the more pressing questions about why I can do some of the things I am able to do.

According to Lord Vader A'kali L'uanna was killed by her lover, the man who fathered me and as I write this I can't help but shake my head because my life is starting to sound more and more like a very bad holo film. You know one of those awful stories where it turns out that everyone is related to everyone else and they all die horribly at the end. How much more complicated can it get? I suppose I should be happy really, now at least I know where I was born and my birth date. Papa jokes that I am lucky because now I get to celebrate two 'birthdays', because we always celebrated the day I was found. But this news didn't bring happiness it brought more questions and a strange sense of emptiness I can't explain. Just over two years ago I had no idea I was even adopted, now I have no idea what to even think. I wonder now at how twisted this universe is, I mean think about it, I work for the men who were effectively responsible for the death of my birth mother.

Lord Vader says he did not kill her himself but he was a part of the Jedi purge so Jedi L'uanna would have been on the run from him. It does seem very ironic and the more I think about it the more it makes my head hurt. I am sorry I didn't tell you any of this sooner, but to be honest I just didn't know how. There is so much more to say than what I am able to put into coherent thoughts on paper, especially in this language which I am still trying to grasp, so perhaps if we see each other again and you want to hear about this I will tell you. Until then I think this is enough on this subject because honestly, I find it depressing.

I really enjoyed your description of the arboreal world you came across in the Gradilis Sector. It sounds fascinating. I have never seen a planet belonging to a red star. I imagine the lighting must be spectacular. Do you think it will really be a place you will find useful for your secret and nefarious plans? I must admit I enjoy all the veiled secrecy in your words and it feels as though you half expect me to somehow figure it all out. So far I haven't come up with any brilliant ideas, but I will let you know when I unearth your secret plot.

Speaking of which, and totally unrelated, I have that list you asked for finished and will send it along with this letter in the form of an encrypted data-chip. Not sure if it will help you much but it's all the information I could find without raising eyebrows and suspicions. I am betting that my uncle Vahlek knows more. I can ask him if you like, if you need more information. What I can tell you from everything I heard before I left was this. There isn't much love lost between Kast and Fett. Everything else is on the data chip.

Well, it's three am and I am falling asleep so I guess I will close this now and get it ready for Jarack tomorrow. He's very efficient and very secretive, you know. It seems to



*me my life is filled with secretive men, complicated family issues and a great lack of answers that make any sense. Papa always tells me that the only constant we can rely on is that nothing is constant at all except change. This statement usually earns him one of my looks and ends with me having to go and make a cup of tea.*

*I hope that you are well and safe. Because it is so late and I am so tired I will risk sounding girly and maudlin and tell you that I miss you. Do you know it has been almost a year, exactly, since we last saw each other? I can't believe how quickly time slips by.*

*And yes, Bel bought a book from the bookseller. I'll show it to you when you pop by next time, I think you will be even more impressed with her taste when you see it. She wrote to tell me you had sent her something, she didn't say what but according to papa she was blushing when she read your note and spent the rest of the day humming happily. I suspect that you will greatly hugged and not severely poked the next time you set foot at the Docking bay. Bel's had a bit of a rough go of it until she came to work and eventually live with us. I can't imagine her not in my life to be honest, so thank you for making her happy.*

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,  
Merlyn*

Thrawn's latest letter had arrived on my desk just before I was already to go home and relax from what had been a really hectic day. There were lots of crazy appointments that Lord Vader had suddenly decided to cancel which needed to be rescheduled as well as some rather heated arguments about certain deliveries he wanted made sooner than the original deadline given. I had spent most of my day pretty much trying not to shout at everyone I spoke to and it was one of those days where even invoking Lord Vader's name did not help the process any. I was so looking forward to the holiday, Tapani day, coming up in a week's time.

Being busy kept my mind off being maudlin. I sorely missed my family and my home but most of the time I was just too inundated with work to think about it. Lord Vader, it seemed, had decided that he would make full use of my talents as his go-to girl and things had never been as hectic as they now were. Or maybe, I had thought ruefully one day, he was actually punishing me in a more cruel and unusual manner than before, making him far more subtle than I had ever given him credit for being.

I didn't really mind though, it felt good to be needed even if it was in that typical Lord Vader shouty, unappreciated way. I got a certain amount of satisfaction knowing I was good at my job and that he relied upon me to get things done. Of course it also made my chances of being killed due to failure somewhat greater but every job comes with risks.

Jarack came into the office just as I was starting to lose my cool with a droid manufacturer and he watched with a bemused smile on his face as I dealt with this latest catastrophe in the saga of droid engineers. I had been doing almost the exact same thing the last time I had seen him and it was ironically funny. Lord Vader went through droid manufacturers and engineers the way courtesans changed clothes. His big thing at the moment was a new sort of probe droid. This would be the thirteenth one in two weeks who had essentially signed his own death warrant. I waved at Jarack who, as always waited until I was finished with the holo conversation I was having.

"Afternoon, Miss Gabriel." He grinned. "I see it's business as usual, today."

I rolled my eyes. "You know, I honestly don't get why people think they can fight Lord Vader on anything. It just makes him cross and that usually results in someone dying. It simply isn't good for business."

He laughed. He had a nice laugh, rich and warm. In the time he had started taking care of the letters that Thrawn and I wrote to each other I developed a certain connection to him. He was a quiet man in his mid to late thirties, with silver grey hair ever so slightly

longer than regulation allowed and a neatly trimmed beard and moustache. His eyes were a strange silvery colour that almost matched his hair and they were intense sometimes to look at. I was quite sure that if he had ever worked as an interrogator of any kind his victims would have cowered immediately after being stared at for any length of time. I was curious enough to wonder about what it was he really did and polite enough not to ask. I am certain he knew this and it amused him greatly.

"I heard a whisper that the Admiral might actually be returning to the core worlds sometime in the near future." I said as I signed for the bulky envelope.

He smiled. "There may indeed be some truth to that rumour but I can neither confirm nor deny it."

"I guess that would mean I will see less of you and you get a break from playing postman."

He just shrugged ever so slightly. "Perhaps, but I rather enjoy the smile I get when I walk in through your door, most people who see me come into a room do not smile like that in fact they generally do not smile at all. This is one of my more pleasant duties, shall we say?" He said.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what else he did but he shook his head almost imperceptibly and I just nodded. "Next time you see the Admiral, say hullo for me?"

"I always do, Miss and it always makes him smile even though he tries his best not to show it."

"Thanks Jarack." I said. He had long ago, on several occasions told me not to call him Commander Behl but my request that he call me Merlyn had fallen on deaf ears; he always called Miss, ma'am or Miss Gabriel and I had given up trying to make him stop.

"Will you be needing me to come by tomorrow?" He asked.

I took a look at the bulkiness of the courier package and shook my head. "No, I have a late night ahead of me and I think this will take longer to answer. I'll send a message, if that's okay?"

"Of course, you know the drill. Till next time, then. " He said with a wink and vanished, leaving me to open the latest surprise from Thrawn. I looked inside and smiled, then tucked it all away until it was time to go home. Work came first and I still had some shouting to do. Not for the first time did I wonder if I should start wearing clothes fashioned after Lord Vader's own outfit, maybe that would get better results.

Several hours later, in the quiet of my flat, curled up on the most comfortable of chairs, with a cup of tea in hand I sat down to read the letter Thrawn had written. As always, it was almost as if he were sitting across from me talking. If I closed my eyes I could picture him, his hands gesturing to help articulate his point, his eyes flashing and his smile. Of course closing my eyes to conjure his image did not help me read his words.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*I am currently sitting in the quiet of my quarters and we have crept into the first hour of the graveyard watch. I am certain you know this time well, the quiet time when things seem to have completely calmed down. It never ceases to amaze me that although there is no day or night in space, humans cling to some sort of internal clock. This watch is, for some reason, always the most serene. The ship's engines hum quietly in the background and as I sit here in the relative silence listening to them I am sharply reminded of you. Ever since the incident with the Ahnkeli' Su'udelma's hyperdrive I have been far more aware of the sounds of engines than I previously was. You have no idea how far reaching your influence is, my dear.*

*I am truly glad you enjoyed the flowers. I had suspected that you might feel a little down coming back to a planet you do not like very much. While I know you are happy to be back in Lord Vader's, dare I say this, good graces, leaving your home world after such a long visit will have been hard. I remember how difficult it was for you the last time to*

say goodbye to your family when we were both there. Now, I imagine that leaving takes on extra significance since you know that you were born there and it truly is your home.

It seems that I have become accustomed to your evasiveness when something is on your mind and have developed almost a sixth sense for it. There is no spying involved just an ability to read between the banter and as you would say, cut to the chase. I did not, however, anticipate your news and I quite honestly don't know how to respond to it. I will tell you this, you need never apologise for not telling me something personal which troubles you. I only ask because I know that often in your case, it helps to talk and because sometimes I worry you might explode from all the secrets you keep locked away inside that beautiful head of yours.

This news must have been quite a shock for you. If I understood correctly, it sounded to me as though it was delivered in a fairly abrupt and unexpected manner. I do not pretend to even begin to understand what you must have thought, what you must have gone through when you learned the truth of everything. I wonder though, if it brings some sort of closure for you in some ways, allowing you to move forward by answering questions that, while you have never voiced them, must have certainly been on your mind.

I must tell you that in all honesty I am not so surprised to learn that you are the offspring of a Jedi. Your particular talents and gifts should, I believe, have made this obvious to those who knew what to look for. I dare say Lord Vader was not at all shocked by it and it might go a long way to answering your questions about why he and the Emperor have a vested interest in training you and keeping you close to their court.

I do understand that you find all of this information unnerving and difficult to deal with but that will change in time. Certainly, when I return to Coruscant I would love to hear your thoughts on it all. I imagine that you would also benefit from having someone neutral in this matter to talk with. I laughed at your somewhat apt description of your life. It does indeed have many of the elements of a crazy holo story, except it is, in your case, all true. I doubt very much though that everyone is related to everyone else and I certainly hope that we do not all die horribly in the end. Life can get very complicated if you let it, although, to my way of thinking, in many ways, this information has simplified yours a great deal. While you rarely ever spoke of it, I know that the question of where you came from burned in your heart, even Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was concerned for you about this weight you carried. Now that you know the whole truth perhaps you understand better the reasons your adoptive parents kept it from you as long as they did. Maybe now you can even forgive them a little for keeping such terrible secrets.

That you are the offspring of a Jedi will no doubt raise a few eyebrows considering their somewhat restrictive ideas on relationships, but during times of conflict it should not be such a huge surprise. There were many rumours of pairings between clone soldiers and women during the Clone wars. No matter what, biological nature is hard to override and during times of great stress and war the need to copulate and procreate is very strong, especially amongst humanoids. I imagine that your birth mother might have had more difficulties with the situation as it went against the Jedi code of non attachment, everything she would have been taught from an early age. It was sobering to read that it was probably the man who fathered you that hunted and killed her. This leads me to suspect that he was, as you surmised, most likely a Commander. I wonder if he had, like so many others, taken a name on for himself and if it is perhaps possible to find out exactly who he was.

During that time, the armies of the republic were cloned on Kamino and the genetic source was a man who originally came from a planet called Concord Dawn. I don't know if you are aware of this or not but his native language was Mando'a, or Mandalorian as it is sometimes known as. I guess this would help to clear up one more

little mystery about you, although how you would automatically know this language is beyond me. Perhaps some trick of your birth mother's? Maybe something she was able to pass on to you through the force? Lord Vader might be a better person to clear that question up for you.

I have a lot of information on the Clone wars and the clone armies raised by the Kaminoans. The history of this time period fascinates me and I did some digging underneath the propaganda that is readily available. Clones have many uses as well as many problems. The Kaminoans were able to very successfully raise huge armies of very capable soldiers in fairly short periods of time. Of course, I have my own reasons for being interested in clones and all the issues this particular aspect of science and technology raises. I must admit you bear no physical resemblance to the images of the clones that I have seen, but from what I have read of them you do have some of their traits such as loyalty, tenacity and bravery. I suspect you have inherited your wilful stubbornness from your mother. You can let me know if you want more information and I will see what I can do.

The planet in the Gradilis sector is indeed ideal for my, how did you put it, secret and nefarious plans. Where do you come up with these terms, my dear? I think you are covertly reading far too many trashy space detective stories from the Jeb Holloway era. Next you will be calling me a dastardly rat bastard, start wearing your hair in inexplicable, gravity defying coifed styles, slinky silk dresses sexily slit up to your hip and a nasty little stiletto blade strapped to your thigh. While this image is most appealing for a number of reasons, I beg you not to try it for real.

There was no veiled secrecy nor were there any tests of your ability to see into my secret plot, not that I have one. There really is nothing much to say about what we are doing out here. The Emperor wished to learn more about these unexplored areas of space, perhaps for possible expansion or so that he has a better idea of what possible enemies or allies are out here. I assure you there is no brilliant and nefarious plan in the works, at least not yet at any rate.

Thank you for the information you sent, it is most useful and exactly what I was hoping for. You are, as Lord Vader says, quite resourceful. Your 'boss' and I are conferring on a plan, still in the initial planning stages but he seems open to this idea and I, we, may yet call on you for further help. I would prefer for the time being you do not bring your uncle into it; the less people involved who can connect dots the better.

I am afraid I do not have all that much in the way of exciting news to tell you. It has been quiet here for the last week or so. Our advances in this region have been remarkable but sometimes it is just space with not much in between. My brother used to call it the Great Black. He was drawn to space, even as we were small children he knew that he would serve in the Chiss equivalent of the Imperial Navy. As small boys we used to play at being star fighter pilots. We must have driven our parents mad with our nonstop chatter of space and ships.

It's odd, I don't think of Thrass that often. It has been a long time since he was reported MIA and I am certain he is no longer alive but of course no one knows this for sure. I do not often let sentiment interfere with my work but all this talk of family brings these memories up and at this moment I find myself missing him. I wonder what he would have made of you. I can almost hear his voice telling me that getting involved with someone not of our kind will only serve to make me even more unpopular than I already am with my people. Rest assured popularity was never high on my list of things I considered important. My younger sister, on the other hand, would most likely see this as a good thing. She enjoyed my rebellious side and in many ways takes after me on this. Unlike Thrass and me, she did not become involved in the military and was taken on by one of the artistic families. She is a very talented artist in her own right and perhaps

someday I will be able to show you some of her works. She has recently had a piece admitted to the U'kalleyj'ann Art Gallery's permanent collection. This is one of the main art galleries in the capitol city of Csaplar. I am, needless to say, quite proud of her accomplishments. I think that should the two of you ever meet, you would get along well. You have a surprising amount in common.

The Chiss produce extraordinary works of art, typical of a people such as mine, but few outsiders ever get to see or experience them. In some respects I find it a little sad that, on the whole, they tend to be fairly xenophobic and somewhat close minded on the subject of off worlders. There would be those of my people who would be furious at me for teaching you Cheunh. It is not the first time I have shared knowledge of my language with outsiders and I don't know that it would be the last. I feel that it is vital to be able to communicate properly with other species and in order to learn about their culture learning the language is first and foremost a must. You already understand this so really I am preaching to the converted. I truly look forward to speaking with you in Cheunh and seeing how far you have progressed in the pronunciation department. I hope that the data I provided you with has proven helpful there and not just for writing.

I have to admit your talent with speaking my language astonishes me. For some reason humans seem to have great difficulty with some of the more complex sounds, particularly the soft palate sch and the tj sound made with tongue and teeth. I wonder if this gift you have for languages is not somehow tied up in your own force talents. Admittedly, I know a lot less about all the particulars of the Force and all the gifts associated with it than I should like, perhaps this is an area you can help me out with. I am quite certain that given the two mentors you have in this arena, you could find out a lot more about it. In the mean time I shall continue to nudge you in the direction of fluent Cheunh and hope that you do not get too bored along the way. Speaking of which I did find the data you sent on Huttese very helpful. You are right in your assessment of the language, it is very brash and somewhat uncouth but considering the species it comes from this is not too big of a surprise.

As something to help you while away your free time, I am sending you a holo book I just finished. I think you might enjoy it. It is a trashy space detective novel set in the Holloway era, I kid you not. It was sitting in the common room and one of the junior officers recommended it. I must admit I was a bit taken aback but he was quite passionate about the whole "grime crime" genre. I feel it is important to try to make some effort to understand the men serving under me so I read it. To my surprise, aside from the awful clichés and terribly dated dialogue, I found it enjoyable. Of course you are much too young to know anything about the fad of Jeb Holloway, but I hope that doesn't stop you from enjoying the book anyway. It is not to be taken too seriously. I am hoping at some point to find you some books in Cheunh but they are more difficult to come by so you will have to be content with my letters as practice until I can get my hands on some.

My dear, I am quite flattered that you stay up until the small hours of the night writing to me, but really you should get some sleep. Jarack or one of his people would not mind if you rescheduled a pick up. He is paid to be both efficient and secretive; this is part of his job. I have known him for some time now, he was one of the best in his year at the Academy and as a commando he was part of an elite group of men I felt could be utilised in far better ways. Do not be fooled by the fact that he delivers my letters to you and vice versa, that is a side line or perhaps better to say a great favour he does for me. As to your question about the types of male attention you attract, I can only speculate on why men of mystery, as you call them, would be attracted to your side but I am certain that were I to utter what I think it would earn me a projectile of some sort being flung in my general direction or worse.

*Sj'iu' Tekari, I am indeed aware that it has been almost a year since I last had the delightful pleasure of conversing with you face to face, a most enjoyable past time I might add. I treasure these moments in my mind and heart. I do not think that it is maudlin or girly, as you so eloquently put it, to tell someone you miss them especially when time and distance create a void that is hard to fill. I must admit, I find the knowledge that my absence is a gap in your life is oddly gratifying. Your affections are precious to me, surprising as that may sound. Now who is being sentimental? On that terribly mawkish note I should end this particular train of thought.*

*The next time you talk with or write to Bel please send her my regards. She was a little worried you might not like it if I wrote to or sent her articles on art, but I get the feeling you are actually happy when you see others you care about being made happy. Envy is a remarkably useless emotion that serves no purpose what so ever. I think that your upbringing on that unpleasantly warm sandbox must have been to say the least, interesting and that you were surrounded by even more diverse and intelligent people cannot be a coincidence. After all you have been through in the last two years this family of yours must be a great source of balance and comfort for you. If I can repay their kindness to me for the hospitality shown when we were there briefly I will not hesitate to do so. And if it also means I have found a reprieve from Bel's poking then I am truly thankful. Now, I am afraid I really must end this letter as I need to get to the bridge and deal with some issues that have arisen. How is that saying, No rest for the wicked? Take care of yourself and stay out of trouble.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia  
Mith'raw'nuruodo*

Of all the people I both dreaded and longed to see when I returned to Coruscant, Master Kjestyll was at the top of my list. I had tried to keep up with my studies in the Bunduki arts but it had been hard to maintain a serious and regular training schedule of any kind, until the day I learned that uncle Vahlek was an excellent sparring and training partner. Mostly I was on my own.

Two days upon returning my uncle's home, after the fight with Lord Vader I had woken up from a bad dream only to realise I wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep. It was early, pre dawn and I had decided that instead of tossing and turning in bed it would be far more productive to work out, maybe even work through some of the demons that tormented me.

Outside the air had still been cool and only the faint lightening of the sky hinted at the coming dawn. I loved this time of day. It was as close to absolute peace as I ever got. Dressed in clothes I could easily move in I began to go through the warm up lessons I had been taught and before long had lost myself in the beauty of the movements that Master Kjestyll worked so hard with me to get right. I neither noticed the light in the sky or that at some point my uncle had woken up, made himself tea and had gone looking for me. He sat on the front steps of the house and watched in silence as I worked through the basic forms slowly, then began the more complex patterns and combinations, dancing in the sand He had not said a word until I stopped to catch my breath. By this time the first rays of Tatoo I were snaking their way across the ground.

We just started at each other for a moment and then after he had sipped at the last of his tea he had said. "You have been well taught by a master very proficient in the form of cho-dhi."

"Cho-dhi?" I had asked as I'd followed him inside and gratefully accepted the cup of tea he had poured me.

He'd nodded. "The style of Bunduki combat you use is known as cho-dhi, it means something along the lines of invisible edge. It is one of the more subtle styles and you are very good."

I had sipped my tea and regarded my uncle for a moment then asked. "How do you know this, Zte'sa?"

He had smiled. "Evidence of a misspent youth." He had told me. "My father's way of quelling my rebellious nature as a very small boy was to send me off to a well renowned and quite prominent business man, Yacoub Magdi-Zatteri to work in his gardens as punishment. What my father did not know is that this man was also a Bunduki master among other things. I used to watch him go through the slow Kata forms every day at dawn while I started my work in the gardens. I would try to emulate him in secret but he was no fool, he caught me at it. He made a deal with me, if I would tend to his garden to the best of my abilities and he would teach me this art form to the best of his. I worked in those gardens for nearly seven years and every day he taught me this beautiful martial art."

"Why did you stop?"

"Master Zatteri was killed, assassinated in his garden by twelve men. It was a beautiful summer's day." He had told me, the sadness in his voice made me sorry I had asked.

"Why?"

"He was a man with many enemies. I never knew the exact reason for this at the time but I swore I would avenge his death. That day changed my life forever."

"You were there when it happened?"

He'd nodded. "Tried to save him, tried to help but they were too many, they were too well trained and I was just a young boy. One of them knocked me unconscious and when I came to my master was dead along with ten of his attackers. I will spare you the details but it wasn't pretty. I had just turned thirteen. "

I had looked at him for a moment wondering if I should ask the next question or not. "Did you ever find the other two?"

"I did. It took a long time but by then I was much older and far more experienced." He had looked at me for a moment with his pale green eyes and then had said, "And to answer your next question, yes. I killed them both and did not regret it." He had given me a small, tight smile. "His teachings were just the beginning for me, after his death I sought others who would teach me, I eventually ended up on Anzat and learned many valuable lessons under the watchful eye of Akku Seii. Still I never forgot my first Master I ever had. His life, his death shaped what I became, much as your does to you now. Treasure your time with him, Lei'lei." He had toyed with his tea cup. "The way you move, reminds me of my first master. The one who is teaching you is very good. I see the same grace in your actions."

We had just looked at each other for a moment and I felt him testing me to see whether or not the news that he had killed changed how I saw him. It didn't. Perhaps two years ago it might have but not anymore. I had not looked away from his gaze and after a few moments he had nodded in acknowledgment of my acceptance. I had passed his test.

"How long were you on Anzat, Zte'sa?" I had asked after a long silence.

Anzat was a strange planet out in the Mid Rim. Not much was known to me about it and no one ever went there, but I had heard stories from some of the spacers and pilots about it, none of them good.

He had regarded me for a moment with his eerie pale green eyes. "Too long." There was finality in his voice that begged for me not to push. He sounded weary.

I had sighed. "I miss him, my Master, he is gentle and kind but firm as well. When everything else around me feels like it's going to hell in a sand cart he is refuge in the storm."

Uncle Vahlek had smiled then. "The best teachers usually are Lei'lei."

After that, every morning until I had returned home he had sparred with me and he was very, very good. He guided and taught much as Master Kjestyll did although his style was quite different.

I learned a whole range of new moves and some not so nice tricks. I had made a point of going to stay with my uncle for a few days every second week or so, mostly to get away from the hustle and bustle of Mos Eisley but also because I needed the training and I needed the time spent with him. There was a strange stillness to him that I craved, as though whatever sorrows and fears lay hidden deep inside me could be tempered by the darkness which he held close to his own soul. I never told my father and he never asked why I spent so much time with uncle Vahlek but I suspected he knew and did not disapprove. At least when I was with my uncle, I was safe.

The first day back under Master Kjestyll's watchful eye had been welcome but hard. He had not taken it easy on me wanting, I suspect, to see how much work he needed to do with me so that I would get back up to the level he felt I should be at. When I had left Coruscant I had just passed my trial and gone from level four to level five. Now after being under his scrutiny for the past four hours I wondered if I should not be sent back to level four. I felt like a bantha in a glass shop.

We sat on the floor bathed in the sunlight that streamed through the huge lancet windows. The dust we had stirred up danced in the beams and the pale yellow light sparkled. I waited for his comments as I worked into slow cool down stretches.

"You have been influenced by another teacher, someone trained in the Khaji-dho style. I see you have learned some interesting new tricks as well. Who has been teaching you on Tatooine?" he had asked.

I told him about my uncle and studied his face very carefully for signs of recognition at the name Vahlek Akosh but if Master Kjestyll knew him, his face gave nothing of it away. Instead he nodded and said. "Well, you are less rusty than I thought you would be and also more aggressive. Khaji-dho is a very offensive form of Bunduki and very, how would you say, old school. Do you like this form better?" he asked.

I shrugged a little. "I don't know if I like it better, it was more like learning slightly different choreography to a dance I already knew. I was just so grateful to have someone to work with that I never thought to question the differences. When Zte'sa asked if I wanted to learn something a little more offensive I didn't see why not, especially given the events that have happened in the last two years. Was this wrong?"

Master Kjestyll smiled. "A skill learned is never wrong, child. Your ability to adapt is quite remarkable sometimes." He said quietly. "When the Emperor asked me to teach you he said *'she is a subtle creature who requires a subtle hand.'* But now, I am not so certain of this assessment and perhaps I should take more care to teach you the more offensive style as well as the passive style you have been so far learning." He spoke thoughtfully. "In seven months from now there will be a gathering of students for trials, I think you would be ready to take your sixth level, but it would mean a lot of work between now and then."

I lowered my head in respect to him and smiled. "I am honoured you think that I would be ready. I will not let you down."

He laughed. "No, you never do, you are a most pleasing, as well as a most unusual student. Now, that was enough for today, I think you will remember this session tomorrow and you will have to ease the stiffness from some of your muscles. We will meet again in two day's time and get back to a regular schedule. I shall be working you hard so come prepared."

I bowed to him and grinned. Hard work didn't scare me.

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Shopping with Shiv was almost more a sport than a pleasurable way to pass the afternoon. I surveyed the mess in my living room and then looked at Shiv who just shrugged and smirked.

"You want something to drink?" I asked.

"Fraid not." He said. "I need to get in some last minute work before tomorrow, it being a holiday and everything. I guess I don't need to ask what you'll be doing." He told me eyeing the pile of books and holo films that littered about the living room table.

I just laughed. "I still can't believe he had the whole set of Jeb Holloway books there."

Shiv shook his head. "I can't believe he gave you such a good discount, they're worth a lot."

"Perks of working for the Empire, I guess."

Shiv made a face. "Bevin Glack hates the Empire but he is a sucker for a pretty face who makes baby bearded jax eyes at him."

"Oh, you noticed that, did you?"

"You, missy, are a shameless minx who shall come to a nasty end on the wrong side of the planet." He said in the weirdest attempt at an accent I had ever heard.

"I have no idea what you are talking about." I laughed.

He nodded towards the pile of holo books and films. "Well, read that lot and you will. I gotta run, see you tomorrow for lunch, don't forget then gang's all going to be there so be prepared for the inquisition. They are dying to know about everything."

"Roger that. Thanks Shiv, I had fun this afternoon."

He smiled and nodded. "Later kiddo," he said doing his usual kiss, kiss thing. "Don't stay up all night reading!"

I was still smiling when I locked the door and went back to make tea. In difference to what Shiv thought I actually had other things on my to-do list than read, I had a letter to write.

*Mia e'Tekari,*

*I laughed at your opening paragraph, engine rooms are great places, you know. And you should always listen to the sound of your ship even if you are now some high up admiral who doesn't have to get his hands dirty with engine grease and hyperdrive fluid. I don't know that I could ever let someone else control how my ship's engines ran. That would drive me bats.*

*You were right in that Lord Vader was not surprised about who and what my birth mother was. In fact he knew her a little, not well enough to make an immediate connection but perhaps on some subconscious level there was recognition. Lord Vader is not a stupid man but sometimes he is quite single minded and he occasionally misses the little details or maybe he just doesn't care about them that much.*

*I have been thinking a lot about what you said about this knowledge bringing me closure and to some extent you are right but on the other hand there are still a lot of questions open. I think Navaari would be proud though, I spent a great deal of time on Tatooine talking with my father, really talking, especially after finding out about my birth parents and being banished from Lord Vader's side. I think, at first he was worried I might try to go off on some half cocked mission to find out more about who my birth mother really was, but I don't need to do that. Her lightsaber, which she had sent to me via Rikka Blane told me all I needed to ever really know. That's a force trick, I'll tell you about later.*

*I would very much like to learn more about the clone soldiers but I would rather it waited until you were here and not done through letters. I hope you can understand that. I did try to find some information on them here but it is not easy to do and even my clearance doesn't allow that sort of access and, no I am not about to try slicing the*

*Imperial mainframe. I don't need Intel breathing down my neck. I have already heard some serious horror stories about Ysanne Isard including a rumour that she had her father framed and executed so she could take his place as Director of Imperial Intelligence. Frankly, she creeps me out, although I suppose that is sort of her job. I have seen and occasionally spoken with her at a couple of the many of the palace events we've attended. I think she that she is just more interested in trying to figure out where I fit into the scheme of things than being friendly. So far, I get the feeling she is convinced I am just Lord Vader's pet office girl and I am, in this case, very happy to play the part. I have heard whispers about what happens to those who get in her way.*

*I did ask Lord Vader about the possibility that my birth mother had passed along some unusual gifts to me. He told some interesting things. The Jedi, it seemed trained infants by methods that included some sort of mind touch. Melding and shaping the babies' minds before they could form opinions and attachments of their own, seems a bit creepy if you ask me, but anyway...Lord Vader said that Jedi L'uanna had some seriously powerful gifts in this area and she used to train infants. He said it was possible for her to have somehow passed along knowledge to me. We got to talking about other force gifts and it seems there are many and they vary from person to person and whether or not you are a user of the light side or the dark side. I must admit this light side / dark side thing is confusing. It is so black and white but people are just not like that.*

*So, according to Lord Vader I have three very strong talents, telepathy, empathy and psychometry. I also have telekinesis, the ability to move objects with thought, but he said that was child's play for most force users who had any talent at all and I can sometimes step into another's being's mind and 'push' them a little or a lot depending on how weak minded they are. This is not one of those talents I like to talk about or use, although I have on occasion. There are other abilities that I can learn but I need a teacher who is able to spend time with me and that's something Lord Vader has very little of these days. The ones I have listed above are the talents I have naturally, that developed on their own without any real training. I do see a difference now from two years ago. Practice and Lord Vader's teachings have helped me sharpen these skills.*

*The empathy part you know about, you've experienced that. I had thought it was just my ability to feel and sense the emotions of others but apparently it works both ways and I can send as well as receive. Lord Vader suspects this is strong in me because it was something my mother was very good at. It allows me the very handy ability to tell when someone is lying or not. He said this was a useful and somewhat unique little side line.*

*Telepathy is my second strongest gift and it is often how I and Lord Vader communicate when he doesn't want to try and sort out my addled descriptions of things. I can send him images, thoughts and words directly into his mind and vice versa and no it's not always pleasant but it gets the job done fast. I have to be close to him physically to do this, although he tells me that it is possible for someone powerful enough with this gift to hear and send thoughts as far away as across the galaxy. I joked that it was a good thing I wasn't that strong because I could then bother him all the time, but he didn't find it all that funny. I truly like working for and with Lord Vader but he has no sense of humour most of the time or maybe it is just that he doesn't get mine at all.*

*It was the last and probably the least likable of my own force gifts that we both spent a lot of time talking about, my ability to pick up the memories from an inanimate object. For me this gift is unreliable and frustrating. I simply have no words to describe what it feels like to touch something only to be flooded with memories and emotions that were never mine. It doesn't happen all the time and the strength of the images, the sensations varies greatly. Mostly, though, it feels like hell. Lord Vader says I really, really need to work on control and practice a lot more. He likened me to an ungrounded power coupling, sending sparks all over the place.*

*There are many different aspects of the Force and the various powers that go along with it. Lord Vader was in a good mood when we spoke about these things and he gave me some data on the various abilities telling me that perhaps he might be able to help develop some of them, when he does have time. I copied some of the more pertinent data on to the enclosed chip for you, since you asked. Do you have force users among your own people?*

*I told him about what happened when I held the lightsaber A'kali L'uanna had left for me. He was not surprised that I had learned so much about her from that. She was my birth mother and the connection between us would have been forged probably even before birth. He said while it was very frowned upon there have been Jedi children born and it was noted that the connection between the mother and the babies was often far stronger than that of normal parents with force sensitive children. He was curious about why I had hidden the lightsaber away; I suspect he wanted to see it. I told him I never wanted to ever touch it again as long as I lived. I mean, in the end, it's not as if I will ever use it as a weapon anyway. He seemed surprised by this but he didn't force the issue. He doesn't have this force gift of psychometry so he doesn't understand what it is like, how awful it really is. I asked my uncle to hide the stupid thing away. I half hope he'll destroy it but I know him better than that. Anyway, those are my particular force talents. Lord Vader says that had I been found and trained as a Jedi in the days of the Republic I would have been slightly above mediocre. I just laughed when he said that. I could live with being mediocre, after all that generally doesn't get you killed in the Empire's service, where as being good at what you do does.*

*Yesterday, I finished the Hallet Fenbach book you sent, you know the Holloway Era one, Dark is the Lonely Night. I loved it. I haven't laughed so hard in ages. I had no idea books like this existed to be honest but now I have 'seen the light'. Did you know, Shiv is a huge fan of this genre and he knew the perfect book shop to visit. He says that the one you sent is in the middle of the whole Hallet series, his Jedi turned detective set and that it probably wasn't the best example so if I liked it I will love the others. I ended up buying the entire set of Jeb Holloway books, since he was the one who started the whole 'grime crime' genre to begin with. Did you know there were holo films made from many of his books? I bought a few of those as well. Shiv was talking about hosting a Holloway theme party. He suggested that if you are on planet I invite you to come along. I told I would pass on the message but I wasn't sure how many clichés you could handle in one evening. Still, it could be a lot of fun. I am looking forward to seeing the holos myself. I am a big fan of Thaddeus Martin and Xandi Kitt and Shiv says they just spark in the Holloway films. And because I know you'll ask, my mother was a big fan of both these actors and we had a lot of their films at home. I just don't remember any of the grime-crime ones.*

*I promise I won't start spouting lines that include words such as dastardly rat-bastard, babe-face, sweet-cheeks or mollycoddle. I have no intention of trying gravity defying hair styles, Zenji sticks are hard enough as it is and slinky dresses with thigh revealing sides are not generally my kind of fashion statement...but the stiletto strapped to my thigh? That could be fun and useful considering the last few adventures I have had. I rather like knives and I know how to use them.*

*Speaking of actresses, Prince Xizor is now dating a famous holo actress by the name of Tylisha Ianko, she starred in the recent set of films based on Pell Norvic's books, The Black Star and the White Sun trilogy. Apparently she played very hard to get but he won her over anyway. I deal with his office on a fairly regular basis as he and Lord Vader communicate, if you can call it that, on a fairly regular basis. I dislike him intensely. I met him briefly at the very first Grand Ball I attended and it was not a good experience. He apparently has the ability to give off some sort of pheromone that make him irresistible to women cross species and he has a thing for Humans. Personally, I feel*

*that if a man has to use chemical means to attract a girlfriend then he's probably lacking something in some department some place. Thanks to Shiv I have this bit of information and so every time the prince comes near me I just have to pretend I am smitten and he leaves me alone. He pulled that pheromone trick on me at the grand ball and it was Shiv who saved the day, telling me that Xizor only goes after women he feels are challenging. So by acting like a besotted courtesan I am saving myself a ton of trouble. The man is repulsive, and has the personality of a Mos Espa Junk Dealer. If you ask me he's got serious issues. I give this relationship a month and a half, just because she is SO famous and he enjoys the lime light.*

*I was really saddened to hear about your brother. I should imagine that the not knowing what really happened one way or another must be awful. I am sorry if I helped stir up old memories better left alone. I don't find it strange at all that you would think of family, you spend so much talking to me about mine, comforting me and listening to me, it makes perfect sense you would remember and think of your own. It does make me sad though. I always thought it was amazing the depth and insight you seemed to have on family and loss and now I have a better understanding of why. I am truly sorry. I never had brothers or sisters so I cannot even imagine what such a loss is like.*

*I think I would be honoured to see some of your sister's work some day although I would hope that if I ever do have the chance to visit your home world that the welcome would not be too unkind even though I am an outsider. I can't imagine you as rebellious at all. If you are rebellious then your people must be very... hell, I don't even have adequate words to describe how they must be. Have I just not seen this rebellious side of you yet or was this a phase you went through as a teenager and I missed it? You know, I never understood xenophobia. I guess that comes from growing up on a planet where the aliens almost outnumber the humans. We have so much to learn from other cultures, other beings I don't really get the whole fear thing. I am glad that you are teaching me Cheunh, it is an extraordinary language and my world is richer for the learning of it. I did ask Lord Vader about my ability for languages and he confirmed your thoughts. He also thinks that my ability with them is directly related to my own force abilities but he added that perhaps I also had some natural talent in that area. In the end I don't care what it is that helps me along with learning other languages. I am just happy to be able to do it.*

*There is so much more I could babble about, but it is, once again, really late here and I am exhausted, truth be told. It has been a busy week and on top of my crazy work schedule at the moment I have been in some pretty strenuous training sessions. Between the brief moments I get to spend under Lord Vader's tutelage and the fairly gruelling lessons with my master who is prepping me for the up and coming trials to pass me to the next level, I wonder sometimes how I can actually stay on my feet. I think I mostly owe that to my uncle's amazing spiced 'caf recipe. Once the level trials are over with I am hoping that my routine settles down a little bit although I have heard rumblings from Lord Vader that he would like to have me start accompanying him on board the Executor for some of his longer runs. I won't complain, my time with him is limited enough as it is. No one, not even I, understands this bond I have with him and I have stopped trying to sort it all out. I only know I am happy when I am on his good side and unhappy when I am on the wrong side of his good grace.*

*So, I hope that you are well and that Jarack delivers this swiftly. I really think he enjoys the galactic man of mystery thing, to be honest. He's kind though and his presence is always a sign of something good so I am always happy to see him. I was also glad to read I am not the only one with a certain amount of sentiment that needs to be released every now and then. I was always told as a child that absence makes the heart grow fonder but in truth, I don't believe that. Absence is a black hole that is sometimes never*

*filled back in when someone you care for is no longer in one's life. You know and understand this better than most and for that I am grateful.*

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,*

*Merlyn*

It always amazed me how quickly time seemed to vanish especially after I had started working for the Empire. My job was interesting and ever changing, Lord Vader was not a boring man to work for. The correspondence between Thrawn and me only served to make my life sweeter and Jarack's visits became moments of calm in the storms that whirled about the day to day life of Vader's pet office girl, as I had become known. It was a peculiar thing to be working inside the Imperial machine. Out on the Rim the Empire was just a name, a faceless government that cared little for the affairs of people so far away from the central core. Tatooine was ruled by the Hutts not the Imperials. Stormtroopers did not instil fear on the people of my home world, Jabba and his minions did. I was starting to see that it actually didn't matter where one lived. It was a trade off, really, one sort of dictator for another, one set of rules for another. The uniforms of the beings that did the dirty work for those in charge changed but the actions remained the same. My father wrote regularly about life in Mos Eisley and his latest letter talked about the recent fifteen percent increase in consumption taxes that the Imperial economic advisor, Pinac Galous had announced a few weeks prior. The reason for the tax hike was the increase in rebel activities which had created a rise in raw material cost. My father was annoyed that now ship's parts would be even more costly and difficult to come by than they had previously.

*...I wonder if these rebels have any idea of the chaos they are unleashing by attacking the current regime? It seems to me that there is an element of selfishness wrapped up in this cause and it is not as if the Empire itself is actually that bad, or do we out here just not see into the deeper workings? Was it not your Captain Thrawn who pointed out that the Empire is merely a system of government and as a rule there will always be those who oppose and wish to change said government? He is right, the same could be said about this planet, there are many here who would wish to see the Hutts long gone, but the question that always remains is what do you replace the government you have ousted with? The Captain had some interesting things to say on this topic while he was here; I think you had gone back to the bay to finish working on your ship and missed this part of the conversation. Needless to say this new tax hike will have some dire consequences for us out here and I am betting that smuggling will rise dramatically which will make life interesting...*

My father was right and smuggling, according to the latest internal report that crossed my desk was up and an increase in patrols had been called for, not that this would do any good mind you. I was surprised to read that Imperial Customs Captain, Dalea Trovin had managed to uncover a large raw materials smuggling ring that had been using Brentaal as a base of operations. Usually the smugglers were always one step ahead of the rest of the galaxy. I was torn, I had worked with smugglers on their ships from time to time and part of me had a tendency to romanticise their crazy life style. I suppose that was to be expected, on Tatooine smugglers were the unofficial heroes, doing the impossible against all odds. This was an opinion I kept to myself though, I was certain that most of the Imperials I worked for would not agree at all. So I made the appropriate noises of disapproval when the topic came up with others but secretly smiled at the boldness of the rogues on the Rim. It was easy to forget that these rogues were dangerous and that everything they did had consequences.

Jarack strolled into the office almost exactly at eleven o'clock and he looked tired. It had been almost four weeks since I had last talked to him. I signed for the courier pouch and then asked if he wanted something to drink. For the first time since I had met him he

did not refuse the offer of a cup of spiced 'caf and he sat down as though it had been the first moment of rest he had had in a long time.

"I don't mean to pry, but you look like bantha poodoo, is everything alright?" I asked as I handed him a large cup.

He accepted it with a wan smile. "It's been a busy time but nothing to worry about; I'll catch up on sleep when I get back onboard my ship." I looked at him carefully and he, in turn noted my scrutiny. "Ask your question, Miss Gabriel. I don't bite."

"Admiral Thrawn said that you do this letter delivery thing as a favour, so I just wonder what it is you really do. Are you a spy for him or something?"

For a moment he just looked at me and then he smiled. "One of the first things the Admiral told me when I offered to do this letter delivery thing for him was '*be warned the young lady is blessed with an over abundance of tenacious curiosity.*' I see he was not exaggerating. No ma'am, I am not a spy, although I am in the information business and yes, I pass along his and your mail as a favour. I've known the Admiral for a long time now and I guess you could say I owe him my life."

"An over abundance of tenacious curiosity?" That sure sounded like Thrawn's words.

"Yes, ma'am that is exactly how he put it." He grinned.

"Well, the Admiral is certainly gifted with a profuse desire to shower everyone with his superfluous verbiage." I said a tad more tartly than I meant to.

Jarack laughed so suddenly I thought he was going choke but he recovered nicely. "I am quite certain the Admiral will enjoy hearing that." Then he changed the topic quickly and added. "May I say, you make amazing spiced 'caf."

"My uncle Vahlek's recipe, he calls it the Akosh Sacred Spice Secret. I am sworn never to give it out to anyone." I said.

Jarack raised an eyebrow. "Vahlek Akosh? *The* Vahlek Akosh is your uncle?"

"You know him?"

He shook his head. "By reputation only. I wasn't aware he had any living family, though."

"Well, I am not a blood relative, he is my Dajdofa guardian and how do you know of him?"

Jarack drew a deep breath and studied my face very carefully for a moment. "Really, well that is interesting?" I noticed he had not answered my question and something about his manner told me not to press or ask.

I frowned. "Why is that interesting?"

"Men like Akosh generally do not attach themselves in such a manner and Dajdofa guardianship is for life." Jarack said.

I sighed. "I don't really understand."

He looked at me for a moment then said quietly. "No, I am certain you do not." He did not elaborate and the look on his face told me that part of our conversation had ended. He finished his 'caf and set the cup on the table by the chair. "I must be on my way, deadlines to meet and I am certain that the Admiral will be waiting for this." He said getting up. He turned to leave but then turned back to face me. "You know, when the Admiral first asked me to play post boy, especially as a favour, I was a bit surprised. He never struck me as a man who attached himself to any one person, always kept himself to himself as a rule but not so with you. Then again, you are not at all what you appear to be, are you?"

I stared at him for a moment. "You know, if I knew what it was I appeared to be then maybe I could answer that and if I had a credit chip for everyone who said those words I wouldn't need to work anymore." I retorted.

He barked a sharp laugh. "Perhaps it's good that you don't know and can't answer that." he smiled. "See you next time, thanks for the 'caf."

"Anytime." I said and watched as he left.

I looked at the courier package and made a face as I heard the words *over abundance of tenacious curiosity* echo in my head. I set the package aside, slipping it into the drawer of my desk and got back to work. I was grateful for my job because it was the one thing that distracted me from all the strange little mysteries that had piled up in my life. My uncle Vahlek was slowly rising to the top of this list. I yawned and poured myself another cup of spice 'caf. Jarack was not the only one who was tired except my reason was too much partying Imperial style. Most of the time I tried to avoid the social functions if I could but sometimes even that was impossible and if Lord Vader said go, well I attended dressed appropriately either at his side or with Shiv at mine. Last night's event was quite unlike anything I had ever seen before and at Lord Vader's insistence I had remained until he had been ready to leave.

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It was a busy time in the office and Lord Vader was in and out a lot. As usual, when he was about so everyone else needed to see him. Although he had a personal protocol droid who was supposed to take care of his minor appointments and an aide de camp for military things, most people preferred to come and bother me to arrange an audience with the Dark Lord. This included people like Demetrius Zaarin. The Grand Admiral had been a frequent visitor to my office since I had returned. Although his reasons for stopping by were always plausible and official I never quite trusted them or him. He often tried to engage me in conversation but I didn't feel that chatty with him.

He was a heavy set, older man with a thick neck and a strong, square jaw. He was not quite as tall, his shoulders not quite as broad and nor was he as slender as Thrawn but he kept himself in decent shape unlike some of the other Grand Admirals who had trouble still fitting into their uniforms and had to suck in their abundant bellies every time a pretty courtesan passed by. He had wavy brown hair that was silver at the temples and cut in a regulation military style. It made his lined face seem harder and older. He almost never smiled and when he did the smile never reached his deep hazel coloured eyes. Everything about him bespoke of a man who was quite used to getting what he wanted and not used to hearing the word no. I had said no to him far too many times and he was more than annoyed with me. Thrawn had warned me to watch my back with this man because he was quite brilliant and powerful and didn't like not getting what he wanted.

"I see, Miss Gabriel that the Emperor's Iron Fist keeps you as busy as ever." He was good at making polite banter.

"Lord Vader is a busy man, Grand Admiral Zaarin. If he is busy then so am I which is a good thing." I said lightly, wishing the man would just go away.

"Oh, why is that?"

"Busy means I have a job." I replied lightly.

He laughed. "You know, Lord Vader tells me that you are quite the mechanic."

I raised an eyebrow. "His praise is too kind." The sarcasm was lost on the man leaning on my desk.

Zaarin laughed even harder. "The word kind and Lord Vader do not belong in the same sentence, dear. I can see why Admiral Thrawn enjoys your company, you are very amusing." He paused for a few seconds to see if I would rise to the bait and when I didn't he continued. "Perhaps you will make it out to the facility to see what we are doing, I am sure you will be impressed by the improvements we are making to the current ship designs."

"If Lord Vader allows it, I would be delighted." I told him, knowing full well that chances were good Lord Vader would not allow it. As I understood it what went on at that particular facility was top secret.

Grand Admiral Zaarin merely smiled and continued with his banter until Lord Vader was ready to see him. Zaarin was the last appointment of the day and I was grateful when Lord Vader brushed his mind to mine and told me I could go, his exact words being more along the lines of '*I have no further use for you today, you may go away and amuse yourself.*' So, I went home with Thrawn's latest missive tucked under my arm. I set it on the counter and changed into my exercise clothes then slipped quietly into the training room where Master Kjestyll was waiting for me. I started to apologise for being late but he waved at me to stop. He knew what my schedule was like when Lord Vader was around and knew there was not much I could do about it.

Four hours of training and a long hot bath later I was curled up on my couch with a cup of tea and a letter from the one Imperial Admiral I was always happy to hear from.  
*A'mia Tekari,*

*I hope that this letter finds you happy and well. Yours arrived three days ago and it was a bright spot on a fairly dull day. I fear that to the outside observer the life of an Imperial Officer seems glamorous and full of excitement but you and I both know that could not be further from the truth. For the past week we have been meandering, I suppose is the best way to put it, around the edge of the Outer Rim in the Unknown Regions. I am hopeful that in six months or so we might be headed back to the Core. While I enjoy what I am doing, I also look forward to some time planet side as well. At least I will not have to spend the first week back catching up on what has been happening. Were it not for you, I would be so far behind on the gossip and stories of Coruscant's rich and infamous that I could not show my face in court. Where do you get all this nonsense from? Siavaan, I am betting, has a lot to do with it.*

*I could not, however, help but laugh at your somewhat apt description of Prince Xizor's prowess with women. I wasn't aware that he used pheromones to seduce unsuspecting young ladies such as yourself and I am indebted to Siavaan for rescuing you, no wonder you were so unhappy that evening. You do seem to attract the sharks. I am still entertaining the thought of chaining you to your desk under the watchful eye of a garrison of Stormtroopers. You have an amazing habit of inviting the worst sort of trouble.*

*My dear, I truly understand your desire to talk rather than read about the Clone Soldiers and the war they fought. I imagine this subject is quite difficult for you. I also understand your desire to stay out of Isard's way, please do. She is a dangerous, ambitious woman who will stop at nothing to get what she wants. So I would take it as a kindness if you would avoid getting on her bad side. I doubt though that she truly believes you are a simply Lord Vader's pet office girl, she knows better than most that Lord Vader would not keep you about or so close at hand (most of the time) unless there was something extraordinary about you. Those whispers you have heard about what happen to those who get in her way, including the tales about her father, are more than just whispers.*

*The information you sent on the various force powers and gifts was incredibly helpful. The Chiss have never, to the best of my knowledge, produced a force user of any kind. While we are not a people who have been able to use this power we are certainly not immune to it. Once before, when I was considerably younger I was given the opportunity to experience what I believe Lord Vader called force choke. It was a most unpleasant sensation. Your delightful gift of empathy has a far more pleasant effect and one day I hope we can explore this to its fullest extent. Lord Vader's description of you as an ungrounded power coupling is not so far from the truth. I am curious if you have ever*



tried to use your telepathy on me? If so I have never noticed. Does it work on those who are not in tune with the force? I feel it would be to my advantage to know everything I can about this Force and all the implications that goes with it.

That Siavaan was a fan of the Grime-crime genre somehow does not surprise me, however, that you would become so enamoured by it does, just a little bit. I have not read the entire Holloway series but I am told he was the best. I am sure you will regale me enthusiastically with all the gory details of your newfound passion and when I return perhaps you will allow me to borrow your books. I find the idea of a party themed around this topic a little unnerving, as you say I am uncertain as to how many clichés I could handle in one evening although I assure you I am a good deal tougher than you seem to give me credit for.

Tad Martin and Xandi Kitt were among the greatest actors of their time, if I remember correctly. Popular culture is not as high on my list of studies as a fine art, but I do keep an open mind and ear. Your mother was quite eclectic in her tastes and I see that she has passed that along to you. I shall hold you to your promise of not spouting clichéd lines from your latest influence and I believe you when you say that Zenji sticks are difficult to use, not, mind you, that I have any practical experience in that particular department. I do wonder though, if I should have to frisk you for concealed and illegal weaponry when I return. Ladies with sharp objects are remarkably dangerous especially when they actually know what they are doing with them.

It delights me to no end that you are not only becoming quite proficient in Cheunh but that you truly enjoy it as well. So few of your kind actually even bother to inquire about it let alone wish to learn it and it is I who am indebted to you not the other way around. It allows me to share with you a part of myself that has long been tucked away and kept from sight simply due to the inability for self expression in the language that is my own. Perhaps your world is indeed richer for the learning of it but I assure you mine is all the more enriched by your enthusiasm and desire.

Thank you for your kind words regarding the loss of my brother. It seems strange to me to even bring up his name in a world where no one knew of him at all. He was a very good man and, as with all things, one only realises what one no longer has after it is irretrievably gone. Brothers and sisters enrich one's life greatly in ways I have no ability to properly express. Unlike parents they are partners in crime for small mischiefs accomplished, the keeper of secrets and best friends who are unafraid to tell you on no certain terms when they think you have screwed up, yet they will come dashing in to your rescue when no one else will. I had always thought that Thrass lacked my ability to over step convention. He tended to play most things by the book but he had skills which I did not and now I miss those things, I miss conversing with him and hearing his thoughts. As you said, some wounds are never truly healed and for me this is one of them. To the casual observer the Chiss, as a rule, can seem very cold hearted and calculating. We are an aloof, proud people who do not like showing our emotions but I can tell you that underneath this veneer this is not always the case. I cannot tell you the number of times Thrass 'looked after me' or did his best to sort things out and save me from getting into trouble. While this used to annoy the hell out of me, in the end I see now that it was love and a desire to protect something, someone he held very dear. How do you replace this when it is no longer there? How do you fill in the empty space left behind? My dear, while you did not grow up with siblings you have experienced such great losses in your own life that I know when I speak of these things, you will understand. This gives me some measure of comfort and I am thankful.

My sister took his disappearance very hard. She was still in her early teens when it happened and a small part of her blames me, which she is right to do. I set into motion events which led to his demise and while she still clings to some faint tiny hope that he

*lives, I know in my heart he does not. She and Thrass were very close, he was incredibly protective of her and she adored him, as a little sister with an elder brother should do. The last time we spoke about it, it was painful and we fought because neither of us was able to see beyond our own pain. Her loss and my guilt have created a wall that has divided us and I don't know how to break through it. There are only so many times one can utter the word sorry before it becomes meaningless and empty. We both dealt with Thrass's disappearance from our lives in vastly different ways. Hers was far more creative and I still get chills when I see the paintings she produced stemming from her grief. Mine was to walk away from it and concentrate on my career but in the end, as you know so well, one can never escape one's past and eventually it will return to haunt you until you deal with it. You need not apologise though, for talking about these things. It is not your words that stir up old ghosts, but the ghost themselves who wish to be heard. I am grateful in more ways than I can express. It is a rare gift to have someone with whom I can speak about these things to. Like you, I do not make close friends easily and in my service to the Empire confidants of this nature are nonexistent. You, Sji'u' Tekari are a treasure to me and have done nothing you need to apologise for.*

*That you have not seen my more outgoing side is of no surprise. My rebelliousness is of a subtle nature. My people's rebellious nature is nonexistent. The Chiss love the safety net of rules, regulations, and traditions, hence the reason I am here working for the Empire and not with the CEDF as I used to be, a long story I promise one day to tell you.*

*On this note I am afraid I must end this letter. I reiterate that you should not stay up late writing to me at the cost of your health especially if you are to undergo some sort of physical trial for your mysterious martial arts. What pray tell does this involve? You really ought to take better care of yourself, I would prefer to come back to Coruscant knowing that you were healthy and vibrant and not in a med clinic somewhere suffering the ill effects of exhaustion or worse.*

*Do give my regards to Siavaan and let me know should he actually follow through with his dastardly plan for infesting the Imperial Center with influx of Grime Crime via the means of a theme party; Fore warned is fore armed.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia*

*Mith'raw'nuruodo*

I sat with his letter in my hand for a long time and eventually fell asleep on the couch only to wake up at the crack of dawn with a painful crick in my neck. This was not the first time, nor would it be the last time that I had not even made it to my bed to sleep. Working for the Empire was playing havoc on my life, or maybe it was the other way around.

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If anyone had told me that I would not only refuse a request from Lord Vader but also be defiantly loud about it I would have called them crazy but there were some things I simply did not want to do and often the only way of getting that point across was to be loud, not that it ever did me much good or got the desired results but I felt the need to be vocal and stick up for myself. Sometimes Lord Vader respected this and other times he ignored it. .

"No!" I stamped my foot.

Lord Vader shook his head. "I was not asking you. I was telling you." He said.

"You don't run my social life!" I shouted at him.

"Perhaps I should." He said sarcastically, "However that is neither here nor there, you are expected to attend the Grand ball. You are expected to attend with me and as I am telling you, you will accompany Grand Admiral Zaarin as his escort." He was being remarkably calm and I wasn't.

"No!" I repeated crossly. "I absolutely will not!"

"Why do you insist on being argumentative?" He asked.

"Why are you making me do this when you know I don't like that man.?"

"He expressed a desire to spend time in your company. Your like or dislike is irrelevant." He said, with a casual wave of his hand. He was standing with his back to me staring out of the tall, lancet windows into the Coruscant night.

"I do not belong to you! I am not a palace courtesan to be passed about to the highest bidder for your pleasure or gain!"

Lord Vader turned around to face me but stayed where he was. "No, you are not. What you are is the daughter of a Jedi with the ability to tell truth from lie. I want you to accompany Zaarin and I want you to... read him."

"You want me to *what*?" I could not keep the incredulity out of my voice.

Lord Vader seemed to sigh even though his breathing never changed. He stared at me for a long time before turning his back on me to look out of the window once again. The next part of the conversation took place where no one else could hear it.

"*I said I want you to read him. You have caught his eye and his interest and I want you to see beneath the surface and listen.*" He said in my mind. There was something he wasn't telling me but I didn't know what it was and I couldn't dig deep enough to figure it out.

"*You want me to spy on an Imperial Officer?*"

His shoulders heaved. "*Not spy, just pay close attention. You have a talent, use it.*"

"*How?*" I asked cautiously not liking where this was going.

"*Use your charm, converse with him and stroke his inflated ego. He likes to talk about his work.*" He said coldly. "*You and I will be attending the Grand Ball next week as per the Emperor's request and you will accompany Zaarin as per mine, have I made myself clear?*"

"Crystal." I hissed between clenched teeth as I stomped out of his office without permission. I was being rude but I was angry so I didn't care. If I could have slammed the door behind me I would have. I didn't like being used and I didn't like this situation one bit.

I went home angry then I went to my lesson with Master Kjestyll even angrier where he proceeded to show me that his calm outwitted my rage any day. I loved him and respected him more than I thought it possible but sometimes his methods just escaped my understanding. Instead of starting out with the usual fairly intense stretching regime he had made me lie down on the floor and for almost half an hour I stayed like that, my left hand resting over my heart, my right hand on my lower abdomen. He had sat beside me, cross legged, calm and placed his hand in between both of mine flat on my solar plexus. At first I had fought against him, fought against trying to breathe fully and fought against relaxing. I was so wound up and so frustrated that my anger spoke far louder than any sort of semblance of calm ever could. I could feel the warmth of his hand as he applied a certain amount of pressure, correcting my breathing subtly, carefully. He drew out my anger as though he was drawing out poison and as my breathing became more regular and softer I began to understand how powerful his calm truly was.

"You fight with yourself and your passions rule you." He said gently when he felt I was ready to sit up. "The Bunduki arts are about centering and using the energy flow to push and pull. To deflect great force one does not need to use great force but one needs to be centered. You block your own energy when you hold your anger within as you do. How do you expect to fight fluidly if your energy cannot flow through you as you wish to move through the air around you?"

I was light headed and trembling when I sat up. "He just makes me cross sometimes." I said as he helped me to my feet.

Master Kjestyll made a noise and smiled. "Yes, he infects you with his own anger." He said.

"I don't understand, he encourages me to be angry and to use it." I said as I began my warm up stretches.

"That is because it is all he now knows to use. His anger drives him so he feels it will drive you as well but you fight against it." My master said. "He uses his anger to fuel the power he takes from the living Force but the Bunduki arts do not draw on this mystery, they were created to counter those who could, created to use the energy of the body, the air and the world around you. When you lock your anger deep within your shi-lu you block everything that allows you to move as one with the energy of life." He corrected my position and continued. "This lesson is one you do not seem willing to learn, so often you come to me in this way, full of fire in your belly." He tapped my solar plexus; the exact spot where I felt that hard knot of anger sit. "You must learn to let go and become the stillness."

I sighed. I had heard these words so often I could almost recite them along with my Master. "I try." I said as we moved from warm up stretches to the slow and beautiful Kata forms.

Master Kjestyll shook his head. "Try? This is a word I do not wish to hear from your lips again. You must simply act without thought or concentration, centering should come to you as easily as breathing does. This will eventually happen, you are a good student but it is harder for you because you began your training so late and are influenced by many ... outside forces." He said.

"I feel sometimes as though I am being pulled in a million different directions at once." I told him.

"A million no, but two or perhaps three." He said. "You waver, paths lie before you and you have not yet chosen which one to walk." His hands corrected my position. I could feel the steel like strength behind his firm touch. "When you make your choice, the way will become easier or more difficult depending on the path taken."

I sighed, lost concentration and was punished for that by ending up on my butt. He pulled me to my feet and gave me a look that said, concentrate. Master Kjestyll had changed my training regime. Instead of a passive, defensive form we had switched to more offensive, more aggressive forms. I had thought I was good at what I did but training with Master Kjestyll made me look as though I were standing still. He laughed as I landed on my ass for the second time.

"Your mind is elsewhere." He chided. "If you were fighting for your life, you'd be dead now. Stop thinking about the next moment and concentrate on the now." He hauled me to my feet and without a single break in his motion he attacked me with a new move. It was beautiful, a sweeping, almost dance like motion full of deadly grace. When his hand connected with my body, it hurt and I went down on the floor again. I was surprised when I felt that sharp twist of anger shoot through my belly.

"Stop thinking about what you are going to do and just do it. This isn't a dance recital, child." He said calmly, waiting until I got back up on my feet. I swallowed my anger down. He attacked again and I failed to defend again.

He shook his head, hands on his hips as he looked down at me. "What is in your head? Not life, I think? Not living. You think this is fun? A joke perhaps? You think I teach you because I have nothing better to do? How many years now have you been under my watchful eye? And still you have not learned?"

I got up. He looked at me carefully. With a slight frown he walked around me as though I were an object of art to be studied. Then to my surprised he walked away without saying a word. For a moment I was cross and more than a little annoyed with him but this was not the first time he had done this. I knelt on the floor, meditating. My brain was busy, too busy. It wasn't so much about coherent thought but rather the lack of it, white noise,

filling, distracting and hard to shake. The problem I suddenly realised was not the noise itself, not the jumble of what ifs and whys that raced around inside my head but the fact that I let it over take everything else.

The question was how to focus. Here in this place, the Imperial palace, I had problems doing that and it had been this way since my return. When I had started to train with uncle Vahlek that had not been an issue and I wondered why. I felt as though I were at war with myself.

*Don't seek the stillness, be the stillness...*

I wanted to center; to find that elusive peace, which enabled me to act without forethought, see the moment unfold without trying to predict the what-next. At uncle Vahlek's home we had worked out in the desert, there was nothing to distract us, just wind, sun and sand. I had found these things calming. Coruscant was not calming, too much traffic noise, people noise, and too much outside stimulation. I *felt* everything. That, I suddenly realised, was a very large part of my problem, I wasn't letting go.

I stood up and stretched my arms upward and breathed. If breath was the key then I was suffocating myself with my thoughts. With each inhalation I took a hold of a thought, something that had been on my mind, as I exhaled I let that thought go. Why, I wondered after what seemed an eternity, had I not noticed all this clutter, all this noise in my head before?

I sensed him return to the room and I sensed rather than knew his move. I blocked it easily and didn't even think about it. He did not stop he did not let up, he moved with a speed and a certainty that was beautiful. No thoughts, no clutter in my brain. Not only was I able to keep up and stay on my feet but once or twice I also surprised him. Soaked in sweat and panting hard we eventually stopped when he put me on the flat of my back with a beautiful leg and hand combination I had never seen before.

"That was called *water through stone*." He said.

"Impressive." I said catching my breath. I sat up slowly.

"I will teach it to you next time if you can manage to find that center again as you did today." He said, motioning me to begin cool down stretches. At my side he helped me perfect my positioning. Even something as simple as a stretch had the perfect form.

"There is just too much in my head. Coruscant is like a big explosion in my brain." I said. "In the desert, with Zte'sa Vahlek, everything was simple, there were no distractions."

He nodded. "In a fight there will always be distractions. One second of your mind being elsewhere could cost you an arm, or a leg or your life." He said. "You are like a power coupling with no ground sometimes, your focus is scattered all over the place, you send out energy in every direction. You could be so much better than this if you learned to focus properly. I am wondering how I can best teach you this. I have never had such a difficult student before. You are most challenging for me."

"Lord Vader said the same thing about me being ungrounded." I told him.

Master Kjestyll regarded me carefully. "You are gifted with the Force but you do not use it when you fight."

I shrugged. "I actually don't really know how. Lord Vader teaches me to reach through it with anger but I lose control when I do that. It isn't as if there are any teachers around who can help out in this area any more. It is as if there is no middle ground."

"The Jedi had a strict code, they believed that the darker side of passions and emotions led to an abuse of the power that corrupted the soul."

"Did it?" I asked.

Master Kjestyll drew a thoughtful breath. "Does the sword corrupt the master or does the master corrupt the sword?"

"I don't know. I just know how I feel when I use anger to fight. It's powerful, it's seductive but I don't like it all that much. I feel as though a part of me dies when I do

things this way, Lord Vader and the Emperor's way. I know that Lord Vader uses it as a tool but he can control it."

"Does he or does it control him?" he asked.

I looked at my master and shrugged. "I wish I had never been born with this gift."

He smiled. "You will find your way. There are sources out there; you just have not discovered them yet." He said gently.

"But in the meantime I struggle." I said.

He nodded. "All this energy you hold, these emotions of fear, of anger and especially passion distract you when they could be used to help you, you must choose one to lead and the others to add strength. You fear they will rule you and not the other way around but, child, by fearing this you allow the very thing you wish to prevent. You have learnt very well how to lock them all up in a bundle together deep inside your being but you have never been taught how to embrace them and use them. Letting go scares you the most, yet it is what you will have to do in order to move forward. You must embrace all the talents you have and you must learn how to use them in a way that you can live with. Most of those who learn and were trained in the Bunduki arts had no connection to the Force. It was because of this these ways of fighting, these combat methods were developed. The Jedi were not only superbly trained warriors in their own rights but they had this power that gave them an edge. You need to come to terms with your gifts, this power and learn how to use it not fight against it. "

I sighed. I had been reading the little journal my birth mother had left for me but it was not much help, and it raised more questions than it answered. I was still searching through the library the Emperor had given me access to for anything that would help me sort out these conflicting ideals in my head, but so far there had been nothing. The Sith had allowed their passions to rule them, they had used the darker emotions to fuel their abilities with the force, but there was no how to manual. I didn't dare bring up the subject of Jedi with Lord Vader for fear of him going ballistic again and there was no one else to talk to about it, who could help me better understand.

Master Kjestyll nodded and stood up. "Have you learnt this lesson today? Will you come to me next time ready to work and learn? Or will we have to repeat these steps all over again? You think on it, either way I am patient. Eventually even the smallest, steadiest drop of water wears through the strongest, most stubborn of stone."

I nodded. He laughed at the face I made. I stood up and bowed to him wondering as we left the room if I would ever 'get it.'

Tired and frustrated, I lay in the bath. I lit candles and the steamy, hot water was scented by oils made with exotic flowers from a planet I had never heard of. I ached from the gruelling work out my master had put me through, but worse my mind ached from all the questions I had. I stayed in the bath until the water turned cool and I had become a wrinkled excuse for a person. I felt much better as I sat, wrapped in a robe that was far too large for me, drinking brandy. The holonet was on but I wasn't paying much attention. I had re read Thrawn's latest letter twice and then I settled down to answer him.

*Mia e'Tekari,*

*Once again it is late but I like this time of night, shortly before midnight when the traffic outside has calmed down somewhat and the activity along with the noise of the city moves downward into the underworld. I always liked night time and at home I often went up on the Bluff and spent hours staring upward. Of all the things I miss, seeing the stars definitely ranks high up on that list. There is too much light pollution here, as though the entire planet wants to outshine even the brightest star in the sky. I remember a couple of the Pilots who worked for my father years ago telling me that Coruscant was one of the only planets that shone like a sun. While I can understand that people love it here, love the busy life style, the access to everything and anything the galaxy has to offer*

*I find it sad that the natural side of the planet is missing. I am glad I never grew up here and got to see the wonders of worlds without much technology. I miss Tatooine greatly, especially at night. Maybe that's why it is easier to write to you in this quiet time, it takes away the sensation of loss.*

*Yes, Shiv is mostly to blame for my surprising amount of useless popular culture trivia, although the others help. He and Antygra, both keep up on all the gossip because they hear most of it first or second hand from the courtesans and they pass it along to me. It's good to know sometimes, even if it is just gossip, and you would not believe how often these crazy topics come up in conversation at the Palace events I am obligated to attend. Speaking of Palace events, last week I attended at the behest of Lord Vader, one of the strangest events I have ever seen here.*

*Grand Admiral Rufaan Tigellinus was inducted into the Order of the Canted Circle. Do you know him? I have never even heard of this strange group before so having to attend this function was a bit weird. It was an ornate ceremony held at the Skydome Botanical Gardens. What a beautiful setting for such a mysterious event. Lord Vader was not very forth coming about what it was all about, not that this is unusual. Lord Vader is not often forthcoming about anything. I got the feeling he wasn't all that impressed by the whole event and even less impressed by the man being inducted. It is a good thing, I think, that his face is hidden behind that mask of his. I am quite sure the disdain I sensed from him would have been very readable on his face. I am sort of in agreement with him though; the whole long black velvet robe thing was a bit over the top. I never really get the whole secret society thing, especially not this one. It was one of those events with high end catering and good champagne, to make up for the fact that it was on the whole quite boring. I am quite sure Lord Vader drags me to these sorts of events with him to keep himself amused. I was a bit surprised when all the members suddenly vanished. However, when that happened it was a good thing because it meant I got to go home.*

*I heard some rumblings amongst some of the on lookers about GA Tigellinus's induction. They didn't seem that happy about it at all. He doesn't seem to endear himself to many people in the Imperial Court. Of course that doesn't seem to matter if you have the favour of the Emperor, who by the way was there but not looking too healthy. He did not spend much time socializing with anyone and was quickly ushered away surrounded by the Royal Guard once the induction was over.*

*There have been a number of strange rumours flying about the palace concerning the Emperor's health. Lord Vader won't speak about this topic but he did tell me that using the Force the way the Emperor does is very draining on the physical body. Since I have been back I have not had any personal contact with the Emperor and I am quite happy with that to be honest. Mostly I have been busy keeping up with Lord Vader and his affairs. I was cross as all hell to learn that he had been quite badly injured sometime ago on Aridus. This information slipped out from one of his informants, a man named Jix. I met him briefly at Lord Vader's Coruscant Palace, which should really be called a dungeon because it's so dark and dreary. Jix was waiting to see Lord Vader and I was there on some emergency last minute rescheduling which Lord Vader really enjoys hauling me out of bed for at the worst possible hour, before he went off planet again. This accident happened while I was still on Tatooine and Jix was not very open about details. When I asked Lord Vader about it his answer was a terse statement about reminding some people to keep their mouths shut and that he was fine. I think he secretly likes it when I inquire about his health but you know how he is. It would be bad form for the Emperor's right hand man to be seen as anything but mighty and powerful. I didn't press the issue.*

*He is completely obsessed at the moment with capturing and dealing with the Rebels, particularly a young man called Luke Skywalker. He has also been doing some*

interesting experiments with cybernetics and droids, and, I might add, going through droid engineers like crazy. Since I am the one who has to make the appointments for him, the list of available engineers is rapidly getting shorter and shorter. It would be funny if I wasn't being yelled at every ten minutes or so. He goes through more droids than anyone else I know. His latest fad is probe droids which he has sent out all over the galaxy in search of the elusive rebels. In the last two months I have learnt more about droids and their manufacturers than I ever wanted to know. I am grateful for the Cynabar Droid datalogue and I have pretty much learned its contents off by heart. Good job I have a bit of a technical background. Lord Vader likes droids though and he will talk about them sometimes if you can catch him on a good day.

It is a shame that you are not on Coruscant at the moment. Next week, which is the Expansion festival week, with Shiv in tow, I am going to a private gallery opening of a collection of works by Venthan Chassu and Isona Medeglia. At first it seems like a strange pairing but they both attended the same art school so I guess that's the connection. I don't know how I feel about Chassu's works to be honest. My mother always felt his style was too nouveau and his nudes drove her crazy but I liked some of his stuff. I will be interested to see how they display these two artists together though because they could not be more different from each other. I remember seeing a self portrait by Chassu in the Art gallery on Alderaan when I was last there, I was very young, and it gave me nightmares for months afterwards. Chassu has a very twisted self image. I wondered if he had taken a mirror, shattered it, taped it back together again and used that to see his face in. I much prefer Medeglia's works, especially her Tatooine series. There is one painting of hers that I have only seen once in a rare collection book of her more unusual works. It is called *Hidden under the Endless Sky*. I know exactly where she sat to paint it, because it is the view from the cliff where Jabba's Palace is situated. I am still in awe at her ability to paint the planet's colours so perfectly. She is the only artist of that school who ever managed to capture the essence of the planet. Well, at least from what I know. Anyway, some whacky collector has decided to put together a show of these two artists for compare and contrast purposes and since Lord Vader was sent complimentary tickets and he has no interest in going I get to attend instead. If you were here, I'd have dragged you along with me. Sometimes I do love the perks of the job. If there is a catalogue, I'll pick you up one and I will definitely tell you all about it in my next letter.

Loss is such a strange thing. I read your words and found myself nodding in agreement with damn near everything you wrote. I miss my mother terribly and I doubt I will ever really get over that loss. Now I sometimes find myself missing my birth mother as well, even though she was not an actual physical part of my life. These gaps, these absences are so ethereal and elusive yet somehow massive and impossible to fill in or even bridge. I see now that I have a tendency to latch on to others and kind of make them a part of my own family, an extension of family, if you will. People like Shiv and Bel become my surrogate siblings. It is as though this act of adopting people into my own circle will help somehow replace the people who are no longer there. I am not sure it actually works this way, but it's too late at night for me to ponder this aspect and come up with a good answer. Needless to say it was sad to read that you and your sister have a hard time because of your brother's disappearance. Old ghosts do seem to have a nasty habit of sticking around, don't they?

I am glad you found the information on the various force powers useful. I have some more stuff to send when I get it sorted out a bit. Force-choke is awful. Who tried that trick on you and more to the point why? It is one of Lord Vader's favourites and he loves to scare the sandjiggers out of the men under his command with it. I sometimes think he just does it for kicks. Did you know that his men draw lots to see which of them will have to deliver messages to him?



*No, I have never tried any "mind tricks" on you. As a general rule they rarely work on strong minded individuals. I don't think one has to be force sensitive to receive telepathic thoughts but it helps. To be honest it is not something I use that often and so far the only person I actually communicate with in this manner is Lord Vader because it's private and easy, well easy is a relative term. Having Lord Vader in one's head is NEVER easy. I always thought, especially where you were concerned that to use this particular gift without your permission was a very large invasion of privacy, which in turn was a breach of trust. I admit that I have used it on a few occasions and always felt somewhat bad afterwards, but never with you. I have seen some of the more unpleasant results that mind-push can have. I don't know how it was to have been trained as a Jedi but these force powers don't bring me a lot of happiness and half the time I wish I wasn't born with them.*

*The more you write about the Chiss the more curious I become about them. What is the CEDF? I must say that subtle and rebellious are two words only you could have used in a sentence and still have made sense.*

*You asked about the trials and what that entails, well I am studying the Bunduki arts, also sometimes known as Teräs Käsi. A form of fighting that was started by the Followers of Palawa on the planet Bunduki. It is a kind of weaponless martial arts, although we are also taught to use some combat weapons such as staves and swords. The trials are a test of how far I have come as a student and how well I have learned. If I pass then I will advance upward and learn more complex moves and combinations. Most of the time a teacher will evaluate his or her students themselves but the trials that take place in a few months from now are intergalactic. This is unusual and should be interesting. I have no details yet on the whole event but when I do I will keep you posted.*

*Shiv has said he'll hold off on the whole Holloway Theme party until you return. I told him he had a death wish and he just laughed saying that was my thing not his. I was the one, after all, who argued with Lord Vader on a regular basis. I couldn't top that so I let the matter drop.*

*Speaking of letting matters drop, you might want to reconsider your threat of frisking me for concealed weaponry. Master Kjestyll has trained me very well and I can hurt you, should you decide to pursue this course of action.*

*Now, on that note I am going to bed. Be safe and have fun guarding the universe from evil doers!*

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia*

*Merlyn*

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"Ow!" I yelled as Cati accidentally on purpose managed to stick the pin she wanted to adjust the dress with into me instead of the fabric.

"Well if you would stop fussing, my hand would not slip and this would be a painless procedure!" Cati said trying very hard to maintain her patience.

I sighed. The Grand ball was two days away and after avoiding all thoughts on the subject I finally got the energy up to look through my wardrobe only to realise that I had nothing I wanted to wear. All of the dresses I owned were beautiful and expensive and terribly revealing. The last thing I wanted to do was give Grand Admiral Zaarin the wrong idea by wearing a dress that showed more skin than what I usually wore at the office. This had meant a very frantic last minute call to Cati and hours of dress fittings that very same day.

"You know, if you had come to me sooner we could have avoided all of this and I could have designed a dress around the requirements you wanted." She told me.

"I was rather hoping I could get out of going to the event altogether." I replied.

She glanced up at me. "On the outs with your gentleman?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, he's not here. That's the problem I have been requested to accompany another. I don't want to give the wrong impression."

"I didn't think you were a Courtesan." She said, continuing to pin.

"I'm not it's a business thing. One does not say no to Lord Vader when he gives you a direct order."

She nodded in agreement then added. "I must admit I was a little surprised to hear from you, it's been well over a year since you ordered anything from me."

"Shiv didn't talk to you about what happened?" I asked, surprised.

She stopped pinning the dress and looked at me. "Siavaan is not my best friend, he is a business associate. He sends girls my way for clothes but he doesn't buy them himself. We generally don't talk about personal things, although he did mention you had been through a rough time and were off planet for a while. "

I sighed and gave her the quick and dirty version of Jyrki's idea of Fete week fun.

"You were kidnapped?" she asked trying to hide her disbelief, resuming her alterations.

"Yes."

"By someone you thought was a friend?"

"Yes. Then after that ordeal was over I spent time off planet. I was on Tatooine working from there. People seemed to think this would keep me out of trouble."

"Did it?"

"No." I sighed and she just laughed.

"Well, I have to say, Miss Gabriel you are definitely one of my more unusual clients and you do lead an exciting life."

"Exciting is not exactly the word I would use." I replied tartly.

She smiled and shrugged. "Yes well, most women would never dream of asking for a dress that makes them look unattractive either, so that does make you unusual."

"I just don't want to give this guy any funny ideas." I snorted.

Cati laughed. "So, you and your gentleman are still friends then?"

I just looked at her for a moment. "Yes, I think so. It's been over a year since I have seen him but we keep in touch fairly regularly."

"What does he think of this whole business then? Does he mind you attending the gala event of the season with another man?"

"He doesn't know, I haven't actually told him." I said, and that was true. "It's complicated, you know?"

"Yes, I see." She said in a way that said she didn't think that was a very smart move on my part.

"I don't think he'll much care one way or the other. He's not the possessive type and it is something I am being required to do, it's not my choice. " I added wondering who I was trying to convince.

She only answered that with a snort.

"You disagree?"

"He's a man." She said by way of answer. "Even if he is not the jealous type, he won't like being kept in the dark."

I just made a face and stared glumly at my reflection in the mirror as she finished making the adjustments. Cati was one of the best dress makers I had ever met and there was no way she could make an ugly dress even if she tried. This dress covered me from head to toe. It had a high neck line and long fitted sleeves. No bare skin to be seen, but it fitted perfectly and the soft fabric hugged my body, flaring gently from the hips for movement. It would be a gorgeous dress to dance in. It was the colour of pale moon light and for reasons I could not comprehend it complimented my own skin tone perfectly,

making my already deep red hair seem even darker, more vibrant. I sighed; this was not quite the unflattering garment I had had in mind.

"You dislike the dress?" she asked watching my face carefully.

I shook my head. "No, that's the trouble, it's stunning. I don't want to look stunning. This looks like you poured moonlight over me, how do you manage that?"

"Sheer talent." She just laughed. "I can't send you to the Imperial Grand Ball in a sack, can I? I do have a reputation to uphold. You said no skin showing, you didn't say ugly."

"Next time I will be more specific. I take it there are shoes to match?"

She grinned and vanished for a moment to reappear with a pair of silver, high heeled strappy shoes. Perfect and she laughed even harder as I made a face. "That pendant you wear goes perfectly with the dress. If you have matching Zenji sticks, put your hair up with them and the look will be perfect. Very haughty princess like." She said. "Very ice queen if that's the desired effect."

I just sighed, absently touched the necklace I never took off.

"Not the desired effect? What is it you want to do then?"

"Create disinterest." I told her as she helped me get out of the now pinned dress.

"I doubt even the ugliest dress in the galaxy would do that." She chided.

I just made a face and changed back into my street clothes.

"I should have it all ready for you by tomorrow. I can have it delivered in the evening or the day after."

"Day after is fine. You have the office address yeah?" I asked as I signed the bill.

"Yep." She grinned. "Can I give you a bit of advice?"

"Always."

"Tell that gentleman of yours about this date. Men don't like it when women keep secrets from them, especially there is an attachment. Trust me you'll be saving yourself a ton of grief."

She was right and I sighed. "I will tell him, right after the ball so he gets all the gory details, a letter sent now won't reach him in time anyway. I really do hate these stupid events. "

She laughed. "No you don't, you are just missing your favourite partner in crime." She stopped and gave me a speculative look. "You know, any time you want advice or even just an ear, drop round. I am usually here and always happy to stop for a little break." She said.

"I might just do that." I said feeling suddenly grateful.

She just laughed and waved cheerfully as I left.

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The Grand ball was a huge event. I had missed last year's because I was already on Tatooine by that time. The theme for this year had been Corellian Renaissance. Shiv and his crew had outdone themselves and I was in awe as I waited for the master of ceremonies to announce Grand Admiral Zaarin and me. Lord Vader had gone ahead of us, already half way down the stairs before his name had been called aloud.

The Great hall was decorated in colours of gold and red, adorned with rich velvet drapes and ornate tapestries depicting the Corellian renaissance. Flowers of red and yellow had been strung in huge garlands from the center of the room to the walls and their scent sweetened the air. The hall had been delicately lit with elegant chandeliers and candles, giving the room a warm glow. It was stunning only made even more so by the beauty and finery of the people attending.

As I walked down the stairs, my hand lightly perched on Zaarin's arm I could not help the ache in my heart as I realised there would be no dancing with Thrawn at this ball.

I had not seen the man in over a year and despite the letters, his words and kindnesses, his physical presence failed making me lonely. *This is what it means to be bound...* Navaari had said. I had become convinced that it was some sort of a Dantassi curse.

Jarack had arrived at the office early during the day and delivered a letter, but I had had no time to read it so the courier envelope sat unopened on my living room table. I would have given almost anything to be there, curled up on the couch with a nice cup of tea savouring Thrawn's words, instead of here attending this function with this man I didn't like very much. I worked hard to curb that train of thought, the last thing I wanted to do was feel miserable and show it. I drew a deep breath and smiled. This was just a job and nothing more.

We walked down through the crowd, following in Lord Vader's wake. Grand Admiral Zaarin was well known and seemingly well liked or at least well respected. Many junior officers as well as older, more seasoned ones came up to speak with him. He did look quite imposing in his gleaming white Grand Admiral's uniform and it was no surprise eyes and heads turned as we walked into the crowd. A small gaggle of extraordinarily beautiful courtesans clustered around him hoping to secure a dance and, as was the general rule of thumb, everyone ignored the piece of pretty on his arm. The conversation was dull and I could find nothing of interest to latch onto. I had to work at not yawning and after ten minutes of this I made a polite excuse of needing to speak to someone and slipped into the crowd.

Shiv found me at the bar ordering a drink called a sneaky clone, I wasn't sure exactly what was in it but it was a pretty shade of blue and the bar tender has assured me that while there was no glow spice in it, there was plenty of kick. His hug was warm and I welcomed it. He took a look at the drink on the bar and raised his eyebrows.

"The night hasn't even started yet, is it that bad?" he asked ordering a sparkling water.

"Don't ask." I growled.

"Don't make that face, Rim-Girl, you look stunning and it spoils the effect!" he laughed. "Come on, we have a table in the corner you can put your things and use as a safe haven. I am quite sure that Grand Admiral who was parading you on his arm like a prized dance slave will find you when he wants to."

I grinned and with drink in hand followed him to join Antygra, B'byn, Maxxi and Ynyth who all welcomed me with grins and open arms. Many hugs later, I actually got to sit down. We chattered and watched the Grand hall fill up with Coruscant's rich and famous. I saw Xizor come in with a beautiful woman on his arm who wasn't Tylisha Ianko.

"Who's he with now?" I whispered to Antygra.

"Her name is Clayre Emmal. She's the daughter of some wealthy investor. Xizor got rid of Tylisha two days ago, was very, very messy. She's apparently in rehab now after a serious nervous breakdown. He's a real bastard."

I sipped my drink carefully because it was a lot stronger than I thought. "Tygra, how do you know all this stuff?"

"Don't you get the entertainment holonet?"

"I hardly ever watch that!" I snorted. "It just makes me cross. I want to throw things at the terminal every time it comes on."

"No wonder you never know what's going on." He countered. "You've been on it you know."

"What?" I looked at him as though he had suddenly sprouted another head.

"Yeah, you and Admiral, then Captain, Thrawn were voted the most unusual pairing of the year, not this last winter fete but the one before that. They had holo footage of you both entering the grand hall, recorders were not allowed in but someone snuck one in any way, so they also had some hidden recorded footage of you two dancing, you looked pretty

cozy in his arms and the expression on his face said he liked having you there. It was probably a good thing you weren't around, you'd have been livid. You should have heard the speculations. Of course it all died down fast enough when he left the Core and you mysteriously vanished. Well... at first there were rumours that you'd run off together, that you were pregnant with his illegitimate love child and the Emperor had banished you both from Coruscant. You know the usual wild speculation but then when no one came up with any new stories about you two, they got bored."

My mouth opened but no words came out I was both speechless and furious all at the same time.

Shiv laughed. "Yeah, we were all stunned." He said. "But you know how it goes; Palpatine's pet alien and Lord Vader's oh so young office girl... scandalous."

Then Antygra gave me a smirk. "So, did you have his love child?"

I was about to make some spluttering comment when the Master of Ceremonies announced the arrival of the Emperor and we all quickly made our way to the floor and kneeled in respect. Once the Emperor was seated and we all rose, the throne speech was given. It was short and I thought the Emperor sounded tired. Part of me wanted to stretch out and sense how he was but my common sense overruled that desire and I kept my force powers in check. I noticed that Lianna was not in the crowd or at his side. I thought that was a bit weird. I had seen very little of her since my return. She had been at Tigellinus's induction in to the Canted Circle but only for a very short time. We had briefly made eye contact and while the hatred was no longer there her look had told me there still wasn't much trust. She had vanished before the ceremony was over and I had been relieved.

With the Grand Ball officially declared open, the festivities began in earnest. It did not take my date long to find me and request that I dance with him. He was polite enough when I had introduced him to my friends but I could feel his contempt beneath his smile. Thrawn, despite his position and intelligence never seemed to look down upon anyone no matter what their station in life was. He treated my friendship with Shiv and the others with the same respect he gave me and until this moment I had never thought about how rare that was among Imperial Officers. Zaarin's cool manner and condescension did not earn him any sabacc points with me at all.

Zaarin was a mechanical dancer. He knew the steps and he could lead adequately but it was a job, or a means to an end. I remembered my mother's words on men and dancing and I smiled. He must have thought I was smiling for him because he tugged me just a little closer to his body as we moved about the room and smiled back. We continued through several waltzes and two of the pavans I hated until I begged off and we went back to the table where Shiv and Ynyth were still sitting.

"Miss Gabriel, can I get you something to drink?" Zaarin asked.

I told him what I wanted ignoring his disapproving look. Well behaved young ladies didn't order Corellian Brandy, I guess. I smiled sweetly and ignored his hand on my shoulder that lingered just a moment too long to be polite.

"How long must I stay before I can leave and not be rude?" I asked Shiv once Zaarin had left for the bar.

"At least until eleven, but midnight would be better, although you could pretend to be ill or something. You need a chaperone?"

"What I need is a blaster." I said putting a finger to my brain making a shooting motion.

Shiv and Ynyth just laughed then Shiv gave me a subtle warning glance to let me know we had company.

Zaarin sat back down at my side and we touched glasses in toast. Without even thinking, I said "*Khasäri'mahr*." Every stopped for a second and stared at me.

"What sort of language is that?" Zaarin asked.

I shrugged. "Some Outer Rim trade language I think, it's a toast, it means to your health." I said and I took a sip of my drink so I couldn't answer any more questions or make any more slip ups. I didn't need for the whole court to know I was learning Cheunh. Shiv gave me a look that said *'watch yourself.'* And Zaarin just smiled politely.

Shiv and Ynyth got up to dance but I declined when Zaarin asked under the excuse that my new shoes were hurting my feet a little. I thought that he would go away and find someone else to bother but I was wrong instead he made himself comfortable in his chair and began to talk to me.

"What's your mechanic's rating?" he asked.

I was surprised by the question and had to think about it. "Well, I just upped my certification four months ago to class one hyper drives. My papers state I have a C rating. So I have a ways to go before I would be allowed to work on ISD engines." I said. "Mostly I worked on light to medium freighters and runners. I am pretty good with swoops as well."

"Have you ever seen a TIE's engines up close?" he asked.

"No. I never had the opportunity." I said honestly. "Nor have I ever seen an ISD's engine room either, though not for lack of trying."

He laughed. "Yes, I get the impression from Vader that you are a bit of a handful." He said. "He does however speak about your love of machines, a most unusual hobby for an office assistant."

I wasn't sure how I felt about Lord Vader discussing me with anyone and I certainly did not being referred as a bit of a handful. "Lord Vader is kind." I answered demurely, biting my tongue from saying what I really wanted to say. The less Zaarin knew about my life the better. This man was a condescending boor and I had to work hard to hide my dislike of him.

"Hardly, but he is a damned good engineer in his own right. Did he tell you that I am also an engineer and that I am designing a new kind of TIE?"

"No, I am afraid he failed to mention that." I said coolly then curiosity got the better of me. "So, tell me about this new design."

And he did. For the better part of an hour the rest of the world did not exist outside of the small circle of the table where we sat. He found a pen and on some of the expensive linen napkins he proceeded to illustrate with rough sketches what he was talking about. It was fascinating and he was, as I had been told on several occasions, brilliant. He had also found the one topic that I would genuinely be interested in listening to.

"Our short range fighters, the TIEs have always had the problem of being at a disadvantage from X-wings because they do not have hyperspace capabilities." He said. "The hyperdrive abilities of X-wings allow them a certain amount of independence from mother ships, and also give them the ability for hit and run style attacks. I am certain you have kept fairly up to date on some of the issues faced by the Imperial navy due to the insurrection, yes?"

I nodded. I read the reports that came through my office, I was certain that under normal circumstances this was a breach in protocol but Lord Vader had actually insisted I keep up to date, so I did.

"Well, now we are working on adding hyperdrive to the TIEs, calling the new design the TIE Avenger." He went on to explain, drawing a quick design of the new ship for me.

I had to keep from rolling my eyes at the name though. I found the Empire's penchant for brutal names almost laughable. It was such a guy thing. Avenger, Executor, Devastator... I wondered what Zaarin would have thought had he known that Lord Vader had named my ship Desert Angel's Kiss. I had often puzzled over this name until recent events had come together and now I understood that the ship he and Thrawn had presented to me had really been named for his long dead wife, Padmé. I was betting this information would have raised a few eyebrows had anyone known.

"It looks like Lord Vader's TIE Advanced." I said commenting on his drawing.

He nodded. "Yes, we kept the streamlined Interceptor design but added Novaldex shielding and extended the Ion engine capabilities. We also added a SFS ND9 hyperdrive motivator. It is a superior ship to the Interceptor in every way."

"Won't the additions make the ship more expensive to manufacture?" I asked.

He shrugged. "We will simply have to raise more money, which can be done easily enough by raising taxes and tariffs. The inhabitants of this galaxy will be glad to help pay for the machines that protect them."

I didn't dare comment on that because I was pretty sure the people on the wrong end of the tax hikes might have something else to say about that. Perhaps we would have sat talking about ships and engines for a great deal longer but we were interrupted when Grand Admiral Rufaan Tigellinus came over wanting to have a private conversation with Zaarin.

I watched the two men walk away and breathed a sigh of relief. I was puzzled by Zaarin because on the one hand he was delighted to talk about his projects and work but on the other hand, there was a darkness to him. Every time he had spoken Lord Vader's name a ripple had twisted through his words. Small and almost imperceptible, I would never have noticed it except that Lord Vader had wanted me to read Zaarin so I had opened myself up just a little more than usual. He hid whatever it was well but I got the feeling he did not like Lord Vader as much as he pretended to, not that this was unusual. Most people everywhere did not like Lord Vader as much as they pretended to. What was even stranger was the odd ferocity that had crossed his face for a split second when the Emperor's name came up. I didn't understand what these things meant and I could sense no overt deception in him, above and beyond what was always there in just about everyone who worked for the Empire. He was very ambitious and power hungry, but that could describe just about everyone who worked in the upper echelon of the Imperial world and all men of power wanted more power. I took a small sip of the brandy I had been nursing and made a face. If I went to Lord Vader with this impression he would not be very pleased but there was nothing else to tell. If Zaarin was up to something big I had not been able to find it under his words.

I sat for a moment and watched as Zaarin finished his conversation with Tigellinus, which had looked serious and unpleasant and was then intercepted by one of the young courtesans from earlier. She clearly liked him or had a crush on him and he obviously enjoyed the flattery, accepting her demure, dewy eyed request for a dance. Many of these girls lived in the hope that one of the Officers they fawned over might actually fall in love with them and marry them. It was not unheard of and the underside of palace life was full of stories of scheming and back biting by girls who would do almost anything to better their position in the court. Sleeping your way to the top was a common theme, almost a sport, and marrying a high ranking Imperial Officer was a coup in anyone's book. It gave status, wealth and some measure of power as well as security. I was always astounded at how quickly a girl who found herself a willing enough officer to wed forgot where she had come from and suddenly shunned the girls who had been her friends. I had seen it on several occasions and heard even more about it from Shiv. Underneath the glitter and the glamour, the fancy parties and pretty clothes lay a dark nasty side to things I was grateful I didn't have to play a part in.

I got up and walked about the room, mingling and making small talk as I did so. I had come a long way, having taken Thrawn's advice on learning the intricate game of polite banter to heart. Participating in the dissemination of information through the means of useless chatter had become almost a sport in some ways. How much information could one glean without actually saying anything useful? I could smile as sweetly as the rest of them but my gifts gave me an edge and I enjoyed that more than I was willing to admit, used my

talents more than I should. Ever since my stay on Tatooine, my gifts had grown. My ability to touch objects and read them was significantly stronger than ever before and my talent for detecting truth from lie was almost never wrong. I did not understand why these gifts were getting stronger and I didn't care. I had them and now I used them and was, in turn, used for them. Somewhere along the way I had crossed a line. I wondered if it was possible to ever go back.

Eventually, I came to be beside Lord Vader who stood like a black statue. We watched the gayety of the dance floor in broody silence. He was an imposing figure, wrapped in his black suit and mask, his arms folded across his chest and standing at his side I looked diminutive and almost dainty. It was almost funny enough to make me smirk. The clockwork regularity of his mechanical breathing was oddly in time with the music that was currently being played and I would never be certain if it was that or the drink I had nursed which made me bold enough to do ask the question that suddenly popped into my head.

I touched his mind lightly with mine. "*Lord Vader?*"

"*What?!*"

"*Would you care to dance?*" I asked him.

Absolute surprise shot through him and I felt it like a blaster hit. His answer was to be expected. "*I do not dance!*" he said, folding his arms behind his back.

"*Why not? Don't you like dancing?*"

He glanced down to look directly at me and then after a long pause he said. "*It was never necessary to learn.*"

I smiled up at him, knowing we were being observed, knowing this would drive people mad with curiosity. "*I can teach you.*" I told him.

His reply was terse and to the point. "*I can hurt you.*"

"*Funny, I told Admiral Thrawn that very same thing in a letter not too long ago!*" I stifled a giggle.

To my and everyone else's great surprise, Lord Vader laughed. It was a sharp, loud and very unnerving sound. I just grinned slightly and edged away from him.

"*Go and amuse yourself for the rest of the evening, girl and stop bothering me with absurd conversation.*" He was still chuckling as he swept past me and the crowds who parted like frightened kreetles allowing him to pass unimpeded. I just stood and stared at his back, well aware that the people around me were both terrified and insanely curious about what had just transpired.

I was grateful when Shiv appeared and bugged me to dance with him. The rest of the evening passed without incident. Zaarin was as well behaved as could be expected and I remained as aloof as I dared without being rude. We made polite banter and danced a few more times but Shiv and the others made sure I was well looked after. By midnight I did not have to feign fatigue, I was tired and my feet hurt. I made my excuses to Zaarin who was deeply engaged in a heated argument with Admiral Harkov, relieving him from the duty of escorting me home because Shiv and Ynyth had offered to do that. He broke off from his conversation to ask if he might see me again and when I told him I did not think it would be a good idea he was not pleased.

"May I ask why?" He inquired in a voice which said it was becoming tedious to keep hearing the word no from me.

"I don't think it would be appropriate." I told him plainly.

Instead of being angry he just laughed. "By the stars, you are to the point. Tell me was your relationship with Admiral Thrawn appropriate?" I felt jealousy flare through Zaarin and smiled coolly.

"What relationship?" I asked. I still asked myself this question so it wasn't exactly a lie.



"I was under the impression that you and he were close." He said.

"I see that palace gossip and the rumour mill knows no bounds." I said tartly, avoiding the actual question. "Do not believe all you hear, Grand Admiral. That I have accompanied Admiral Thrawn on several occasions to various Imperial functions at his request does not mean anything other than what it is. I was simply doing my duty to the Empire, just as I do tonight with you."

"So then, his intentions with you were entirely honourable?" there was a nasty little edge to Zaarin's voice I didn't like or wholly understand.

"Grand Admiral Zaarin, I do not worry about Admiral Thrawn's intentions with me. He merely wished to have female company for an official event, this is not so unusual. I do not believe he has any interest in entertaining courtesans or young women who work for the Empire. I believe his ambitions lie elsewhere." I shrugged. *You on the other hand...*, I thought.

Zaarin gave me a look and then smirked slightly. "Probably so, that *alien* is only interested in furthering his career. Goodness knows how he's managed to stay in the Emperor's good graces so long. I hear he can be quite defiant." There was a bitterness behind his words that bordered on hatred. Thrawn, it seemed had managed to make a few enemies along the way. I bit my tongue from saying something snarky in response to Zaarin's insulting tone.

I raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "I am merely Lord Vader's office girl. I wouldn't know these sorts of things and I am afraid I leave that sort of speculation up to others."

Zaarin laughed. "Hardly just an office girl." He said then added. "Well, then perhaps you would permit me to invite you to another official function, would that be *appropriate?*"

"If I am afforded the time to go, I imagine it complies with the regulations on inter palace relationships set in place. Now, Grand Admiral, I really must leave I have a lot of work to do tomorrow and my ride is waiting for me. I had a very pleasant evening, thank you." I turned to make a quick getaway but he caught my arm. I had to fight against my instinctive desire to put him on his ass. I was a little unprepared when he took a hold of my hand and kissed it politely. I could feel his lust but I shut it out. The thought of his hands on my body made me queasy. I wasn't sure why, though, because it wasn't as if he was ugly or even unpleasant to be with. But something about him didn't sit well with me and I was very glad to get away from him.

Home was quiet and peaceful. I stripped off the fancy clothes, showered and put on something unflattering and comfortable to wear. I made tea and then sat down to read Thrawn's latest letter and then, taking Cati's advice to heart, reply to him and tell him about everything that had happened.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*I fear I must apologise for the lengthy delay in replying to your last letter. I could make up a myriad of excuses but in truth there are none other than the fact I have been preoccupied with our current mission and time slipped away. It is easy to forget how many days have passed in space as that unit of time measurement does not exist. I am sure you understand this phenomenon well and can forgive my lack of thought.*

*Your description of Coruscant is very apt in more ways than you know. It is affectionately known as The Jewel of the Core but in truth it is a planet climbing out of its own decrepit foundations. What is shining and beautiful on the top is dark and ugly underneath. You see only the beauty, the culture of the wealthy and privileged who live above a certain level, and not the seamier underbelly of the world below.*

*When I was first introduced to this planet I was quite awed by the sheer audacity of it. An anomaly of science more than anything else, it fascinated me to know how the whole thing worked, because in theory a planet like Coruscant should not exist. I visited*

some of the atmospheric plants and the weather controllers, and made several forays into the underside. It is not a place I would care to live forever. I, too, would miss the natural side of a planet. Csilla is a cold, place wrapped in the grips of an ice age, but one can go topside and see stars, feel the wind and breathe the air. I often got the feeling on Coruscant that the air was never really fresh, that it was used, cleaned then used again. A foolish notion I agree but something that passed my mind. So I do understand your feelings about it, and while I doubt I would ever feel wholly comfortable on Tatooine, it is an honest planet. She shows you her face for good or bad and you make of it what you will. I empathise with you on your longing to see stars in the night sky.

So, Tigellinus finally got his wish and was inducted into the Canted Circle. It does not surprise me that you have neither heard of this nor seen an induction before. It is a very old, fairly secretive society based on Coruscant for the elite, wealthy and the influential. There is a very long waiting list of beings wanting to be allowed entry into it and it used to be that perhaps in a decade no more than ten or twelve new members were allowed in. Since the Ascension of the Emperor that number has increased considerably. He tends to push those whom he favours. I can only imagine that Tigellinus' induction caused quite a stir, he was most assuredly not officially next in line.

There is not much to tell about the Order itself, it is essentially an elite club for the selected few. In the last few years it has become a bit of what you would probably call a 'boy's club' and the more recent members have been human. Being a member of the Circle does allow for some privilege and a certain amount of respect. There is of course the public ceremony which you were witness to and then once that is done the members and the newly initiated go to a secret place deep in the underground levels of the Imperial palace and the real fun begins. I am never quite sure how to take these secret societies and clubs personally but since my name is on the list of those waiting to be inducted I guess I should mind my manners. Inclusion in this order is one of the highest honours a person can attain on Coruscant. For me, it is a means to an end.

I have had it on good authority that Lord Vader is quite the engineer; it does not at all surprise me to hear tell of his ability to design droids. He may not be the most diplomatic man in the universe but he is very talented when it comes to machines and flying. I suspect that this small part of him sees something in common with your love of engines and ships. It does not surprise me at all that he will, as you say on a good day, converse about such matters. I am quite sure these conversations are a source of light in his otherwise dark world. It probably does him good to have someone around who does not quake at the very sight of him and likes to banter about machinery. I, too, have had opportunities to discuss machine and ship design with him, these conversations were almost enjoyable.

A private showing of both Medeglia's and Chassu's works. My dear, there are very few moments when I actually wish to be back on Coruscant but this would definitely be one of them. What a wonderful opportunity you have been given, a chance to see the works of two of the galaxy's greatest artists and in such a setting as a private gallery showing. I am quite envious and I do hope you will pick up a catalogue if there is one and regale me with all the details you possibly can. I suppose this is an event the Emperor has sponsored or something one of his many courtiers is doing to curry favour? Either way, do enjoy the evening. Both artists' works are not displayed in exhibitions all that often. It is a rare chance you are being given, although I expect with your back ground and upbringing you already knew that and were just taking great delight in teasing me. Be warned, I tease back.

I am quite familiar with the Medeglia painting you mentioned. I happen to know that the reason it is not on display anywhere is that it is in private collection. It is an unusual piece when compared to the rest of her body of work because of its relatively

*small size and incredible attention to detail. What you don't see in the reproduction images is how she managed to paint the sand in such a way that it actually seems to shimmer or that if you stare at it long enough the slight wisps of clouds you can barely see in her sunset sky almost seem to move. I had no idea where she had actually sat to paint that landscape and it is nice you can fill that gap of information in for me. Perhaps one day you can take me to the spot you think she sat at, I would very much like to see it for myself. I am personally quite fond of her larger works, especially the depictions of some of the Ice planets she visited. I smile as I write this because it appears we both seem drawn to her works which remind us of our home worlds.*

*I am quite curious which of Chassu's pieces you will get to see and if his last work will be on display, Palpatine Triumphant. If you have not seen this piece I'd be really interested as to your thoughts on it, especially given the reaction you had to the disturbing piece I had in the living room the last time you were in my flat.*

*You never cease to amaze me. Your eloquence on the subject of loss is most profound. I suppose I should not be surprised at all but still, your words often catch me by surprise and I am often awed that one as young as you in terms of physical years lived has such a grasp on subjects that most beings can spend a life time studying and never seem to fully comprehend. Old ghosts, as you say, do indeed have a nasty way of sticking around. I expect that someday the rifts between my sister and I will eventually have to be faced and dealt with, but she almost seems to like her pain and as for myself, well I don't care to speculate on that. Sj'iu' Tekari, do you think we can leave this particular topic for another time, perhaps when we are sitting together someplace that is comfortable with a decent brandy or cup of tea?*

*My experience with force choke happened a very long time ago and is a story I will wait until we see each other in person to tell it to you. It was my first experience with the people you call Jedi and it did not leave me with a favourable impression. I think that Lord Vader uses this power because he can and he has little to no patience for mistakes of any kind. He is unreasonable in this area and you would be wise not to bring this topic up with me as we will most certainly disagree on how the Sith Lord runs his affairs. His brutality is legendary and you have been on the wrong end of it too many times. As you say, I know how he is and I do not like it very much.*

*The CEDF stands for Chiss Expansionary Defence Fleet. It is the military branch that falls under the Chiss Ascendancy, which is the portion of the galaxy just inside the Unknown regions that is ruled by my people. The fleet is in charge of frontier patrols and exploratory missions in areas around the Ascendancy. It is also responsible for recording its discoveries in the Expeditionary Library on the capital world of Csilla. You would love this library, every single book is written by hand. The Defence Fleet also have the job of repelling aggressive incursions and considering long-term strategic concerns. It is well organised and well run.*

*I wish you the best of luck in your Bunduki trials. I have since done some research on this fighting style and I must say it is impressive. I look forward to hearing more about how you do in these trials. It does make me reconsider my previous statement about frisking you for concealed weaponry. I feel I should warn you though; it is unwise to make overt threats, teasing included, to a Chiss particularly one who has a subtle rebellious nature, so be wary about this course of action. And on that happy little note I shall end this. Be well, my dear.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia*

*Mith'raw'nuruodo*

*I grinned as I read the last few lines. I loved it when he played these word games. He had told me when we had first begun to write exclusively in Cheunh that the Chiss enjoyed word play greatly. It was an elegant, almost sport like past time and he excelled in it. I*

made a fresh cup of tea and sat down to answer him. I wasn't sure this would be an easy letter to write though because I got the feeling he wasn't going to like it much that Lord Vader had insisted I spend time with Zaarin.

*Mia e'Tekari,*

*So much has happened that I hardly know where to start. I know that you are probably very curious about the art show but that will have to wait. Firstly, at Cati's urging, I should probably tell you about this year's Grand ball.*

*I wasn't going to attend but that soon changed after I got cornered into going and at Lord Vader's request was to be Grand Admiral Zaarin's date for the evening. I can tell you I wasn't pleased with this situation. I would have spoken of it earlier but I was hoping I could worm my way out of it right up until it was almost too late to get a dress. Lucky for me Cati can work miracles at the last minute. She said that as a man you would not like me keeping secrets of this nature from you, I don't know that it was a secret but more like an annoyance I didn't want to talk about. However her words made me think of something you said to me a very long time ago. 'Trust is a delicate matter' and I do not want to shatter ours for any reason.*

*It was a long night to be honest and your presence failed. Lord Vader is playing some sort of game with Zaarin, I think, and is using me as a sort of human lie detector. I didn't find anything worth reporting except that Zaarin doesn't like the Emperor or Lord Vader that much and that he is terribly proud of his new ship designs. He spent an hour ruining very expensive table linens showing me the new hyperdrive ideas. I must admit his plans are impressive and he is, as you once warned me, very intelligent but he's a boor and I do not enjoy his company. I am quite sure that rumours will circulate about the fact that I was there with him and not you, especially as apparently you and I were quite the gossip news item after the Fete Week gala we attended together. Zaarin asked me out but I turned him down, you should have seen his face when I told him I didn't think that was appropriate. To which he countered by asking if my relationship with you was appropriate. My answer of 'What relationship?' will no doubt confuse the issue and it does make me ask why all the competition between you Imperial men? This in turn has led me to feel just a tad like the end prize in a bantha race. He will most likely request that I go with him to other official social functions and chances are that Lord Vader will not only agree but insist. I am not sure what the deal is between Zaarin and Lord Vader but I am not happy to be in the middle of this at all. I wanted you to know so that there were no misunderstandings between us, now... onto other things.*

*You spoke about my eloquence on the topic of loss. I have to tell you I don't feel eloquent. I feel, for the most part sad. Perhaps, it is partly that I don't hide from that but rather choose to face it and let the sadness pass through me so that I can maybe one day move onward myself. Your gentle words and kindness make all these losses somehow easier to bear. Knowing I am not alone helps more than I could ever have imagined. I would be more than glad to sit with you and talk about these things over a glass of brandy instead of writing them down. I will also not bring up the topic of Lord Vader and his foul temper again, but he is someone close to me and whether you like it or not I need to talk about him and his ways. It is not that I think he is misunderstood or that I agree with his brutal methods. But he is a part of my life and important to me in ways I have no words to describe.*

*Thank you for the little lesson on CEDF. It was really interesting to read. I cannot imagine an entire library filled with hand written books, it must be spectacular to see. You keep hinting at the wonders of your home world and one of these days I shall be so full of curiosity that I might just take my ship and head out there for a visit. I don't imagine that would go over well, given the xenophobic nature of the Chiss. I am also*

*grateful for the information on this strange little 'boy's club' so peculiar to Coruscant. I had no idea you were on the list for induction into the Order of the Canted Circle, how exciting. If you get in I will try to make sure I am in the front row cheering you on. I am quite sure you will look simply stunning in one of those long velvet dressing gown robe things. I could probably arrange to have you matching slippers made, Cati knows a very good shoe maker. Sorry, I'll stop now before you really do come back and decide that payback is required. Not sure what the Chiss policy is on retribution for teasing an Admiral is but I am sure it can't be good.*

*So I imagine that by now you are wondering about the private art showing. Shiv came and picked me up at seven. We drove over into Coco town where Fontey's Gallery, as it was called, was located. The showing had been organized by the Art Friends of Palpatine, some high end, private, snobby art circle, I hope you aren't a member of this or else I have just insulted you. But I have honestly never met a more pretentious bunch of nitwits in my entire life. My mother would have laughed herself silly at their affectations and mannerisms. Anyway, you should have been there and I really wished you were. The collection was of their self portraits. I had no idea there were so many different ways an artist could paint, draw or etch themselves. They had a lovely, complimentary catalogue so I swiped one for you and I will send it with this letter. Second of all they had amazing catering. Shiv and I nearly made ourselves sick on the canapés... I am so uncouth sometimes and a sucker for really delicious little finger foods.*

*There were twenty four portraits in total, even numbers from each artist and they were displayed in alternation. There were mainly painted portraits but from each artist there were also etchings and one drawing each. The etchings and drawings were very early works, and probably from their days as a student.*

*I have come to the conclusion that Chassu's portraits really do scare the sand jiggers out me. He had a very strange way of seeing himself, and although none of the information I have read on them says this, I wonder if he was not trying to express all sides of his somewhat eclectic personality at once. The images were all very fractured and broken. The blurring and the almost nightmarish quality of the faces he produced made me wonder if he was constantly at war with himself. Only in his very early works does he draw the whole face without splintering it somehow. The catalogue talks about his difficult upbringing and being shunted off to live with various family members at odd times and equates that to his self image, but I don't see that in his works at all because if that were the case all his paintings would have some element of that and I know his nudes do not. Anyway as much as I disliked his paintings they will certainly stay in my mind for a long time. Well, dislike is not the right word at all; I found them disturbing and very compelling all at the same time.*

*By sharp contrast Medeglia's self portraits were almost disappointing at first, until one gets really close to the canvas and looks carefully at her work. Her use of colours is astounding and where Chassu's faces are all painted in cold hues of blues and greys, disrupted by violent reds, hers are all warm tones and blended almost as though you are looking at her works through a frosted glass. From a distance it is as though she were trying to veil her true face but up close you see that she was actually catching details of light and shadow and it is really stunning. As though she sees herself not as a whole person of flesh and bone but rather as a being of dancing light and tries to capture this even though the light is in constant motion.*

*It is hard to describe and I am sorry I don't do a good job of that for you. Perhaps, it will be easier to talk about once you have seen the catalogue. There is another one of these private exhibits being put together for sometime in the future, no exact date has been given yet and if I understand that right I will get to go. I'll let you know more when I do.*

*The Emperor was there and seemed quite interested to hear what I thought about the whole thing. He is very fond of Chassu's work himself and was intrigued by my take on the portraits. He told me he was happy to see the invitations Lord Vader gets sent being put to good use and told me there would be further opportunities for me to, how did he put it, 'further my artistic development as well as my other talents.' The fact that he spent so long talking with me really made people curious to say the least or downright suspicious. He's quite well educated about art himself but he has some strange ideas about it. Do you ever discuss this topic with him?*

*All this talk and thought about artwork made me curious. How did you ever start to use art as a way to learn about other cultures from a strategic point of view? The Emperor talked a little about this and he seemed most impressed by your ability to do so. He said I could learn a lot from your example and I must have made a face because that's when he ended the conversation by chuckling and muttering about besotted young ladies and their attraction to arrogant, older men. I was sorely tempted to argue this point with him but for once I shut my mouth and kept it that way. I am not besotted and you, as you have so often told me, are just extremely good at what you do.*

*I have no doubt that it is unwise to make overt threats to a rebellious and subtle Chiss, but the results could be interesting. I think I will stop now before I get myself into seriously big trouble I can't back peddle out of. Now it is close to four in the morning and while I am sure that no one will actually notice what time I crawl into work in the morning, I would like to get some sleep before hand.*

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,  
Merlyn*

I sat for a long time and stared out of the window of my flat. My mind was buzzing with everything that was happening. I had that strange itching between the shoulder blades sensation coupled with a restlessness that I could not define, as though a storm were coming. I stared at the letters on the table and wondered how it was possible to miss someone so much. I often thought about this, and what attachment meant, what being bound to someone was. Thrawn had become an integral part of my world. I could not imagine it for one moment without his presence. Not for the first time did I wonder about my place in his. That was a puzzle I didn't think I would ever solve, but there seemed to be many of those in my life these days.

I closed my eyes and leaned back on the couch. The images that came unwanted, unbidden were not of Thrawn but rather of my birth mother. I had been lying to myself that I did not want to know more and questions about who she had been, what her life had been like began to gnaw at me in the quiet hours of the day. I just had no idea where to begin looking for answers. All these things pushed at me giving me the sensation of spiralling upwards and out of control. Life had been simple on Tatooine, not knowing the things I now knew had also been easier but as I looked at Thrawn's letter I realised that easier was not always better. At least there were a few complications I actually enjoyed. He was one of them. With that thought I decided it was time to get some sleep. The way things were going who knew what was coming around the corner.

After the Grand Ball things around the Palace had settled down and were at a deceptive lull. Shiv was busy preparing for the Court's move to Naboo and I was busy trying to keep up with the work that Lord Vader created. I had been disappointed when he had told me that neither he nor I would be staying on Naboo this year. I had been looking forward to it but his order had not come as a big surprise. He hated the planet for a number of reasons and he hated reminders of his dead wife even more. Shiv had told me when we had gone out for 'caf and desert that this year it was only a smallish portion of the Court going and the whole affair would be quiet and toned down. The Emperor was moving away from the huge glamorous courts and trying to streamline things a little more

so I would not be missing much. Still, I was a bit sad about it. I liked Naboo but not having to shift the office to another planet did make things a lot easier. With most of the court and many of the offices getting ready for the move things were fairly quiet on my side. This meant I could explore the Imperial palace without running into too many people, asking me if I was lost. I never got lost but try explaining that.

The Imperial Palace was a huge labyrinth of rooms and corridors, riddled with secret passages and tunnels that have gone untouched for years and years. When I had time, which wasn't so often any more with the heavy Bunduki training schedule on top of the weird hours that Lord Vader kept, I wandered about. I had come across a few interesting places, a couple of hidden passages and a room full of what looked like antique vases of all shapes and sizes. There were a couple of rooms filled with books and old datalogues and I found what appeared to be a small banquet hall with a rather nice but old fashioned kitchen attached. On the whole I found the Imperial palace to be a very odd place.

I often visited the little library I had been given by the Emperor. I had not seen him there since my return but I was almost certain I felt his presence lingering and from time to time things were moved, or books added. Every time I visited there were new things to be discovered. The last time I had looked about I had found a file full of blueprints tucked away in a small shelf at the far end of the room. The bookshelf had been covered in dust that looked as though no one had touched it for years but I was certain I had explored it thoroughly. The data card had been tucked away behind a large book that I thought was supposed to be a cook book but I wasn't sure. When I clipped the cards I to the card reader I was amazed to find the most complete set of blue prints I had ever seen. On one card were detailed plans of the Imperial Palace and on the other were plans the building I could see in the distance from my office window and my flat, the old Jedi temple. I had often wondered about the Jedi Temple but I had never asked about it, fearing Lord Vader's wrath. After his display of temper the last time the subject of Jedi and family had come up I did not want to even think the topic let alone ask about the one place he would probably hate more than any other in the galaxy. But the Temple called to me, it tugged at my curiosity and that was always a bad thing.

I scoured the small library and the archives as best I could, looking for any information on my birth mother, on the Great Jedi Purge and the cloned soldiers who had fought the war. There were snippets of stories but nothing concrete and I began to wonder if I would not find more of what I was looking for hidden in the Jedi temple instead. The Jedi had been the ones to use the Clone armies, it made sense to me that their building might have better archives, more information which might answer my questions but I was not quite brave enough to try and enter the building. While, to the best of my knowledge, going there had not been verbally or expressly forbidden, I had a feeling that to be caught inside might not be the best thing to have happen. There were whispers that the Emperor had taken the entire building over as his personal sanctuary but I wasn't so sure that was true. Still, as I stood staring out the window of my office, I wondered what was over there and why it had begun to pull at me. I was so lost in thought that I did not hear Jarack knock or come in.

I jumped when he said my name and then laughed. "Sorry, I was light years away."  
"So I see." He grinned.

"You're here very late." I looked at the chrono on the wall. My lesson with master Kjestyll had been cancelled; he had had an emergency of some sort to deal with so I had taken the opportunity to work through some of the mess Lord Vader's latest to-do list rampage had created.

"Yeah, well actually I would have stopped by in the morning but I saw the lights were still on. You know how things go; you start out a little behind schedule and just keep

accumulating lateness." He grinned handing me the bulky courier package he held in his hands.

I took the large envelope and signed for it. "So when do you head back out?" I poured him a cup of spice 'caf from the carafe I had on my desk. He smiled as he accepted it.

"It's a direct turn around as soon as I leave here, I leave the planet. I should be back in about three weeks if you can wait that long or I'll send one of my guys over. The Admiral is on a tight schedule at the moment so we are all quite busy."

I shook my head. "No that's fine, I am also busy these days, so much so I can hardly can't think straight let alone put serious pen to paper and answer these letters in a way that does them justice. This way I will have lots to write about when I get back."

"Oh, will you be headed to Naboo?"

I shook my head. "Not this year but I am going home to Tatooine for a few days. I wrangled some time off to attend the Boonta Eve festival."

Jarack grinned. "You actually get time off? How do you manage that?"

"Would you believe I make baby jax eyes at lord Vader until he can't stand it anymore?"

"No. Try again."

I laughed. "I just asked. I can work from Tatooine easily enough and a few days doesn't matter much so he didn't really have a reason to say no and I caught him on a good day."

He grinned. "I don't know how you do it, everyone else is scared to death of that man and you make jokes about his temper."

"Maybe that's how I do it, Jarack." I said airily.

"That, Miss Gabriel I would believe." He said finishing his 'caf. "Now I am afraid I must go, deadlines are unforgiving. See you when I see you then, if you want a pick up done earlier, you know the drill." He waved.

I loved the quiet of working this late at night but with a letter and other secrets tucked inside the courier envelope burning a hole on my table I decided to go home. I had been waiting for this letter and was a little worried about it. I made tea and curled up on the couch, tore open the package and opened the envelope of beautiful creamy paper.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*When I first met you on the balcony in the palace, like so many others, I was curious about the young woman Darth Vader had accepted as his personal assistant. Everyone was whispering about this timid little outer rim red head and naturally I had to see for myself. After our brief conversation, your complete nonplussed attitude towards my appearance and your brazen response to my inappropriate hands on behaviour I knew then that you were unique and far from timid. It did not occur to me though, that you would become a part of my life in a way I could not even imagine. I am quite sure I could write several pages of terrible, florid prose about what makes you so intriguing and still never quite get it right, but perhaps from amongst all of your interesting character traits the two I appreciate the most are your unwavering loyalty and your open heart.*

*Your talented seamstress friend, Cati, had a valid point when she stated that men don't like it when women keep secrets from them. She is quite right you know we do not like that at all, but I know you and that is not the sort of secret you would keep from me, that is simply not your way. Your letter sounded so apologetic, as though you had actually done something wrong by obeying an order given to you by Lord Vader yet I feel it is I who must apologise for not being there for you. I was also saddened to hear you did not have such a good time at what has to be the most lavish Imperial event of the year. It*



surprises me that Lord Vader would put you in such a position and that leads me to believe, as you surmised, that he has suspicions concerning the Grand Admiral although exactly what those suspicions are I have no idea as of yet. In the Empire nothing is ever as it appears to be. I can only reiterate my previous words and tell you to watch your back and keep your wits about you.

So mia Sj'iu' Tekari, how can I put your mind at ease? Should I tell you that I am not a jealous man by nature? That I am certain that were the nature of our relationship to have changed you would let me know, your blunt honesty has always been something I have admired even when it has been annoying. I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall when you turned Demetrius Zaarin down but tread lightly my dear, Zaarin, as I have said before does not like to hear the word no, especially from a pretty girl he has assumed will be an easy target for his advances. You mentioned discussing Zaarin's work with him, I am quite curious. What is he working on exactly, that he destroyed table linen to impress you with? I know that there has been talk of upgrading and changing the TIE design but I have not seen any of the plans yet. Do not worry about losing my trust; you would have to work very hard to make that happen.

Now, let me thank you for the catalogue you sent me from the art show, it is a very good one and I am most pleased to have a copy. The image reproductions are very high quality which is nice for a change. I was very intrigued by your take on Chassu's self portraits. That theory is not well published although it has been brought up in some of the more elite art circles by the scholars who delve more deeply into his psyche. If you manage to get a hold of his very rare self published autobiography you will see that you are actually not very far off the mark. He writes about his love hate relationship with his own self image but goes on to explain that he felt that it was impossible for an artist to capture all that he or she is in a single image, that is, a normal self portrait so he tried very hard to capture all sides of the personality. It might also interest you to know he loathed all his self portraits but it did not stop him from continuing to paint them. I believe in total he actually painted something like fifty-seven, many of which he also destroyed at some point before he died. I do not know if he actually used a fractured mirror for what he did but your analogy is very close to how he apparently felt. It does not surprise me too much to learn that you are both attracted and repelled by these paintings at the same time. They are remarkably powerful.

Isona Medeglia's portraits are really quite elegant, don't you think? I have only ever seen one in person before and judging from the images in the catalogue you were fortunate enough to see some of her very best. I like her style. She has a delightful understated elegance to her work. It is easy to see why, at first, one would be disappointed but thankfully you have the good sense not to judge on first glance and are able to see the beauty underneath the veil, so to speak. Your description of her use of light and colour is quite apt. You do surprise me, you know, with your ability to look past the obvious. I do agree it will be easier to discuss in person and I look forward to this conversation more than you know.

It should not surprise you to learn that it was the Dantassi who first led me to look at art as a more functional way of understanding people and cultures. Chiss art is something that is almost sacred in many ways. Our artists are considered national treasures and we value the best of them by displaying their works in galleries and museums, to be looked at and admired. The Chiss produce stunning works of art but to a small boy, also uninteresting. It was not until my encounter with the Dantassi that I began to see that art itself could be and often was so much more than just a painting on a wall. You must remember I was a young child at the time of this initial encounter. Before that art bored me to death, I was far more interested in playing with my model spaceships than being dragged around a gallery on an educational school trip. After my

*time spent with the Dantassi I started to think about art in a different way and as a young teen I began to study it on my own quite seriously, much to the chagrin and confusion of my parents. I read a lot on the subject and began to understand that one needs to, more often than not, look a little deeper at the art, architecture and artistic culture of a species to get a better grasp on how the species and culture work. These insights did not come over night and I work quite hard to remain educated in the field of art analysis. It helps that I genuinely do enjoy these studies and that they are not just a means to an end. Yes, I have on occasion had the opportunity to discuss these analytical aspects of art with His Excellency and we have often had some quite interesting debates. He does not always agree with me nor do I, him but in the end it is not really about who is right or wrong. You are correct on one thing though, he is very knowledgeable about art and he does have some unusual ideas on the subject as well. I did have to smile at his comment about furthering your artistic education, I don't think you need a lot of pushing in that direction but do take advantage of any chances you get to go and see all the exhibitions you can. If I am able, I would be more than delighted to accompany you to these affairs should you wish it, the excuse to start yet another round of gossip notwithstanding.*

*I am sending you two books I hope you might enjoy. I did promise that I would try to find you Cheunh literature and thanks to some of my contacts I was able to procure some for you. The two I have included are among my personal favourites and are quite lovely. One is a collection of Chiss fairy tales and myths. The other is a delightful story based on an old legend that supposedly took place long before the great cold came. I will be quite curious as to what you think.*

*Your idea of matching slippers to go along with the black velvet robes for induction into the Canted Circle Order is an image that made me shudder and laugh simultaneously. I can only imagine what the rest of the members of this elite and somewhat snobbish group of men would think should one of their inductees show up in that fashion statement. As for your foray into the dangerous art of teasing me with such suggestions...well, it just leads me to wonder if I should not be more careful about the words I choose with which to converse, I am not certain I wish to provide you with more ammunition. I am quite certain I could think of some appropriate retribution for teasing... something long, lingering with interesting results.*

*Since you asked, Chiss military policy in general is that we do not make the first move; however should an aggressor attack us then we are free to take the appropriate measures in return to assure our safety is secure. Should I take your delightful foray into the world of teasing as an act of aggression thereby allowing me to counter attack? Of course, I would prefer to continue this in person. I think it is far more fun to tease you where I can see the results of my work, namely that sparkle in your eyes and the rosy blush on your cheeks. Or that moment when your pupils dilate and your breath quickens as I, perhaps, barely brush the nape of your neck with my fingertips, for example. I could describe my defensive strategy in great detail but I think that perhaps I will save that for when I am able to show you just what sort of counter strike I am capable of, should you wish to pursue this line of aggression. Rest assured, my dear, retribution will come when you least expect it. Make no mistake, I do not issue idle threats and I always carry through on a course of action, especially when I know I will win. It is unadvisable to start acts of aggression towards a Chiss warrior, particularly one with my unusual nature. Does this answer your question? Do you still want to play?*

*I know that this is a short letter but I am going to say goodnight to you now. I am quite fatigued and in the interest of not having my own advice tossed back at me about getting some sleep, I am going to bed. I will add a little good news that we will be returning to the core worlds soon. By the time the Imperial Court has returned from its*

*retreat to Naboo I hope to be back in Imperial Space. I am certain that after your not so pleasant evening at the Grand Ball it is I who owe you many dances, a debt I shall be more than happy to repay.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ja*

*Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I folded the letter back up and slipped it back into its envelope with a grin. How could he make me shiver and smile from so far away? How was it that his words could caress like his fingertips and create such an ache, such a longing that I almost wanted to cry? I sighed and then looked at the two books he had sent. They were old and beautiful and they had both been transcribed by hand. I did not even want to think what such books as these would cost on the antiquities market. I was willing to bet that there was many a collector out there who would give his eye teeth for hand written Chiss books. My fingertips stroked the covers of each book as though they were alive. I would take them with me on the trip home for Boonta Eve and read them in the quiet of my ship. I sighed as I got up. I was glad to be getting off Coruscant for a few days. All the petty bickering and political wrangling of court and office had begun to get on my nerves. Lord Vader's already vile temper had gotten even worse and the last couple of days had been nothing short of violent shouting matches, hurled objects and air that crackled with power and tension. He had not actually given me permission to go on leave for a few days as I had told Jarack, but rather I had annoyed him so much that he had ordered me to get out of his sight and out of his way.

"So you would be happy if I went off planet?" I had asked carefully.

"I would be happy if you would stop bothering me, do your job in silence and I could care less from where you do it!" He had snarled.

"So you don't mind if I go to Tatooine then?" I said, pressing the point.

He had paused for a split second, detecting my underlying deception then continued to shout at me. "I don't care if you go off and rot on Malastare, stop pestering me with stupid questions! I do not have time for your idiotic games. If you want to visit your family just go, but make sure your work is attended to!"

That had been as good as permission in my eyes and I had not bothered to complicate the matter further by having him clarify exactly what he meant. He was just in a pissy mood and I had learned how to take advantage of it. He was well aware that Boonta Eve was coming up because I had mentioned it several times in passing. I had half hoped to draw out his memory of the pod race he had won as a child. I longed to hear him describe how it had felt to not just participate but also win but the topic made him cranky and antisocial. I should have known better than to push but sometimes I just could not help myself. My father had been thrilled when I had sent a holonet message saying I'd be visiting and Bedi had promptly decided that they would hold a huge Boonta eve family dinner.

The next days passed quietly enough. Lord Vader was away and most of the major court had gone to Naboo, despite Shiv's claims that this year the move had been toned down. There was a skeleton crew left behind along with the non essential departments and staff. I was glad to know that Master Kjestyll was also not going to Naboo this year. Our training could continue uninterrupted which was good because if I was going to pass the trials that were approaching far too soon for my liking, I was going to need all the help I could get.

I made my own preparations for my trip back to Tatooine. My droid, P2B4 had become accustom to my not being around and quite liked the trust I gave him. He seemed to think that being allowed to deal with the minor affairs of Lord Vader's office was a big deal and got very irritated when people insulted him about it. It would have been hilarious if he had not been so earnest about it.

I packed happily and was on my way out the palace to my ship when someone came running down the hall after me yelling my name. One of the young palace message runners, Taduk, he was called. He was all out of breath as he handed me the small data card.

"Miss...Gabriel.... I am so glad I... caught you!" He puffed. "The man said it was... very important that you get this...."

I smiled at the young boy, he could not have been much older than eleven or twelve and took the data card from his hands. I turned it over in my fingers and a shiver rippled down my spine.

"This isn't standard Imperial issue, who sent this?" I asked.

Taduk shrugged. "He didn't say his name, stopped off at the main office, said it was urgent."

"Did you see who it was?" I asked. The main message center was on the ground floor and open to the public with proper ID. It was the only way the general populace could get messages to palace workers during work hours aside from holonet transmissions.

"Nope, he was all covered up, had a strange accent though. He did have a valid ident card, there will be a swipe of it in the system if you want."

"Yeah, can you get me that info?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now." I said a little more sharply than I had meant to. He ran off right away and I waited.

I turned the little data card over and over in my fingers not liking what I was sensing from it. There had been a brief flash of residual memory when I had taken it from Taduk's fingers. I hoped I was wrong but was certain I wasn't.

I drew a deep breath and took out my data reader, the small portable one I used when I was travelling and slipped the card into the reader slot. As I read the message my worst fears were confirmed and I could not stop the sudden rush of cold terror that swept up my spine.

*I have not forgotten about you, Mouse.* Was all that the message said.

I did not know what it meant but the underlying threat scared me more than I thought possible. I removed the data card from the reader and shoved them both deep into my satchel. I had the worst of the shakes and my fear under control by the time Taduk came back with a second card.

"Here you go, Miss. It's all there. Brackton says if you need anything else you can call him, he's on duty now." There was worry in the boy's eyes.

"Thanks Taduk." I said as reassuringly as I could. "Always like to be sure who sends me stuff, you know how it goes working for Lord Vader...check and double check." I said with a smile hoping to take some of the boy's fear away. They were all so scared to death of Lord Vader that the mention of his name made them tremble in fear and they transferred that fear to me. I even so much as raised an eyebrow in question and they all jittered like nervous durnies.

The boy heaved a little sigh of relief and vanished before I could say anything else.

I didn't have to look at the information on the second data card to know who had sent this message.

"*Jyrki.*" I hissed between clenched teeth. As I walked out of the palace towards the landing pad with my ship I wondered if he would ever leave me alone. I ran three very thorough checks on every system on board before I took off. Jyrki knew my tricks; he had taught me almost every one of them. If he wanted to get to me, through my ship would be the best way to do it. I was almost certain that he had delivered the data card himself but I didn't understand why. After his stunt last year he was a wanted man and there was a

pretty decent description of him on the core bulletin and holonet service. But he had covered his face, Taduk had said.

'*Bastard*'. I thought and as scared as I was of him I discovered that I was more angry than anything else.

The trip to Tatooine was uneventful and along the way I studied the blue prints I had brought with me. I hadn't been sure what the exact policy on removing things from the library the Emperor allowed me access too but since no one had forbidden me to take stuff out; I had made careful copies from the data cards. These blueprints were incredibly detailed and showed many of the hidden passages that ran not only through the imperial palace but that also those that let to and from the outside to various building and places in the underbelly of the city. I was certain that if I looked hard enough I could find a way to get from the palace to the old Jedi Temple via some sort of passage, there had to be one somewhere but I just could not find it. The distraction kept me occupied until I had to land. It was late at night as I touched down and when I opened the ship up the air that rushed in was warm and sweet. Home, it felt good to be back.

Boonta Eve was a big celebration on Tatooine. It had started out in Mos Espa, a sort of day off in celebration of thanks. Some scholars believed that the word Boonta was bastardization on the word bountiful. It was the one day of the year where slaves, masters and pretty much everyone else got a free day. It had grown from a small localized event to a planet wide excuse for a huge party.

It used to be, before the Empire was in place that on Boonta Eve the great pod race was held. People came from all over the planet and even the galaxy to watch, but that had been before my time and I had never been lucky enough to see a real pod race, an official pod race. Now the holiday was celebrated with city wide street festivals, open markets and fireworks in the evening. Traditional meals would be prepared and small prayers of thanks offered up to whatever deity you believed in. Slavery still existed on Tatooine but less than before, even so, as was tradition it was the one day were slaves were allowed a certain amount of freedom, given time off to enjoy a day and night of celebration.

I spent the day with my family. In the morning I had gone shopping in the markets with Bel and Bedi while my father along with Uncle Vahlek, who had arrived at the house shortly after I had, hung the traditional lights and decorations.

The markets were a wonder and I loved them. Small, collapsible stalls set up on either side of the main square streets, with every imaginable sort of being selling anything they could, fresh produce, meats, pallies, trinkets, souvenirs, fabrics and clothing and so on. The whole place was filled with delicious scents of cooked food, spicy sweets and the traditional Boonta Eve drink, zuffi, a spicy blend of bantha milk and some sort of strong fermented fruit juice. It was potent, usually served cold and was a very acquired taste. For two hours we wandered in the early morning warmth, buying what was needed for supper. I picked up some new clothes and a couple of trinkets and souvenirs for my friends back on Coruscant. By the time we got home we had sampled too much zuffi, giggled so much our faces ached and spent a lot of money. For a brief time I forgot about everything else and just enjoyed myself. The rest of the day was spent helping prepare the dinner and just spending time with my crazy family.

Usually everyone who was around from the docking bay ate with us, a tradition my mother had started many years ago, but Boonta Eve was a time for families so most of the people had gone off to their own, the only additions for dinner were Tigann the book keeper and Nate, the mechanic who had just been hired the last time I was home. Dinner was a small but loud affair and consisted of fairly competitive storytelling between everyone. I had forgotten what it was like to laugh so hard.

After dinner, when the dishes were cleared away and everyone had retired to the living room I snuck away to sit outside. I would have gone up to the Bluff but too much

zuffi and wine made that impossible so I just sat on the rooftop of the house and stared up at the night sky. Stars twinkled and danced and I was so glad to see them, they reminded me of how small I really was and that in the entire universe nothing lasts forever. These thoughts were not sad just sobering. It was so easy to get caught up in Court politics, feel more important than one really was and forget one's place in the galaxy as a single being, tiny and fragile. I didn't say anything when uncle Vahlek sat down beside me and handed me a cup of spiced 'caf.

"What's on your mind, Lei'lei?" He asked after a lengthy silence.

I smiled. There wasn't much I could hide from him. "I got a message from Jyrki." I said. I felt him stiffen and the air rippled with his sudden anger. I repeated the message for him. "I don't know what it means or what he is doing, what he wants but he really scares me. This message scares me."

Uncle Vahlek nodded. "That is probably his intent."

"Maybe I should have asked you to deal with him." I sighed.

Uncle Vahlek glanced at me. "Do not say such things lightly, Lei'lei." He chided gently.

I looked at him. "It's going to come to a head at some point and when it does...." I shrugged.

"You will be as ready as you will be." He said.

"You specialized in being cryptic didn't you?"

He just laughed. "Well, it's true enough when you think about it though."

"That's not very helpful." I said crossly and we sat once more in silence, sipping the hot spiced 'caf until I asked, "What do you know about Coruscant, Zte'sa?"

"Be more specific."

"Okay, what do you know about the Jedi Temple?"

"Why are you asking?"

I hesitated a moment then tugged at his sleeve. "Come with me want to show you something." And I scrambled down from the roof, through the house out into the docking bay to my ship with my uncle in tow.

We sat at the little table and I turned on the data reader with the blue prints in it. The bluish light filled the common area as the three dimensional projection lit up.

My uncle looked at the image in surprise and whistled lowly. "Where did you get your hands on this?" He asked.

I told him about the library the Emperor had given me access to, watching as my uncle manipulated the image with a deftness that was a little unnerving. He had used these kind of readouts before.

"This is a very high end blueprint. Are you sure it was just lying around?" He asked as he browsed through the technical readouts, one by one.

"Well, it wasn't exactly lying around and as far as I know aside from the Emperor I am the only one who has access to this room." I told him.

"What are you looking for?" He asked.

"A way to get from the palace to the temple via an underground passage. I am sure there is one I just can't find it." And I showed him what I was talking about.

"You have the plans for the Temple as well?"

I nodded and keyed in the second file. The one replaced the other and uncle Vahlek sat back in his chair, folded his arms over his chest and studied the floating image carefully.

"Why?" He asked after a long silence.

I sighed. "In truth, I don't really know. Ever since I returned to Coruscant the temple has been on my mind. Lately, I have dreams about it. It is as if I know my way

around and I am looking for something, someone. I wonder if I can find out more about my birth mother, but I don't know what the real reason behind it is, just that it calls."

We were both silent and deep in thought when my father came on board. "Ah, there you both are, Bedi has been... is that the Jedi Temple?" He asked as he saw the technical read out.

I looked at him in surprise, wondering how my father would know that because as far as I knew he had never even been on Coruscant.

Uncle Vahlek nodded. "Merlyn is trying to find an underground passage from the Palace to the Temple." He said.

My father pulled over a chair and sat down and began to manipulate the image. "I remember this bit, the great hall and this was the library, a huge room filled from top to bottom with all sorts of data imaginable. I had never seen anything like it before in my life."

I stared at my father in shock. "You were in this place?"

He sighed as he looked at me. "When I was very young my parents took me to be tested. It turned out that while I was not gifted in the ways of the force I was blessed with a photographic memory. I remember it very well."

"Why did you never tell me?" I asked.

"What was there to tell, pet? I was only there for one day. It was my first and last visit to the great core world." There was a sadness behind his words. "My parents were disappointed and after that day things were never quite right between us. Looking back though, it was just as well, considering what happened to the Jedi in the end."

I glanced at uncle Vahlek who shook his head almost imperceptibly, the message being don't ask, don't push. Then the two men began to study the blue prints as though I were no longer there. They spoke their own language of short cuts and half finished sentences and not for the first time did I wonder about what had brought them together. It was more than just a simple friendship; it was something darker and more secretive.

"Look, here Lei'lei," my uncle said after almost half an hour. "This is your library, yes?" I nodded. "Well, this wall is false and if you can figure out how to open it, there is a door right here."

I watched where he pointed and closed my eyes to conjure up the room as I knew it. The wall was paneled like much of that part of the palace and there was a single half bookshelf there, at the back of the room. I had found the data with the blue prints on that shelf.

Uncle Vahlek waited until I nodded then continued. "From that doorway there is a set of stairs here," his finger traced through the image making the projected light ripple slightly. "Then follow the passage to here and then where it splits go left and you have your way to the Temple." He showed me the way and it looked so simple I wondered why I had not seen it myself.

He smiled as I squinted and moved about to try and figure out why I had not been able to find that on my own. "You were looking at the image from the wrong side, you can only see this passageway if you look at it from here. It's very cleverly hidden." He said.

My father nodded. "That tunnel goes right underneath everything, a direct way from palace to temple. Amazing, it takes you into what looks like a storage room. Very strange." He shook his head but didn't elaborate on what he meant.

I shivered as though someone walked over my grave.

My father clapped me on the back. "Come on, you both are going to be on the wrong side of Bedi and Bel if you don't come back and join us for a nightcap before bed. You can talk all you want afterwards but the girls will be cross if you monopolise Merly all night Vahl." My father said getting up.

My uncle grinned. "Best not to incur the wrath of Bedi." He nodded and turned off the holo image. I sat for a moment staring at the empty air where the image had been.

"How long are you staying with us, Zte'sa?" I asked after my father had left.

"How long do you need me to stay?"

"I was planning on leaving day after tomorrow, I have a lot of work to do and I only managed to wrangle this time off by being obnoxious. There is only so much of that behaviour Lord Vader will tolerate."

He smiled. "Then I'll stay as long as you are here if that's what you want." He got up. I glanced at him. "I do." I said.

My uncle studied my face for moment. "He really frightens you, doesn't he?"

I nodded. We were not talking about Lord Vader. Uncle Vahlek patted my shoulder and as I got out of the chair he gathered me into his arms holding me tightly, something he rarely did. I had to fight from crying. I had not realised how terrified I had been since Jyrki's little message had been delivered into my hands until that moment.

"Lei'lei, don't let your fear of him get the better of you, he is just a man and he can be defeated. Don't give him so much power over you." He said, stroking my hair, the way he would a frightened bantha. "Now, take a deep breath and get yourself together, no need to scare everyone else and spoil the day? We can talk about this after everyone has gone to bed."

By the time we walked back into the house the panic attack had subsided and I was laughing at uncle Vahlek's description of the three jaxes and the new kittens. Bedi had made a pot of hot chaya liqueur and it was a nice way to wind down the last remnants of Boonta Eve.

Long after everyone had wandered off to bed, my uncle suggested we go for a walk up out onto the Bluff, away from the house, the city and the memories. Once we had found a quiet place to sit, we talked until dawn. It was only when I began to fall asleep, my head slumping against his shoulder did he nudge me into getting up and we wandered back to the house.

"If you want I can come with you to Coruscant when you fly back." My uncle said as we walked inside.

"You must think I am being really silly." I said. I felt silly. "I didn't used to be this way."

Uncle Vahlek stripped off his long coat and looked at me carefully. "This man, who was once your friend, your teacher and your first crush, kidnapped you, tortured you and tried to break you. I do not think you are being silly. I understand your fear but you need to get past it because, mark my words, he'll come for you again. Sarlacc knows why and personally I think he's gone insane. That you are scared is no wonder and he's counting on that, Lei'lei. Why do you think he sent that little note? That wasn't a social call or even an apology, that was a barb deliberately created to frighten you. He is threatening you, playing mind games of terror, stalking you. He wants to put you on edge."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he can." Uncle Vahlek replied.

"As if I didn't have enough to worry about already." I grumbled.

"You did mention that Lord Vader had discussed bringing you on board his ship with him, maybe you should push for that, you'd be safer there than on Coruscant."

I yawned. "Maybe and then again maybe it has nothing to do with being safe at all." I shrugged. "I have to go to bed I am not making sense anymore." I stood up on tip toe and kissed him on the cheek, his stubble prickled.

"Dream of good things." He said heading into the kitchen as I went to my bedroom. I lay in bed watching the first rays of dawn trickle through the blinds. I was exhausted but



my mind raced. Sleep took a long time to find me and when it did come, contrary to uncle Vahlek's wish, it was full of unpleasant dreams.

The trip back from Tatooine went quickly. Uncle Vahlek was a great travelling companion and I was glad of his presence. We reached Coruscant in the early evening and landed on the pad close to my own flat.

"Do you have a place to stay the night?" I asked.

"Yes, with you." He said matter of factly.

We walked through the halls to my Imperial Palace home and when we entered he whistled. "You live in style." He said. "This is very nice."

I shrugged. "Tea?" I asked.

"Not yet. Show me this library of yours, Lei'lei." He said shucking off his long coat and setting down his bag, and pulling a small satchel across his shoulders.

We walked through the quiet dark halls. There was no one around and we did not speak. I unlocked the library door and we walked in. Nothing had changed, nothing had stirred. The dust had not been disturbed since my last visit and everything was still in place.

I turned on the small wall lights and watched as my uncle wandered around looking at the stacks and their contents.

"You were given this library?" he asked quietly.

"Sort of, yeah, I guess."

"Where is the book shelf, the one you said that covered the wall panel that leads to the stairs down." he asked.

I led him to it and watched as he studied the book shelf, its contents and the wall carefully. I had never seen him so intent before. It was as if he could soak up every tiny detail and later he would be able to recite them exactly.

"Help me move this." He commanded, so I did. The bookshelf was made from a very old heavy wood and it was full. Moving it was not as easy as it sounded but in the end we managed to shift it away from the wall. I watched as my uncle closed his eyes and with the flat of his hand moved over the wooden panels of the wall. After five minutes he stood up and nodded.

"Lei'lei, do what I just did, but open up, drop your blocks and use the force." He said. He moved aside to let me stand where he had stood and I did the exact same thing he had done with his hand. As he had suggested I used the force to see and to my surprise I found something.

With my fingertips I touched the one place on the wall that had felt different from all the rest and with a soft snick, the panel slid open. I looked at uncle Vahlek who grinned. He drew a small torch from the satchel and before I could think to protest he stepped into the secret passage leaving me to follow. It was exactly as he had said. We made our way down an incredibly long flight of stone stairs and as we descended I noticed the air began to smell less and less fresh. The light from uncle Vahlek's torch was surprisingly bright. As we walked downward he stopped for a moment to let me see how the tunnel had been constructed.

"The first part was built but I wager the lowest parts will have been carved from the planet's bedrock. We will have to go down a very long way." He said. His voice was muffled sounding.

I didn't like this place at all, I didn't like the smallness of it, the stale air or the fact that my ears reacted to the pressure change in the air but we kept on going. When we came to the bottom there were two paths. We took the left one.

"Touch the walls." My uncle said. "What do you sense?"

"Nothing, no memories." I said in a whisper. "This place is dead. No one has been here in years."

"Good." He said and we kept walking. The passage way was large enough for him to walk upright in but narrow enough that I felt constantly on the verge of panic. I did not like this dark enclosed place.

He sensed my agitation. "Don't worry, Lei'lei, this place has been around for a very long time it is not going to collapse now."

'*Breathe, just breathe, child.*' Master Kjestyll's voice whispered in my head. I fought the knot of fear building up in my solar plexus and kept on walking. It had not occurred to me to question what we were doing or why.

The tunnel sloped slightly downward and then eventually evened out. I felt as though we had walked for days but when I mentioned this uncle Vahlek said. "No, we have been walking for about an hour. The dark and the unknown makes time stretch out, seem longer."

We kept going until I noticed that the way had begun, ever so gently, to curve upwards and when we came to stairs I knew that we had reached the end of the tunnel. The steps up were well worn and as we climbed upwards I noticed fresher air, there was ventilation here. I brushed the tunnel wall with my finger tips but there were only faint echoes and no vivid memories. About half way there was a hand rail to hold onto. I gripped it tightly, hoping it would tell me more, give up its secrets and stories of who had made this place, who had used this place but my psychometric gift was fickle and not easily called up, it came when it wanted to and not the other way around. I almost bumped into uncle Vahlek when he stopped short in front of a door.

"Do the same thing you did in the library, find the lock. It will be force activated." He told me. I drew a deep breath and did as he asked. There was power on this doorway and it radiated like sunlight. I let my thoughts slide away and followed the source of the warmth. I didn't know how I opened the door but it swung away from us with a soft click.

"Well done." He said softly and he went first.

We were in a small room tucked away in a subbasement. Nothing had been here for many years. A thick layer of dust covered everything. I followed uncle Vahlek as he walked with a certainty that told me he knew exactly where he was going. All around me I felt the whispers of long dead ghosts. This place was huge and empty. It scared me.

"These rooms were mostly used for storage." Uncle Vahlek told me as we headed out into a main hallway. "The dormitories and the living quarters are two floors up, the archives and main library two floors above that. The great council room was in the center tower."

"How do you know all this?" I asked as we walked up a stairwell.

"I spent some time here on and off." He said vaguely. "This way." He held the door open for me and I walked into a hallway that was a lot larger, and more airy than anything I had seen up until this point.

"Jyrki lived here; he was just a small boy then." I whispered. "He told me about the night that the 501st swept through with Anakin Skywalker and killed all the Jedi who were here, including the children." I shivered, knowing now that Anakin and Lord Vader were the same person. I had not wanted to even think about this, not wanted to imagine that the man I worked for, for some reason cared about had mercilessly slaughtered children.

Uncle Vahlek looked at me but didn't comment.

"Why *did* you come here, Zte'sa?" I pressed breaking the awful silence.

"I sometimes contracted to work for the Jedi," He said stopping for a moment to look around, "Before and during the Clone wars."

I followed his gaze, began to stretch out with my own small force talents to try and grasp the scope of the building we were in but I couldn't. "How big is this place?" I asked.

"Huge and it's very old, close to over four thousand years old. It has been modified and built on many, many times. It used to be beautiful, full of light. There were fountains

and extraordinary gardens." He said. We kept on walking, passing smaller corridors, heading up small stairwells, and closed doors. Suddenly without rhyme or reason I felt drawn to go left.

"Wait, Lei'lei?" Uncle Vahlek hissed and tried to grasp my arm but missed.

I didn't answer but just kept going. I didn't need the torch's light, even in the dark I knew the way. I almost ran until I reached a set of twisted, shattered glass doors. The room was large and full of broken furniture, small box like objects, decayed pieces of fabric, feeding bottles and various amounts of ruined machinery, including medical droids. There were dark stains on the floor and the walls. I walked into the middle of the room and looked around as my uncle, who had followed me, shone the torch about. I knelt down and touched the nearest bit of broken furniture. Images shot through my head violently and I gasped with the pain of it.

"This was a nursery." My uncle said putting his hand on my shoulder. His touch brought me back to the present.

"They shot babies. They killed each and every one." I whispered. I felt sick. "They were screaming and crying but the soldiers didn't care. How could they do this, how?" My skin pricked with cold sweat and I desperately fought the urge to vomit.

Uncle Vahlek caught me by the arm and tugged me to my feet. "Come on. This room is not a good place for you to be and there is nothing you want to know here." He hissed trying to drag me out, but I fought him.

I had been led here for a reason and if I left now I wouldn't come back. I shook free from his grip and walked about the rubble and the mess. No one had been here in a long time. I picked my way around the objects that lay tossed and scattered around, casually brushing my hand against them. I was looking for what had called me to this place. Some sent me memories and others held their secrets too tightly for me to see. Everything was a jumble until my fingers brushed the back of an over turned rocking chair. The vision sent me to my knees as it coursed through me. My mother had often sat in this chair. I saw her there, rocking small babies, whispering to them, laughing and even singing. The chair gave up these secrets willingly. She had longed for a baby of her own, saddened that she would never have one. I saw her clearly sitting in the chair with a tiny Twi'lek baby in her arms as though she alive and right there. She was in the middle of telling the baby a story when someone burst into the nursery. She had looked up and as she had absorbed the news that war had been declared and that armies of clones were to be used against the droid armies of the separatists. Suddenly all the babies began to cry as if they could sense her distress. The vision faded and I came back to the present with uncle Vahlek squatting down at my side.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

I nodded. "Yes." I told him but I wasn't so sure about that. I wiped the tears from my face. I had not even realized I was crying.

Shakily I got up and followed him out of the room. We kept moving and I made sure not to touch a thing. We found the library after what felt like forever. I was surprised that most of the holo files were still in the stacks. The library was, for the most part, still intact. I looked around and sighed. Part of me yearned to just stay here and search through everything. All this information, all this data it was enticing.

Uncle Vahlek must have read my mind. "You have a perfect memory for direction, right? You could find this room again if you came back on our own?" He asked.

"Yes, I could find it again, but I don't know if I want to." I nodded. "This place is filled with bad memories and I think I got what I came for, at least for now." I looked at him.

"Well, I haven't." Uncle Vahlek said. "Come on." and then he walked through the huge library to a door tucked away behind the stacks. It was locked.

"Open it." He said. I glanced at him. There was a thread of urgency in his voice and no mistaking the command behind the request.

I closed my eyes and concentrated, my hand hovered above the lock mechanism. The door opened to my touch with a gentle, almost apologetic sound.

"What are you looking for?"

But he didn't answer me instead he brushed past me into the room and looked around. Suddenly I was very afraid and all the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

"Zte'sa, we should go." I whispered, rubbing my arms to ward off the cold.

He ignored the request and went deeper into the smaller room, which was full of storage units and shelved data. I followed him but the sensation of being watched, being hunted only got worse.

"We need to leave." I tugged at his sleeve. "Now!"

"Wait, go out and stand watch." He told me. There was a thread of steel in his voice and impatience. I stood a moment too long and he turned on me. "Lei'lei, get out of this room. I will be very fast, trust me." There was a ferocity in his eyes I had never seen before and I backed away leaving him to do whatever it was he had come here to do. I could hear him moving softly about but I couldn't see what he was doing and the sensation of danger grew worse and worse. It was a darkness pressing against my mind. It hurt to breathe and panic surged through me.

"Zte'sa, please, we need to go now!" I hissed at him sending a mental push he could not ignore.

He came out of the room two minutes later holding something wrapped in a cloth which he slipped into the satchel slung across his neck. He closed the door and told me to lock it. I did, my fingers trembled violently. He took my hand in his and led me through the library in a different direction from the way we had come, down a small set of stairs and through a labyrinth of hallways. He had turned off his torch and we were completely in the dark. It would have been unnerving except he knew his way around and I could sense where I was. Our footsteps echoed about the empty space, sounding too loud, too urgent.

I stumbled over some unexpected rubble. To steady myself I braced my hand against the wall only to be assaulted with visions I didn't want. Images of small children running for their lives smashed into my head, terrified, older children who were trying to defend the smaller ones, the sounds of screaming and blaster fire. I gasped and cried out but my uncle did not stop. Instead he tightened his grip on my hand and pulled. We were almost running through the dark hallways, down stairwells and through corridors until we were back at the entrance to the underground passage.

"Touch the door. Has anyone else passed this way?" he was not out of breath or even breathing hard but my lungs ached with fear and I could not speak.

I didn't think to argue with him and did as he had asked. The last memories the door held were of him and me. I shook my head.

"Quickly." He whispered and when the door had closed behind us he made me lock it the same way I had opened it.

As swiftly as was possible we made our way back through the long dark tunnel, up the never ending stairs to the library in the Imperial palace. I half expected the Emperor himself to be waiting for us like a decrepit old rancor as we stepped into the cool, dimly lit room but it was empty. I shut the wall panel and we slid the book case back to its original position. There was no way I could hide the disturbed dust so I disturbed the dust all over the place, until I was sneezing and coughing so much I couldn't breathe.

"Lei'lei, stop." Uncle Vahlek said gently, catching my hands in his. His touch was calming and made me realise I was on the verge of hysteria. He pulled me away and we left the library silently. I made sure the lights were off and the door was locked.

In the quiet of my flat I heaved a sigh of relief and the overwhelming fear I had felt began to subside. I dug out the bottle of brandy, one of Thrawn's gifts that had been delivered to me shortly after I had arrived back on Coruscant and poured two generous glasses. My hands shook as I carried them from the kitchen to the living room and handed one to my uncle.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" I asked. Now that I was back in the relative safety of my own space my fright was quickly replaced by anger.

He accepted the brandy and took a thoughtful sip from it. Then with a sigh he opened the satchel and he drew out what he had taken from the room off the temple library and uncovered it.

I just stared. Wrapped in the cloth were two small crystal cubes and several data cards. "What are they?" I asked, pointing to the cubes.

"They were called holocrons, data storage crystals designed by the Jedi." He picked the left one up and held it out to me. "These two I found under your mother's name."

I sat down hard on the floor. I did not take the offered cube from his outstretched hand. "You knew you'd find them?"

"That was the records and recording room. I knew what to look for." He was not telling me the whole truth; he was hiding something, being evasive. It was the very first time I could remember ever sensing a lie from him and I didn't like it, it made my skin crawl.

"Who are you, Zte'sa? Why do you know these things?" I whispered suddenly afraid of him.

He held my gaze for a moment, seeing my fear, reading my thoughts and then he sighed and placed the two small cubes on the table. "I don't know if you will need a password to open that or not, certainly you will need to use your gift, holocrons were force activated. Most of the things in the temple were force activated, which is probably why much of it still stands."

"You are lying to me and you won't answer my questions. Should I be as scared of you as I feel?" I asked looking into his pale eyes. I expected anger but only saw sorrow there and that scared me more.

"It is not so much about lying to you, Lei'lei, as it is about not telling you the entire story. I am trying to protect you." He said. That was the truth. "What frightened you so badly in the Temple tonight? What did you sense?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I felt something, a presence, something dark and malevolent. It pushed at me, tried to crawl inside of me." I shivered at the memory. "We were not alone and whatever it was, it was evil." I said remembering the terrible need to get the hell out of that place. "You know so much about everything, but you are not force sensitive are you?"

"No, thank the stars I am not *blessed* with that terrible gift." He said wearily. He sipped at the brandy and sat back. Suddenly, I realised he, too, had been scared. He ran his left hand through his long hair and dust flew off it, back lit from the small lamp in the corner it almost looked as though his head was glowing. White dust dancing about his white hair, the image almost made me smile. I wanted to ask what he had been scared of because I had always thought him fearless, invincible but instead I bit my tongue. I didn't really want to know the answer to this question at all.

"We stirred up old ghosts, Lei'lei." He said as though he read my thoughts. "Many innocent beings died horribly in that place. Their voices linger."

"What is on the data cards?" I asked nodding to the satchel at his side.

"Personal information I would rather not have lying around for anyone to find. While reading a holocron requires force sensitivity to be opened, data crystals can be sliced."

"You won't actually answer my questions will you?" I said.

He gazed intently at me. His eyes which were pale to begin with almost appeared as translucent as the dust. "If you push I will, but I'd rather you didn't."

I didn't know what to say. I was tired and frightened. He must have sensed that and he continued. "I swore a blood oath to protect you, with my life if necessary." He said. "But there are secrets and they need to be kept."

"Is that why you came back here with me?" I asked.

"Partially." He said.

"You came back to enter the Temple, but you needed me to do that didn't you."

"You always were a clever girl." He said.

"You used me."

He leaned forward and gave me a look that sent shivers down my spine. "Would you have preferred to go into that place alone?" He asked very quietly.

I shook my head.

He sat back and sighed deeply. "I wanted to be sure you were safe." He said and that was the truth.

"You think that Jyrki might try something again?" I asked after a long silence.

He leaned forward again and gave me a small, tight smile but his eyes were as cold and dead looking as Kerest had been. I shivered. "Jyrki Andando should know better. I wanted to be certain this time you came home to no surprises."

I snorted. "This place isn't home, Zte'sa."

That made his smile soften and the hardness vanished. "No, of course not."

I looked at the holocrons and went to pick one up. My uncle watched me carefully. The first cube sat in my palm and while I felt a faint buzz as though a slight current ran through it, the cube did not give up any secrets.

"Nothing?" he asked. I shook my head, put it gently back down and picked up the second one.

I gasped as I felt it come alive in my hand. The holographic image that appeared was that of a young girl. She stood straight and tall, with her hands clasped behind her back. I glanced at my uncle and felt a lump in my throat when the holographic image began to speak.

*\*\*\*Today is a big day for me. I am to be taken on as a Padawan learner. I was scared that this would not happen because I am almost eleven now and Keito told me that if none of the Jedi wants to take you as a student by the time you are thirteen then you must leave the Temple. I would be scared to go, this is my home, but now I don't have to worry about this because now I am to be the Padawan of Master Ilmari Tane. I am glad; I like him a lot, he smiles and even laughs sometimes unlike some of the more serious Masters I have seen.*

*There will be a ceremony tomorrow afternoon and then everything will be official but Master Tane came by the library today to speak with me and let me know of his decision and to ask if I was happy with it. When I said yes, he gave me this holocron and told me to start keeping a diary of everything. He said that I would be glad I did, a way to remember everything I am going to be taught. He said it was a good first lesson...remembering the path that was to find the path that will be. I don't understand what he means by this but I will do as he asks. So this is my first entry. My name is A'kali L'uanna, I am ten years old, I was born on the planet of Naboo but I don't remember it. I have been told that my mother was from Naboo but my father was from Kiffu. I have no memories of them because I was taken from my family to the Temple when I was just a baby. I am going to become a Jedi. I am so excited. \*\*\**

The entry ended. Before anything else could crop up, I put the little cube back on the table and the holographic image disappeared. I stared at the holocrons for a long time and said nothing. I wasn't exactly sure what to say.

"Well, it appears you will have the chance to get to know your birth mother a little better after all." My uncle said, breaking the silence.

I nodded, biting my lip.

"Hide them well, Lei'lei. They are precious."

"Did you know they were there?"

He shook his head. "No, but I hoped." He told me. "You need to connect with your lineage somehow and as much as you seem to dote on Darth Vader he is not the be-all and end-all of how the force works. I don't want to see you end up like him, twisted and angry all the time."

"You don't like him?"

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. "That is neither here nor there; I just don't want to see you get hurt. There is more than one side to how the force works. I know, I used to work for the Jedi, spent a great deal of time with some of them, talking with them, watching their ways. This Sith teaching that the Emperor and Vader seem so keen of having you learn is not the only way."

"For someone who isn't force sensitive, you seem to know an awful lot about it all." I said sharply.

"Information is the most valuable asset a person can have." He said cryptically. He brushed dusty hair back from his face and lay back against the couch, his eyes closed. "I'm getting too old for this nonsense." He sighed.

I just stared at him for a moment and then got up. "I'll get you some bedding. I hope the sofa is okay, I don't have a spare bed." I told him.

"Lei'lei..." He began and I turned to look at him. "That was well done tonight."

"No it wasn't, it was stupid!" I shot back. "We should never have gone there. Terrible things happened there and that place is haunted by evil and sorrow."

He stared at me for a moment then said. "Just remember that when you go back, then."

I made a face and went to get the bedding, by the time I got back he had already stretched out and was asleep. As I placed a blanket over him I knew in that moment that as much as I feared him, as much of a mystery as he was to me, he was a part of my family and I loved him dearly.

I thought that I would lie in bed awake for hours but as soon as I tucked myself between the covers I fell asleep and if I dreamt I never knew it. When I awoke the next morning uncle Vahlek had already gone. The holocron cubes were still on the table where he had left them. I picked them up with a cloth so that I wouldn't have to touch them again and hid them in the box I had bought to keep my precious things in. The box was kept tucked away in a secret place. I showered, ate breakfast and went to work as though nothing had happened. The day passed without any major incidents and I had spent most of it sorting through the news I had missed while I had been on Tatooine. In the afternoon I had gone to a Memorial service and after that I came home. When I got back I found a tiny holotransmitter with a message waiting for me.

*-Lei'lei, I know you have questions and I know you are scared. I am sorry if I added to this last night, but you do not need to fear me. I swore to protect you and that is an oath I cannot and will not break. I would beg you not to go back to the temple and never speak of it to anyone, not even to the man whose token you wear, but I know that you are stubborn enough, or perhaps young and foolish enough not to listen to me. There are some things, some secrets which should never be revealed. You were right when you said there is much evil in the temple but it wasn't always that way. Once it was a place of*

*great learning and of much joy. While I have wanted to go back there for a long time for myself, I truly did not want you to be alone when you ventured in there as I knew you would have. You are far too curious to let something like that be. Call it killing two wamprats with one shot. We will see one another soon enough, don't be surprised and don't give everything away either. Watch yourself, Lei'lei. I fear for you. Jyrki has not done with you yet and you let your emotions for him get in the way. Just remember if you need anything I am here for you.*

*Zte'sa Vahlek -*

I sat and stared at the holo message as it repeated itself and then turned it off. I was tired and he was right, I was scared and because I didn't want to think about any of these things any more did what I always did to take my mind off whatever was bothering me, I re read Thrawn's letters then answered his last one. I had news to tell that did not involve midnight raids on the old Jedi Temple.

*Mia e'Tekari,*

*I apologise for not writing sooner, I had hoped that I would get a chance when most of the court and essential office staff relocated to the Retreat but that was not the case. Instead I came back from my trip home to a mountain of work and a very annoyed Lord Vader, among other things.*

*Have you heard about the death of Admiral Amice Griff? Did you know him? His fleet was supposed to be a blockade against the rebel fleet but something went really wrong. Of course, what the news didn't say was that he managed to come out of Hyperspace right on top of the Executor. It was the Executor's shields that destroyed Griff's fleet, vaporized them instantly. Lord Vader was furious when told me what really happened. Well, told isn't exactly the right word I'd use, more like exploded about it. He explained in more detail than I really wanted to hear how Admiral Griff's fleet manoeuvred the rebels so that they could only go through a really dangerous area marked by unpredictable stellar flares from a rogue star. It had been planned that by driving the rebels into this area they would be caught there and be easily captured, but that wasn't the case. The rebels were able to get through this passage and escape.*

*Lord Vader said that to lead the rebel ships through this part of space safely must have taken someone with powerful force abilities and he suspected it was the same kid who managed to blow up the Death Star. He also said that it was Griff's own blind ambition that led to the destruction of the Imperial ships and men. If he had done what he was supposed to, which was to stay put and continue to be a blockade he'd still be alive.*

*So now the Death Squadron is under the command of Admiral Ozzel. The Executor command has now been handed to Captain Piett who was formerly on board the Accuser. I have only ever met Admiral Ozzel once, at one of the palace functions. He struck me as a bit of a pompous snob and I heard some of the junior officers go on about him being not terribly bright, wondering how he ever actually made Admiral in the first place.*

*Firmus Piett, on the other hand, is an interesting man, though very quiet and quite unassuming. I spent some time talking with him last year at one of the smaller functions, a promotion or something, I can't remember any more. We spoke mainly of the perils of coming from an Outer Rim world. He was born on Axxila, a place he described as Coruscant turned inside out. He was very kind to me actually at an event where I knew hardly anyone and was, for the most part, if not ignored then shunned. We had a good laugh about that and we decided that people generally come in two categories when it comes to Lord Vader, those who hate him and everyone around him to the point of totally ignoring them or those who fawn over anyone or anything having to do with Lord Vader in the hopes of currying some sort of favour. Typical of such a quiet, thoughtful man, he has a wickedly sharp sense of humour.*



*I was shocked when I heard all this news and, as you can well imagine, it has turned things here a little upside down. To put it bluntly, it's been a bloody mad house. There was a memorial service for Admiral Griff and the men who lost their lives today and I went because it was held in the Palace in the main hall. I was a bit surprised at how few people outside of the relatives of those who perished were there. Maybe it would have been better attended had the court been here and not on Naboo, as it is right now, even the Emperor was a no show. I thought it a bit strange that His Highness did not attend personally but rather had a holographic message played. It was very sad actually, because so many family members lost someone they loved and it brought back a lot of painful memories.*

*Admiral Griff leaves behind a wife and three sons, they came all the way from Corellia to attend the service, but they kept distant and were surrounded by their own friends so I didn't get to pass along my regrets to them in person. They were very upset. It was extremely hard to be there and when I laid flowers upon the memorial stone I was given some really dark looks from most of the people there including Admiral Griff's family. From the whispers I heard, they blame Lord Vader for this incident not Admiral Griff, even though Lord Vader wasn't the one who jumped out of hyperspace into an unsafe area. I went to the service as a sort of courtesy but I don't think I'll attend any more, they are just too sad and I don't like the feeling of being associated with the bad guy. And this wasn't even Lord Vader's fault. Isn't it possible to actually check your hyperspace exit point to see if it is free and clear? I thought that the nav computers had some sort of built in collision guard?*

*I am glad you were not upset by the whole Grand Ball thing. It was quite strange to attend it, to be honest. When he wasn't arguing with the likes of Admiral Harkov or GA Tigellinus, or dancing with flirty young courtesans, Zaarin spent most of his time talking about the new TIE designs they are working on, the adding of hyperdrive and shields to them to make them a far more effective against the rebel ships, the x-wings. The lecture he gave me about the work he is doing was one of the highlights of the evening, which tells you everything you need to know about the event. What I found interesting were the constant barbs about you that both Zaarin and Tigellinus kept spouting. Neither of them likes you very much. It irritates Zaarin to no end that I appear to prefer the company of 'the Emperor's pet Alien' over him. Some people just don't get it, you know? Zaarin can ask me out all he wants I still would rather trek through the jungles of Myrkr with you than have dinner in the finest restaurant with him. Tigellinus, on the other hand spent the entire evening practicing his disdainful look. He is, for the record, an awful dancer and he has bad breath and for the life of me I can't figure out exactly what it is Tigellinus actually does in the Empire as work. In the end it was Shiv and the gang who saved the evening for me. They acted as guardian angels, saving me from the pomposity of boring Grand Admirals who just love to talk about themselves. Shiv and Tygra took me home and I was grateful for the chaperone service.*

*Thank you so very much for the two beautiful books you sent. I took them with me to Tatooine on the hopes that I would have some quiet time to read them but that was not the case. My family had other plans. We celebrated Boonta Eve in great style and I was too tired the next day because I stayed up all night talking with my Uncle Vahlek. He was helping me sort through some stuff that was on my mind. Just before I left Coruscant to fly out I received a data message from Jyrki. It was short and cryptic but it would seem he has not quite finished with me yet. I spent a lot of time talking with uncle Vahlek about this because Jyrki's note scared me more than I had ever thought possible. My uncle even travelled back to the Core planet with me. Normally, I would have complained about the babysitting, but I was just grateful to have him along and I guess he knew this. He isn't usually the type to interfere or poke his nose in my life.*

*He's a bit of a mystery, my uncle. He has a past he won't discuss and begs me from asking about it in such a way that I cannot help but comply. Sometimes I wonder what it is that he hides because every now and then I get a feeling of terrible sorrow from him. He tucks it away very well and I don't pry but sometimes people's emotions are so powerful that they can't stop them from leaking and I pick up on it even when I am not trying.*

*Anyway, I promise I will read the books you sent. They will take my mind off the trials coming up in a few months. Master Kjestyll does his best to calm my fears about it but I am nervous. It is one thing to have a private trial with one's master as the judge and quite another to test against another student from another school while being watched by goodness knows how many. I am not overly big on the audience thing.*

*Your description of Chiss policy and tactics on defence was very interesting but if the Chiss do not make the first aggressive move then you seem to have violated this rule because if I remember correctly it was you who initiated the first act of "aggression" with me. Not that I mind, but it does seem contradictory to what you told me. I suppose this is your subtle, rebellious nature coming into play? I also have to wonder then if 'frisking me for concealed weapons' comes under pre-emptive strike? I must admit that your defences are impressive but surely you are aware I do have some interesting counter measures of my own. As I recall the last time I used them you were somewhat taken by surprise. I do agree that this skirmish would be far more fun in person than on paper. You put it so aptly the last time we fenced verbally; I do enjoy the linguistic challenge of exploring an alien tongue. So far your follow through efforts have been offensively weak, or is this your way of trying to put me off guard? My experience in these kinds of battles is very limited and as you have by now surmised you have the tactical advantage. So if you want a worthy opponent, you will have to educate me, something I doubt you will mind as I think you secretly enjoy teaching and are especially fond of the 'hands on' approach. So, yes, I do believe you answered my question adequately; the next question would be, are you up for this little rumble? I am quite curious about your next move. On that note I think I will end this before I get myself into trouble I can't get out of.*

*I am enclosing a data card that has a holo-vid from the Boonta Eve celebration. Bel took it for me so I would not get lonely. I made you a copy, I thought you might enjoy seeing everyone again as well as the fireworks that were shot over Mos Eisley. We were all up on the roof of the house watching them and we had been drinking zuffi all day so be warned, the recording is pretty silly. I think the only two people you won't recognize are Nate and Zte'sa Vahlek. Nate is the one with shaggy brown hair and my uncle is the one with long white hair.*

*It's late and I am tired so I will end this now. I look forward to hearing from you soon.*

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,*

*Merlyn*

When I had finished writing the letter I folded it and stuck it in an envelope with the data card before I could change my mind. I turned on the holonet to watch the late news and promptly fell asleep on the couch.

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It had been almost two months now since I had been on my home world, two months since uncle Vahlek and I had taken a little side trip to the Jedi temple and two months since I had received Jyrki's little data card and in those two months I had not slept well at all. Bad dreams and stress were taking their toll so to relax, or at least try to I spent a great deal of time either practicing for my upcoming Bunduki trials or just sitting with a book on the balcony.

The micro storm moved quickly across the city and I stood on the balcony, my favourite place in the palace, staring at it. The lights were off and no one else was around. I watched as the storm cells shifted, showering the tall, silvery buildings with flashes of lightening. The sound of thunder vibrated all around and I could feel the wind on my face as the clouds pushed the warm air forward. There was a sweetness to the heavy air and moisture so thick I could taste it, almost drown in it. When it started to rain I raised my head upwards to greet it. Rain was a miracle to a person from Tatooine. These storms were a mirror for my own thoughts, my own inner turmoil. I welcomed them.

In difference to how I usually felt about time, at the moment it was dragging its heels miserably. Lord Vader was more often than not away and had not only growled when I had asked to go with him but had expressly forbidden me to go off world at all. When I had asked for a reason his answer was a swift and nasty 'because I told you to so.' followed with a little taste of force choke. I had backed down fast. I wasn't willing to fight him on anything at the moment because his temper had been much worse than usual. So he had gone off to Mechis III and then on to Ord Mantell and I was stuck on Coruscant. He was working with bounty hunters and they were not making him happy. There was a substantial reward for the capture of Luke Skywalker now which had brought out all the very worst sorts of beings into the hunt the rebels game. I had been compiling lists of the better known Bounty Hunters for Lord Vader, sometimes my job experience from working Jabba's Palace and the docking bay paid off but it had been a bit odd to hear him mention Boba Fett and I had to bite my tongue from saying '*tell him Merly from Tatooine says hi.*' I didn't think that Lord Vader would appreciate being a messenger boy for me.

I brushed wet hair out of my face as the storm unleashed its fury and rained with a vengeance. Everything was a weird pale orange-pink colour as the city lights reflected in the rain and the off the clouds. Only the lightening changed that into a second of brilliant bluish white every time it struck. I shivered with the sudden change in temperature as the storm cell passed. Below me the traffic moved as it always did, a steady stream of lights and noise. As the rain eased up I could once again see off in the distance the spires of the Jedi Temple. A shudder ran down my spine and I turned my attention away from it. In difference to what my uncle had thought, I had not gone back since our first visit.

The temple called to me, though. It made me think of the tales that were told about strange ghosts in the deserts of Tatooine, spirits who would sing to weary travellers especially during sand storms to lure them away from safety and shelter. The temple whispered but I could shut its voice out, at least for now. While I knew there were things waiting to be discovered over there, secrets and answers but my fear outweighed my curiosity and I had no real reason to go back there. Even though I had pulled out the box with my precious things from its hiding place many times I had also not activated the holocron cube of my birth mother's diary.

I was soaked by the time I got back to my flat. I had not intended to stay out on the balcony for so long after my lesson with Master Kjestyll but the micro storms that had danced across the city had lured me and kept me there. The restlessness of the weather mirrored mine but now after an hour of storm watching I was glad to get back to where it was warm and dry. I put the kettle on and grabbed a towel to dry my hair, threw on dry clothes and when the kettle boiled made a hot water and brandy mixed with some honey. With the warm mug cupped in my hands I curled up on the couch to read the letter Jarack had delivered right before I was going to leave work for the day.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*I can only imagine that the palace must slowly becoming back to life as the court returns from its two months on Naboo. We are currently en route to the edge of Wild Space where we will rendezvous for supplies and then continue our way towards the*

Core. I am hoping to be back on Coruscant in less than two months, perhaps upon my return I can entice you to join me for a quiet dinner far away from the Imperial Palace.

I had not heard about the incident you mentioned and I did not know Admiral Griff that well, only in passing I am afraid but anyone so incredibly stupid enough to come out of hyperspace on top of the flagship of the Imperial Fleet probably deserves what he gets. It was a pity so many loyal Imperials had to pay the price for such stupidity along with him. I can only imagine Lord Vader's ire at this event. To answer your question, yes, in theory an ISD is equipped with adequate warning systems for obstacles in the way of a hyperspace exit, that is, if the nav computer is properly used. These systems can, of course, be overridden.

I do find it of interest that Admiral Ozzel is now in charge of the Death Squadron, as you so delicately put it, he is a bit of a pompous snob and he is not quite as suitable as some of the other men who might have been better prepared to serve in this posting. Time will tell how good of a placement he is.

Firmus Piett, on the other hand, is a very suitable choice as Captain of the Executor. I have only spoken with him once very briefly several years ago, before his promotion to Captain. He struck me as a deeply intelligent man with a slight penchant for worrying too much. Like all officers serving directly under Lord Vader's command I do wish them a certain amount of luck. Vader goes through men the way small children devour sweets.

Memorial services, it has been my experience, are usually sad and quite painful affairs. As a rule they are attended only by the family left behind, close friends and the few officers who have been given leave to do so. I imagine that the service held on Coruscant for Admiral Griff and the men who perished in this disaster was larger than most due to the sheer scale of the accident. It does not surprise me that your attendance was not so well received and you should not take it personally. You know what losing a loved one is like and you also know the anger that comes with that. They need someone to blame and Lord Vader, along with his associates, is an easy target. It does not matter who is actually at fault.

Speaking of Imperial men, I was intrigued to hear what Zaarin has been up to. Placing hyperdrives in TIEs has been spoken of for several years but it has been mostly a question of logistics, weight versus speed and so on. Shields have been another tricky problem and it will be very interesting to see if the new designs actually work as well as being cost efficient. Zaarin is a brilliant engineer and tactician so I am quite sure that if anyone would be able to make these plans a reality, he will. While I may not like the man on a personal level, his engineering skills are to be admired. Your comment on my popularity amongst some of the Grand Admirals was most amusing. No, they don't like me very much. As an alien I am in a minority amongst Imperial officers and it would seem that the Emperor's faith in my abilities has created some sibling rivalry amongst his favoured twelve.

Tigellinus is especially unhappy about my place in the Emperor's fleet, he feels that Palpatine has made a very grave error in affording me the freedom he so far has. However, Tigellinus is short sighted and sees nothing beyond his own petty desires for power. He is not a military genius but does have a commendable knack for courting the right people at the right time and ingratiating himself into the elite circles. He does not like me much at all I am afraid, although I am not sure exactly why, apart from the obvious fact of my not being human. With Zaarin, on the other hand, it is more a rivalry borne of our individual gifts for strategy and tactical thinking. I do not think that he, unlike Tigellinus, actually hates me, but rather I annoy him and I am in his way. To be honest he is probably every bit as intelligent as I am and I am quite certain were we ever

to engage in a game of dejarik the outcome might very well be stalemate. He's quite analytical in his thinking.

This must seem a bit like petty school yard politicking to you and, indeed, it is. None of these men understand my reasons for doing what I do, nor do they understand my relationship with the Emperor. I suspect that if they were to ever uncover the truth of the matter the shock would kill them but like so many men of power they are blinded by their own desire to not only hold onto the power they feel they have worked so hard for but they also wish to gain more. These petty games don't interest me much but I find myself forced to play them in order to get what I want from this position. One of these days perhaps you will understand this a little better. We all play games, my dear. It is just our reasons for doing so that differ.

I find it hard to put into words the anger I felt upon hearing that Jyrki Andando has not seen fit to leave you in peace. That his message frightened you is of no surprise, you suffered great trauma at his hands. This is not as easily forgotten as one might hope. Your uncle feels the same way, it seems, in his desire to protect you and I was glad to hear you were not alone when you came back to the Coruscant. Thanks to that delightful holo-vid you sent, I have an image in my mind now of your entire family and I should think that Vahlek Akosh would be a very interesting person to speak with. Perhaps one day we shall get to meet in person although I am not sure about the reception I would receive from him. I am quite certain that while he is aware of my presence in your life, you have not been exactly forth coming in telling him everything about me. Speaking of being forth coming, I hope that you have submitted a report of Jyrki's message to Intel or at the very least to Lord Vader. There is a warrant out for his arrest.

My dear, you seem to excel at getting yourself into trouble and you do not need much help in this area from me. As I have explained previously, the Chiss have a very strict policy of not attacking first. I, however, do not always agree with or follow this policy as you have pointed out. While it has served the Chiss people well enough to sit back and wait for the aggression of another. I do not subscribe to this approach, feeling it leaves us open to an attack that perhaps we would be otherwise better prepared for had we known before hand the military capabilities of our opponents.

I am not certain as to whether frisking you for concealed weapons would come under a pre-emptive strike heading or not, as I recall when we met for the first time you did threaten to do me bodily harm. As I see it, my searching your persons for dangerous objects is merely a measure of self protection after the first aggressive overture had already been made. I highly doubt that your inexperience in the area of the type of conversational tactics we have been engaging in will be a hindrance for you, you learn swiftly and do not often make the same mistake twice. I am quite certain under my firm guidance you will become a more than worthy opponent in these exercises as you are both physically and mentally adept at adapting. I am also well aware of your most unique and interesting defensive capabilities but you should be made aware that I have a habit of turning situations around so that I have the tactical advantage despite any appearances to the contrary. I would be more than happy to educate you in this delightful field of tactics and strategies, I am quite certain you would enjoy the hands on approach I would choose. I am most definitely, as you asked, up for this little rumble (you really must stop reading Holloway books) and I am most curious about how far you wish this to go. I believe you have the next move.

On that note, my dear, I must end this. I wish you the very best of luck in your up and coming Bunduki trials. I am quite certain you will do very well. Do not take the disparaging looks you received at the Griff memorial to heart. As with all things, once the initial sting of loss has passed the family will come to terms with it and move on as we all must do after the death of a loved one. You have nothing to do with the military side of

*things and this is a known fact. You are not responsible and no one blames you at all. You just happened to be a convenient target. Don't take it personally.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ja*

*Mith'raw'nuruodo*

The rain pelted against the windows of my flat and I shivered even though I wasn't cold. Thrawn's words about Jyrki brought back the fear I had felt when I had received the data card message. I had neither submitted a report to Intel, nor had I told Lord Vader about it. I didn't actually think either would be that interested. For Intel, I was unimportant and in Lord Vader's eyes I should be able to take care of myself. This situation just annoyed me more than anything else. I wasn't at all sure what Jyrki had hoped to gain by sending me this message. His actions didn't make any sense to me they just made me furious as well as frightened and I wasn't sure which emotion annoyed me more.

My mind drifted to the upcoming trials. I had been training hard and had learned much. Master Kjestyll assured me I was more than ready but I was nervous about it. I had been trained in private by one of the best Bunduki masters around but while this gave me the advantage of being well trained it had its disadvantages. I almost never got to train with other students of my own level. It was a little lonely sometimes but I never brought it up because I was certain that my master had his reasons for this and who was I to question his wisdom. He would have probably berated me for this way of thinking. He had told me often enough, *'A student's job is to question everything, including the master'*. I still did not know what these trials would be like and the more I thought about it the more I worried about them. I had tried to talk to Lord Vader about my concerns but he didn't anything helpful to say.

As lightening flashed, momentarily brightening the living room, I wondered what it would actually be like to see Thrawn in the flesh once more. It had been a very long time and yet despite this and the distance between us I never felt closer to him. His letters were gifts and the presents he sent gentle reminders that he thought about me from time to time. That pleased me and the strange verbal teasing we had engaged in was thrilling. I looked forward to his return to the core. His absence not only made my heart ache but created a longing that was difficult to ignore. I suppose it was only normal that I had begun to imagine what being with him for real again would be like, distracting thoughts that helped me pass my free time that were not very productive.

With a sigh I put Thrawn's letter away. Jarack had told me that because they were on some sort of manoeuvres at the moment he would not be back until after my trial. I had told him that would at least give me something worth writing about, that my life was quiet and dull at the moment. He had laughed and said teasingly that a person should be careful when saying that sort of thing out loud.

"Why is that?" I had asked.

"The gods might just be listening." He had replied with a grin.

I had just shaken my head as he was left but now, sitting here in the solitude of my flat, the micro storms raging outside, I wondered about his warning. He had been joking but now I didn't think it was all that funny.

It was late and sitting in the dimly lit room being maudlin was not doing me any good so after I tucked Thrawn's letter away and cleaned up my dishes. I went to bed. Lord Vader was still away but that didn't mean I wasn't busy. I had more than enough to do, on top of preparing for my trials. I did as Thrawn suggested and stopped dwelling on the animosity I had felt at the Griff Memorial service, stopped worrying about things I could not control and tried to get some sleep. I was going to need my rest for what was coming.

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On the day of the trials I woke up nervous from a listless night full of restless dreams. Not a good way to start one of the most important days of my life. I got up, showered, dressed, ate a decent breakfast and then as arranged I went to the meeting place where I would be picked up along with several other students and taken to where the Trials were being held. I had discussed the day before with Lord Vader about having the day off for the trials. I wanted to make certain that he knew where I was and what I was doing so that on some off chance that he might actually miss me at work and wonder where I was that he wouldn't send a bunch of stormtroopers out to drag me back. That would have just been very embarrassing.

His end of the conversation had been as cheery as ever ending with a somewhat terse; "See that you neither fail nor disappoint me in these trials, girl. I expect nothing but excellence."

I just smiled. "Thank you for your kind words of encouragement, my lord." One of these days I was going to get thumped for having a smart mouth but as he leaned to sever the holonet connection I could have sworn I heard him chuckle.

There were seven other students waiting at the appointed meeting place. I had not studied with any of them, Master Kjestyll taught me alone. He said the Emperor wished it so I had been given private lessons. It was both an advantage and a disadvantage. Although on occasion, my master managed to arrange for me to have a sparring partner other than himself, I rarely had the opportunity to fight against people who were at the same level I was, more or less. I was the outsider of this group; the others all knew each other well. They had been laughing and joking but as I had approached they had gone silent.

I waved and said hullo in my standard cheery isn't this wonderful we- are- all-just-going-to- be-the-best-of-friends voice, because I knew what they were thinking. I saw it in their eyes, the same way I saw the same look in everyone's eyes these days. *Oh look it's Darth Vader's little pet.* I tried not to let it bother me but it did anyway. A few of them mumbled a quiet hullo back and the others just stared. Not much else for me to do except sit and wait, so I did and tried to find that quiet center within as I was doing so. When the transport arrived, along with Master Kjestyll and two other Masters of the Bunduki arts I did not know, I was grateful.

I sat on my own and ignored the cheerful camaraderie of the students travelling with me. It was easy to slip back into feeling left out and alone, even feeling sorry for myself but somewhere along the trip I began to realise that while I didn't belong to this group of friends, I had my own group of people that I joked and giggled with. It occurred to me that when others saw me with Shiv and the gang, we too did exactly the same thing. We giggled and whispered and laughed. This group, they weren't being mean, they just didn't know me. This thought was comforting after the unquiet night I had experienced and I just closed my eyes and rested until we reached our destination.

Because of the secretive nature of the teachings I had been receiving I was quite surprised at the size of the gathering for the trials. There were over a hundred and fifty participants, from all over the galaxy and I was suddenly more than a little nervous.

One of the other students must have noticed this because he gave me shy smile. "It'll be fine." He said. "You're trying for sixth, right?"

I nodded.

"There are only twelve or so combatants for that level, so it's not as if you have to fight everyone here." He grinned.

I grinned back. "Thanks, I was starting to feel as though I was stepping in front of a Krayt Ancient."

He stuck out his hand for me to shake. "I'm Makki Iekki." He said with a grin. "The others said you wouldn't want to talk to us but I told them you were probably a bit shy."

I took his hand and grinned back. "Merlyn Gabriel."

He nodded and before I got to say more he added. "Yeah I knew that, guess most people know. They're all a bit scared of you actually; I guess you thought we were being kinda rude."

I shook my head. "Well, maybe a little bit but mostly what I thought was how lucky you all are that you get to do this together, I don't often get to train with others." I said. "And most people think I am pretty standoffish or being a snob, at least that's what one of my friends who works at the palace told me a long time ago. With my job it's hard to know how people will react."

He nodded and grinned. "Guess it's hard to know who to trust and talk to, given who you work for."

"I didn't think it was that big of a deal and I keep finding out I am wrong about that."

He laughed. "Hell yeah, you were the big topic of gossip for ages, I knew the guy who had the job before you, not well mind you, but given what happened to him most of us thought you would be history in a week, two plus years later you are still around." He shrugged. "To most of us that's nothing short of a miracle. What's he like to work with anyway?"

"Abrupt and unpredictable." I said with a smile. "What do you do?"

"Hoping to eventually get into the Royal Guard, this is part of the pre training." He said running a hand through his short dark hair.

"What level are you going for?"

"Ninth."

"Oh, wow. And is Master Kjestyll your teacher?"

He shook his head, "No he actually doesn't teach any classes he supervises mostly, my actual master is the Zabrak over there, Master Fessi. Actually most of the TKA students are pretty envious of you. Master Kjestyll doesn't give private lessons to just anyone. He only has, I think, three or four solo students and you're one. How did you swing that?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't my idea, it was the Emperor's." I told him, figuring the truth was better than a lie.

Makki nodded knowingly. "No one says no the Emperor and lives."

I couldn't help my grin because I knew someone that did exactly that and got away with it.

"When was your last trial, Merlyn?" He asked as we scanned over the trial floor and the crowds gathered in small groups.

"Almost a year and a half, I have been away on assignment for Lord Vader, so I am a bit behind, but the last trial I was at was very small and very private. Nothing like this."

"Yeah, this is big. I think they are starting to open up the schools a bit more, not sure why though. For the longest time it was all very hush, hush but the Emperor changed things some months back, before that you couldn't even utter the name of what we all learn but now you can. I don't know what happened or why but I am not complaining." He said.

"I hadn't heard that, but then my master is pretty tight lipped about most things, we don't speak a lot." I told him.

Makki nodded. "He is one of the best. We are lucky to have him at the school. I was nervous when my master told me I would be ready to take these trials. When I disagreed he said '*If Master Kjestyll arranged for a trial then you must be ready; he would not put you out there if you weren't.*' It was your master who stopped me from going for my ninth six months ago because he knew I wasn't quite there yet, even though Master Fessi said I was. I was really angry but you know what? He was right."

"I am sure you will do well, Ninth trials are at the end of the day right?"



He nodded. "They save the best for last, I get to watch you all bust your butts first." He laughed. "Come on, I'll introduce you to the others. They are all dying to find out more about you anyway."

I was introduced and once the initial shyness wore off we all chattered about what was happening. All of us were nervous and none of us had attended such a large example of the Trials before. The buzz in the air was infectious.

Of the group I was with no one else was trying for sixth, two were a level beneath me, going for fifth, what I was now and except for Makki, the other four were all vying for eighth level. None of us would compete until later on so we had plenty of time to watch the juniors and get really wound up.

The arena was not large, and the testing was done by three masters watching the students. Passing the trials was based on several things, form, speed, skill and accuracy but also honour played a big part of it. This was not a competition or even a tournament but it felt a little like one. Each person was matched with a partner whose skill and level pretty much equalled their own. The judging masters would watch and appraise the students' skill based on what they saw. Each pair had three matches and while it was stressed many times by the person doing the announcing that this was not a competition, there were no prizes being handed out and unlawful conduct would not be tolerated but it sure didn't feel that way.

Master Kjestyll was one of the selected judges and the other two masters, Master Fessi and Master Loridan were in charge of watching over us. We were herded into our waiting area on the wooden benches and told on no uncertain terms that we were to behave ourselves. The morning passed by easily enough and we watched, more quietly than some of the other groups, as the lower Trial participants began their testing.

It was easy to see the slight differences in the various schools that were there. Makki and I had fun pointing them out to each other. The way certain hand motions were made, or how a crescent moon kick was executed. I was curious to see how the variations in styles also combined, the defensive verses the offensive. It was almost relaxing to watch the little kids pass from level one to level two; they were still unafraid of anything life had yet to throw at them and mostly just enjoyed what they were doing. The older the participants got the more tense the atmosphere became. Even though this was not a tournament it sure was starting to feel like one.

Two of the pairs going for level four had to be stopped because instead of trying to show off their technique and prove they were skilled enough to move on and learn at the next level they were actually trying to beat the brains out of each other. I was surprised at the quick brutality of a one particular pair and wondered if it hadn't been some sort of a grudge match without anyone knowing.

Makki filled me in on some of the gossip about school rivalries ending with the second largest school in the system. "The Corellian Star school hates us most of all, any judge who pairs one of them with one of us is asking for trouble." He said.

"Not that any of the Palpatine School would engage in a grudge match, am I right ke'ashj Makki?" whispered Master Fessi, leaning down from his seat up from us to interrupt.

Makki looked up at him. "No master, we all know better than to engage in dishonourable conduct, but sometimes they do make it hard."

Master Fessi nodded. "All the more reason to show the watching world how disciplined and good we are at what we do." He said. "All the more reason to show this watching world how we obey and give pride to those who have taught us and gone before, would you not agree ke'ashj Merlyn?"

I nodded, smiling at the use of the title *honoured student* before my name. Master Kjestyll never called me that, he usually just called me child when he called me anything at all.

"We look forward to seeing your skill, ke'ashj Merlyn, Master Kjestyll says you have great promise for a student who began training so late."

I blushed. "I am honoured by his praise." I said, and then added, "I sure hope he's right."

Master Fessi laughed. "Find the stillness, little one, and you will find your strength. He has mentioned to me that you have had the honour of sparring with Lord Vader?"

I nodded and must have made a face because he laughed. "I have indeed been on the receiving end of a lesson or two." I said.

Makki looked at me with wide eyes. "You fight with him and you live?"

"Well it is more like I spend an hour or two trying to avoid being killed and he thinks it's funny." I told them. "I usually end up pretty black and blue and mostly we fight with combat staves, and" I added, "he is mostly playing with me, like a jax with a mouse, trust me it's not as much fun as it sounds."

Master Fessi nodded. "Lord Vader has been well trained in many martial arts styles, including some of the Bunduki Arts. I am quite certain you have learnt a great deal from him ke'ashj Merlyn."

I just nodded and gave Makki, who was staring at me as though I had suddenly sprouted five heads and turned green with pink spots, a big grin.

Master Fessi laughed. "I think you have just done the impossible, ke'ashj Merlyn, you have rendered my most garrulous student speechless. Well done."

In that moment the announcement that the morning's trials were over and there would be a half hour break for lunch broke any other comments coming my way. Huddled in our little group we ate high count nutrient bars that would not fill us up and make us sluggish, washed down with water. It wasn't much of a lunch, but then as my trial time drew nearer I wasn't all that hungry.

As the second half of the day got underway the tone of the event shifted slightly, as the higher levels began to show off their skills and advance upward so did the tension and the excitement.

We all watched with baited breath as the first two students from our small group, Alra and Jutiri were called into the trial square and paired off. Alra was in the first group and Jutiri in the third. They had been partnered with members from the Chandra'beh School from the planet of Malastare. Alra was very petit and she had been paired with someone who was almost twice her size, something I thought was a bit unfair but Master Fessi only shrugged.

"Size is not important, and sometimes being smaller can be advantageous, ke'ashj Alra is very good at taking advantage of her small size." He said as he munched noisily on an apple.

And he had been right. She was fast and moved with a breezy ease that annoyed the hell out of her opponent. She passed her level easily and Makki whispered to me that she should have passed this level some time ago but had to skip the test because she had come down with vagles, a particularly nasty virus that caused severe burning in the joints.

We all cheered as the announcer gave the results of the first round of participants and then waited until it was Jutiri's turn.

Jutiri was a medium height, well built young man about three years younger than I was. He had an easy way of moving that reminded me of my uncle's jaxes. His opponent was taller, more wiry but no less graceful. They were very evenly matched and their three trial bouts were just gorgeous to watch and it was no surprise that they both passed.

Nothing could hide their beaming smiles as the master of the ceremonies handed them each their new coloured kej-ji'doh jackets.

When my name was called I was ready. Just as I got up to prepare Master Fessi put a hand on my shoulder.

"Remember who you are and who has taught you ke'ashj Merlyn. Be the stillness do not seek it." He said.

I bowed to him and thanked him for his words which I had needed to hear. I took a deep breath and then I took my place amongst the others of my trial class. It was a strange thing to look around and size up my peers. It wasn't a tournament or even a competition but the competitive tension that filled the room was astonishing. No one it seemed learned the Bunduki Arts just for fun; each and every one of us had an edge to sharpen or in some cases an axe to grind.

## **Chapter 2**

I waited quietly in a dance stance while the announcer read of who we would each be paired off with. There was a sucking in of breath as both mine and my opponent's name were called. I looked over to see who I was sparring against and suddenly understood. I had been paired off with a rather unhappy looking young man from the Corellian Star School. One of his friends nudged him and he looked back at me. There was something slightly familiar about his face but I couldn't place it. The smile he gave me was not a nice one and he made a throat slicing gesture with his finger. I just shrugged. What did he think he could do to me? This was not a tourney and the sparring bouts were to be clean. The purpose of these trials was to test the student's abilities and skill. He and I were evenly matched as far as levels went. There really was no win or lose, or was there?

I got to watch the first round because I was set for the second. I focused on breathing and trying to center. I was sort of used to doing this in stressful situations; I was pretty sure that being in Lord Vader's presence counted as a stressful situation. I was aware when the first round of students were finished their trials and felt a strange sense of calm when my name was called.

I took my place in front of my opponent and gave him the traditional greeting, right hand curled over left fist and I bowed. I was aware that he did the same but was also aware that underneath his calm exterior he was angry. I just did not know why.

We had three separate rounds in which to prove our skill with the moves we had learned and to show off all that we had been taught within the parameters allowed. As students in a trial, this was not an offensive match but rather a showcase of our abilities; at least it was supposed to be.

My opponent, a tall, muscular young man about my age called Kiol, was not going to play by the rules and his first move was a fast serpent strike with his right hand. I blocked it and countered. We moved around one another, and continued to dance, attack and counter attack. He kept his temper in check but there was an edge to his moves that made me wary. He was aware of the rules but he wanted to hurt me and I didn't know why, this wasn't a tourney and we were not enemies. When the judges were satisfied with the first round they signalled us to stop, take a minute and begin the second part, where the more intricate kicks, leaps and leg moves would be judged.

We bowed and began with me on the offensive this time. I liked the leg moves and kicks, they always reminded me of dance and it was part of the Bunduki Arts I was very good at so I got the better of him, while he was powerful and strong he lacked my agility. Instead of trying to focus on what I would do next he allowed his frustration to get the better of him and broke the rules of trial by completing an illegal hand strike at me. It caught me by surprise as he hit me on the side of my face. When I hit the floor I saw stars.

One of the adjudicators stopped the round then and came over to me asking if I was okay. I nodded, shaking off the buzzing in my ears. I heard the judge tell Kiol he now had a black strike, one more and he would fail his trial, this was not a tourney and the object of this was not to hurt the opponent but to evaluate the skills of the students. Kiol mumbled an apology at me and I nodded back. I could not figure out his reasons for being so mad but put it down to the rivalry between the two schools Makki had mentioned earlier.

The third section of the trial was to test for combinations of moves and defensive-offensive skills. We circled about and he moved first, I could tell the combination he was going for because it was an easy one to spot through the body position. He had been well taught but there was a certain stiffness in his motions as though he had memorized choreography and was not feeling it by heart. I countered easily and moved into a more complex combination that was not generally used or utilised, but I liked the flow of it. It put Kiol off and he was unable to defend his body, had I been fighting for real it would have hurt him, as it was I just put him on his ass.

When he got up his anger was visible on his face. He launched a series of moves that were fast and furious, putting me on the defensive quickly. He was very strong and quicker than he looked but he was oddly predictable and I was able to counter each combination he threw at me until he lost his temper and in a surprise move dropped into riding bantha stance then swiftly and then with a spring spin, viciously kicked me in the lower chest sending me backwards onto the floor in pain. The crowd made a collective noise of displeasure and the one of judges watching us sounded the tone to let us know that our match was now over and that Kiol had violated the rules a second time meaning that he would not obtain the right to step up a level, but that I would. I got slowly to my feet and wondered at the pain in my side. It felt as though he had cracked one of my ribs with that last kick. As I turned to walk off the floor he suddenly came at me, grabbing me by the front of my kej-ji'doh. He pulled me as close to his face as he could and hissed.

"This is not over, you witch. We know who you work for and we will have revenge for what was done to us. You will pay for Lord Vader's arrogance." He would have said more but someone pulled us apart and he was roughly escorted off the floor. My hands were shaking as I was handed my new kej-ji'doh and I barely noticed that Master Fessi had come down from the bench seats to lead me back to the group I was with.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know but he wasn't being friends."

He shook his head. "Bloody school rivalries, I wish they'd stop promoting it. Are you hurt?"

I lied and shook my head. "Just winded." I said. I thought about telling Master Fessi what Kiol had said but then decided not to, after all lots of people hated Lord Vader and I didn't want anyone to think I was asking for sympathy.

He patted me on the back. "Well, you do this school and your master proud. Well done ke'ashj Merlyn, you are a most promising student and your Master will be pleased. Now come and sit and watch the others."

I swallowed the aching pain in the right side of my chest and did as he asked, grateful to stop moving. The others all clapped me on the back or the shoulders in congratulations but I didn't feel so celebratory. As I had glanced around me I noticed that Kiol and two of his fellow students, who were older and stronger looking, were eying me

with such a bitter hatred it made me shudder. This wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. I just hoped that I could avoid any more arguments with them. I didn't want to give them more of an excuse to dislike me than they already seemed to do. This was one of the disadvantages of working for Lord Vader. The rest of the afternoon passed quickly and each student from the group I was with passed their trials easily. Only one other student from a different school was not passed for his behaviour and for the most part the rest went on without incident.

I watched with delight as Makki passed his trial and was awarded his white kej-ji'doh. He was a beautiful fighter and I could see why master Fessi had beamed when his student's name had been called. I wished, at that moment, I would be allowed to train with these other students. I suddenly realised how much I had missed by being taught alone and in private. I made a mental note to ask Master Kjestyll if it would be possible to do so. I was grateful when the master of ceremonies made his speech about how well the first inter-galactic school trials had gone and closed the event. We started to stand up, joke and laugh. Collected our things and prepared to leave the hall. I was in the middle of teasing Makki about something stupid when someone yelled my name.

"Merlyn Gabriel!"

I turned around to see Kiol and the two others flanking him standing with their hands on their hips. Everyone still in the great hall stopped and watched. I was aware that the tension in the room had suddenly tripled. Master Fessi stepped up beside me and I looked up into his face, then back at the three men who faced me.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"You." Kiol said in a loud clear voice. "I call the Rite of Tet'zais-tjiumei."

Master Fessi sucked in his breath and the following stillness in the hall was sickening.

I turned to him. "What is that?" I asked. I had never heard of it before. While I was slowly learning about the Bunduki Arts and their history from master Kjestyll, this Rite was one I had not been taught yet.

Before Master Fessi could speak Master Kjestyll was at my side. "What is this about ke'ashj Kiol?" he asked. "Are you aware of what you request?"

Kiol pointed at me and said. "She works for the Dark Lord; he is responsible for the death of our father. We will have retribution, we will have revenge and she will pay. I demand the Rite of Tet'zais-tjiumei and you know the rules, once the challenge is laid it cannot be refused."

I watched as my Master drew a deep slow breath. I could feel his subtle anger and it scared me.

"I am aware of the rules." He said. "I am also aware that it is forbidden for students to engage in death matches during official trials."

"The trials are over Master. I will not be denied. Either she fights the Rite of Tet' or she is punished accordingly."

"Would someone like to explain some of this to me?" I whispered.

Master Fessi drew me aside as Master Kjestyll called over the other Masters to confer. "The Rite of Tet'zais-tjiumei is a rare challenge usually only given in the direst of circumstances. It is a fight between two combatants to the death. It was only ever used as a last resort when all other avenues of resolving an issue or grievance had been exhausted. Once the challenge has been issued it must be followed through or the one being challenged can walk away but in doing so you also walk away from further training. You would be considered *Ash'nej*, shunned, and no one from the Bunduki schools would be allowed to ever teach you or speak to you again. You would be banished from our grace and in doing so you would bring about much dishonour to your master."

"Some choices." I said softly.

He nodded, "The rules are this way so that the Rite of Tet' would not be used lightly. This incident is far more unusual than you will ever know." He sighed. "There's more. He will have the right to choose someone to fight for him because he is of a lesser level, a lesser strength than you. He can choose someone of a higher level than you even and there is nothing we can do to prevent this. You then get to choose the weapons. In a death match weapons are allowed. The fight ends when one dies."

"These rules are insane." I hissed.

He nodded, "They are very old, from a time when life was very different."

I rubbed at my forehead and looked around at the group of scared looks on faces of the new friends I had made today. Now I understood why Kiol had acted so badly during our trial, he had not wanted to obtain a new level; he had wanted to stay behind.

"Why do these things only ever happen to me?" I asked as Master Kjestyll came to my side. I hoped I didn't sound as worried as I felt.

"Your path is, indeed, a difficult one." He remarked. "I cannot tell you which way to walk, child but the other masters and I have talked and unfortunately ke'ashj Kiol has the right to do what he has done. This challenge has been laid and must be answered." He said. The sadness in his voice made me ache.

"Then I accept, I will not have Master Kjestyll's name dishonoured. I am not afraid to die." I said loudly enough for everyone to hear. I sounded braver than I felt.

Kiol grinned nastily. "I call the right to have someone fight in my stead. My brother Riori has agreed to do this." A taller, more powerfully built man, probably three or four years older than me stepped forward. One of the two Kiols had been standing with. I looked from one to the other now that I was aware of it, I saw the family resemblance. Admiral Griff's sons.

Master Fessi drew a deep breath. "Unacceptable, ke'ashj Riori is level eight and the match will be far too uneven."

"It is my right to pick whom I choose. If she is not up to the fight then she can step down!" he shouted.

"I can fight in your stead." Master Kjestyll told me. "You are still my student and I am considered responsible for you, I can take the burden for you as the match would be uneven."

"He can," Kiol said, "but what he doesn't tell you is that this would disgrace you both."

I was starting to get cross. That slow burning anger that simmered in my gut was making itself known. I forced it down. Now was not the time to get angry. I needed to be clear headed. "Fine, fine! I accept the challenge and I accept the substitute combatant but I get to choose the weapons, yes?"

Everyone nodded.

"Combat staves." I said and there was a collective noise of surprise.

"I protest!" shouted Kiol.

I smiled. I knew from long talks with Master Kjestyll that the Bunduki arts concentrated on a weaponless style of combat, this is what made it so deadly. Most students did not learn how to fight with weapons unless they branched off into some of the more elite training styles that also taught weapon use. More often than not most students who wanted to learn these elite styles went to swords, it was flashier. Combat staff training was considered archaic and was not often taught. I had been playing with fighting staves for a very long time, they had been Jyrki's weapon of choice and he had taught me well. I took it from the general reaction that my choice was very unusual. It was the first time since this whole nasty affair had begun that I felt I had an advantage. It wasn't much. My side ached with what I was sure was a cracked rib and Riori was not just two levels more

experienced than me, but also much larger and stronger physically. This was not going to be fun.

"You can protest all you want ke'ashj Kiol, it is you who have called the Rite of Tet' and you have requested we all abide by the rules, so then must you. It is her right and she has asked for combat staves. These weapons will be provided and examined by a neutral parties, masters Anadiav and Oskarii have agreed to do this as and act as watchers for the Tet' match."

I looked at the two Bunduki Masters who had offered to play chaperone, neither were from the either of the schools involved in this fight. "Do I get time to get ready?" I asked.

"Yes, we begin in an hour from now." Master Kjestyll said. "Master Fessi will take you to a place where you can prepare and meditate. I will join you in a moment. I must confer with the others about this. This is most unusual."

I nodded and did not resist Master Fessi's touch as he led me off to a quiet room off the main hall.

I looked at the Zabradi Master. "Why is this happening? How did this get so complicated?" I asked as he gave me a nutrient bar and handed me a cup of juice.

"I do not know. The Rite of Tet' has not been used in many decades. It is considered barbaric and out of touch. It was a very old method of sorting out conflicts between two individuals. It was created by the original Followers of Palawa many centuries ago. These boys, they want revenge for something the man you work for supposedly did to their families. They know they could never even hope to come close to Lord Vader and you are, in their eyes, an easy mark. They do not understand that this solves nothing." He sighed. "You need to concentrated and center." He told me. "This is not a trial test; this is a fight to the death. Do not focus on the negative or the why. Be the stillness." He said and I did as he suggested and knelt down to meditate. I heard rather than saw Master Kjestyll enter the room and heard Master Fessi leave. I looked up at my Master and our eyes met.

"I am sorry." He said. "This should not be happening."

I shook my head. "I seem to attract the lunatics. It's as if I am a magnet for insane behaviour and bad things."

He nodded then said. "Listen to me carefully. This boy you fight is very good, but he does not have the variety of training you have had and he has never sparred with anyone on the level of Lord Vader. He will not think creatively, *he is not a dancer*. In this fight you may use everything you have to survive within the few rules there are. Now, that being said I will tell you this, you are capable of winning, but you must kill him or else you forfeit everything."

He paused then said slowly, carefully. "If you want to walk away, you may and I shall accept that and all it entails. I will not force you to do something your heart will not allow you to do. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "I do." I said but I wasn't so sure. I did not want to be killed or to kill anyone, least of all someone I didn't know over something I had nothing to do with.

"Meditate, center and find your stillness." He said as he began to put pressure on certain points on my back, releasing the stress and the terrible fear I was starting to feel. I did as he said and delved deep into my center, hoping I would make it through this latest bit of idiocy in one piece.

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I walked out into the hall and was assaulted by the utter silence. I felt the anxiety as well as the excitement thick in the air. I took a very deep slow breath and looked at my master who stood at my side. I didn't show it but I was scared but that was not the only emotion I felt, I was also angry.

I took my place in the center of the combat area across from Riori and concentrated on my breathing as Master Anadiav handed us each a combat staff. They were beautiful weapons, carved from dark, heavy hard wood. I tested the weight of mine and studied it carefully, then shook my head. He accepted it back and handed me another one. This time I nodded after, once again inspecting it carefully. There actually wasn't much of a difference between the two but I knew that doing this would put Riori on edge. I could tell that while he was very good in the art of pure Teräs Käsi, he wasn't so comfortable with a staff in his hand. I was pretty sure he had studied sword art instead.

Most students were exposed at some point in the training to all the possible weapons forms but few choose to follow any, especially the archaic ones. I owed my love of this form to Jyrki. He had wielded a combat staff with such ease and grace that it was almost dance like. The sudden image of Jyrki as he had been when I had known him on Tatooine made me sad. I swallowed that emotion down. I needed to think clearly not get caught up in self pity and maudlin memories. I didn't play with the staff I just stood waiting calmly for the signal.

"The rules are simple. No other weapons. You can discard the ones you have and fight hand to hand only, if you wish." Master Oskarii said. "This fight is to the death, unless either of you wish to forfeit the match and suffer the consequences only one of you will leave this hall alive. There are no other rules. Do you understand?"

We both said we did.

Riori glanced at his younger brother who nodded. I could feel their anger, sense their hatred but it was unfocused. I looked only at my opponent. He was muscular and well proportioned. He played with the combat staff, testing it, learning its balance. A weaponless fight would have suited him better. I drew a deep steadying breath.

*Focus only on the moment at hand; let nothing distract you from the goal.* Master Kjestyll had said.

Master Anadiav gave the start command and both Riori and I saluted the other with the traditional hand gesture and bow, even here in this arena, some sort of honour was being observed. We circled around each other, staves held with both hands, defensively. I watched his eyes; he was waiting for me to swing so that he could judge my skill. I twitched the staff in my hands a little making his shift to defend and then swung out at him in the opposite direction.

He had to move quickly, awkwardly to block me and the loud crack of wood on wood was like thunder in the silent hall. The first attack made, the first block completed. We circled again this time more aware of the other's gait and stance. He grinned at me. I moved again, spinning on the spot, swinging my staff around letting it slide through my hand so that as it swung I lengthened the end that would strike him, sweeping low. He did not anticipate this move and the staff caught him on the arm, but he stepped backwards enough that the blow landed softer than I had hoped. I ducked as he swung, and felt the air part as his staff swept over my head. He had put a lot of power behind that blow. There was no sudden stop so his follow through recovery gave me time to get a better grip on my own weapon and ready my stance. I swept low, dropping to a crouch and caught him on the shin knocking him down. He rolled and recovered swiftly, as we had been taught. Use the momentum of the fall to pull you back up.

We moved back and forth, wood smashed against wood and our eyes never left each other. Sweat beaded down my back. I could see it glisten on his face, running in rivulets down the sides of his jaw. We were too well conditioned to be tired, but my muscles were starting to tell me they wanted a rest. From the way he kept flexing his fingers I knew that holding the staff was starting to wear on him, He gripped it too hard, white knuckles showed the strain. We circled. He grinned. I kept my face emotionless but anger coiled in



my belly. I could feel it reaching upwards, testing me, and teasing me. It wanted to be set free.

*Let me loose, it whispered, let me loose and let me kill...*

I gritted my teeth, shutting the seductive voice in my head out. If I gave into that I might not lose the match but I would lose my soul. Some of this must have shown on my face, Riori snickered and grinned at me, taunting me. I swung at him hard. He was expecting such a move and he countered. The sound of the Kanaka wood smashing together ricocheted around the silent hall. He swung around and used the staff to counter my next move but he was second too slow and I caught the side of his leg with a glancing blow. So far we were just testing each other. Our moves were guarded and mindful but it was getting tedious. If he hoped to tire me he was failing, instead he was touching that anger I wanted to keep locked away.

*Let me go, let me go ... it sang to me.*

For a single moment I thought I heard Jyrki's voice in my head and my concentration was, for a second, broken and as he sensed this he came at me in a sudden flurry of motion. I was instantly on the defensive, he was very powerful but as Master Kjestyll had often drilled into my head strength could be turned against its user and I dropped into crouching panthac position and swung at his shins. I connected and he went down but recovered faster than I had hoped to swing about and once again I was on the defensive. I don't know how long we went on like this for, it was probably a lot shorter than it seemed and we were both now sporting what would be some pretty impressive bruises under our clothes. He had good power behind his blows, then again so did I; we just came to it from different places. I twisted from the hips, and he used his upper body strength. I knew that he would tire if he kept that up but it was a common mistake with people not used to swinging a big stick.

I annoyed him when I caught him with a surprise move, one I had learned from Lord Vader and hit him on the back of his thigh. It hurt him and I could see he would now have to favour that leg. But his ire made him fast and I wondered if he was not just the smallest bit Force sensitive and just did not know it.

Anger snaked upwards, it curled its fingers about my belly and I had to swallow to fight it back. It was seductive, and I could feel the power it would give me. *Join with me, let me make you strong...* it was like a lover's touch, that ache of lust. I reached down and caressed it just a little. I felt a renewed strength, half hidden, flood through my limbs and I smiled.

Again we circled. Unlike me, he used his darker emotion easily. It came off him in waves; it made him stronger, impervious to the pain that he must now have felt. He swung at me hard and fast. The terrible sounds of wood against wood, wood against flesh filled the hall. I countered and fought back. I should have been in pain but I didn't feel it. The anger in my belly became a fire in my heart. *Yes, yes* it sang to me as I tapped into it, just a little, just enough. Momentum helped me shift against gravity as I flipped about and almost caught him on the side of the head with the end of my staff. He saved at the last minute but it cost him, a muscle wrenched trying to absorb the blow. He winced, and then he got angrier.

He came at me furious and with a move I would have considered dirty, had this been a normal bout and managed to catch me left shoulder, thrusting with the end of the staff. I heard the pop before I actually felt it as he dislocated my shoulder. Pain flared and I gasped with it but had no time to consider what to do about it because he smelled blood and came in for the kill.

*I am here, part of you, pain is fleeting anger is strength...*

My arm hung wrong and the pain coursed up and down it was exquisite. I gulped air and swallowed the agony down. I heard master Kjestyll's voice in my mind. *"Pain is a*

*moment, get beyond it."* Fury wormed its way upwards. It warmed in my gut. This time I didn't push it away and the joy that coursed through me outweighed the pain.

*Yes...yes...*

I could fight with one arm if I had to. Sparring with Lord Vader had taught me that. It was a technique I had learned through necessity. I swallowed the misery that wanted to break past my fury, adrenalin made that easier to do and I touched the anger that desperately wanted to break free. It coursed through blood and it gave me strength. While I could fight with one arm not working right, it would be easier if it wasn't hanging like a limp flag. If he caught it with a blow again he could tear it from my body or at least do permanent damage. I caught my breath and in a move that surprised him and everyone else, I threw myself at the floor, praying I got the angle right. My shoulder found its way back into the socket messily, noisily. I cried out in pain and rolled over on to my knees then staggered to my feet. I wasn't sure why he had not attacked me in that moment. Perhaps sheer surprise at what I was doing rendered him momentarily stunned. I would never know. When I turned to face him he was smiling openly. I gave him a tight smile back and focused on breathing which was very hard to do.

I could no longer control how I felt. It was choose between pain or anger and anger won. It turned into a wild fury. I laughed as I let it flow through my limbs, flow through me. I opened up to the universe. The force and my rage collided and began to dance.

He was expecting me to be an easy target because he was higher in the levels than I was and I was now seriously hurt but I had some advantages he didn't know about. I moved slower now more carefully, he could use my pain as a weapon against me and I wanted to avoid that. I watched as he flipped in a spin to whirl around and went to hit me on the head. I had to brace my staff with my body as I dropped into one kneel. The staff took the blow not my head but in crouching on one knee I lost the advantage and when he swung again I wasn't ready. The staff smashing into my right side and broke not only the rib that his brother had cracked earlier on, but two others as well. I think I screamed.

For a moment we eyed each other and he grinned. He was certain he had won, certain I would lose and for the first time I wondered if he was right. Then, he made the worst mistake he possible could right then and there. He laughed. Like a solar flare, my rage leaped upward and I welcomed its burning warmth. I got up. The pain vanished as I rode the wave of fury. It was my turn to smile and that put Riori off guard. Power rippled about me, power that was deep, dark and seductive, Lord Vader's power. I stopped thinking.

I swung my staff upward, parallel to the floor. Using my body as a brace I pirouetted about, a dance move and I caught his left arm on the elbow. With a terrible sound, the arm broke. I didn't stop as he staggered momentarily shocked by the pain. I coughed and spat blood out of my mouth. I had to end this now or else it was going to end me. I spun around again and swung low catching him on the side of his leg. The crack was loud. He went down on his knees and I kicked him hard in the solar plexus. Watching as he flew backwards and lay winded and momentarily stunned on the mat. My anger sang to me and the force ran with it. I was having a hard time controlling this, I laughed because I liked it even though a part of me knew this was not good, this was not good at all.

I watched for a second or two as Riori struggled to get up but that kick had hurt him and he was struggling to catch his breath. I moved in for the kill. Shoved him backwards, back down flat against the floor and I laid my staff across his throat and braced one end with my knee while applying pressure with my good arm so that I slowly began to crush his neck. The dark anger that writhed in my gut screamed at me to end it now, all it would take is one quick motion and I would walk away the winner, but I hesitated. Somewhere deep inside me a voice that was not mine, a voice I knew only from my dreams, whispered past the fury, past the pain, past the fear. 'No Merlyn, don't'.

I looked into Riori's eyes and my anger suddenly receded. His eyes were wide and full of fear. I felt his grief. I understood it. This boy wanted to stop feeling empty. He wanted to find a way beyond his sorrow. He did not want to die and suddenly I didn't want to kill him. My anger screamed at me as the power I had felt stirring my blood into a frenzy slowly receded. Suddenly I had Thrawn's words from almost two years ago whispering in my head.

*'Everyone has the capacity to kill, some more so than others. It is a choice many must make on a daily basis, whether they wish to or not, those who choose not to often die because of that decision. But it changes you and it makes you harder, colder in ways you cannot imagine. I am certain that if it came down to the blade's edge and you had no other avenue available, you would choose life over death, there is enough steel in you to do that, but I should hate to see that happen.'*

I took as deep a breath as I could without starting cough and I staggered to my feet using the combat staff to brace my weight, shaking my head.

"No." I whispered, "I won't kill him."

There was a stunned silence in the hall as I backed away from Riori who was starting to sit up. He stared at me with such bitterness and hatred that I didn't understand it. I looked around leaning heavily on my staff and caught sight of Master Kjestyll looking at me. He gave me one of his rare smiles that reached his eyes and then he bowed to me deeply, a sign of great respect. I turned to walk away and Master Oskarii looked at me.

"If you leave this hall with Riori still alive you know what will happen." He said quietly.

I nodded. "I know." I looked over at my Master who just acknowledged with a single slight nod of his head. He knew, he understood and he had accepted it. I think he had expected this from me should I get the upper hand.

I hurt and I wanted to go home. I no longer wanted to be in this place. I straightened up as much as the broken ribs would let me and went to walk out of the hall but a gasp from the crowd and a warning shout from Makki made me turn suddenly to see Riori leaping at me.

I didn't think, I just acted, leaning on the staff and using it as a brace, I sprung up with all my power in my legs and just as he reached me I kicked at him with every ounce of strength and force that I could muster. I felt that last flare of anger surge and coupled with the Force I caught him squarely on his jaw with such brutality that his head was twisted violently sideways. The sickening sound of his neck snapping was like Tusken gunfire in Beggar's Canyon. We both crumpled to the ground at the same time and as I inhaled a deep, painful breath so he exhaled his last.

My staff clattered dully on the floor. I laid my hand on his body but there was nothing, no heart beat, no life force. That last move had done something in my chest and I was having real trouble breathing. I coughed and there was blood, lots of it. I looked around but could not focus on the sea of faces swimming about me. People tried to pull me off Riori's body, I think I was screaming or at least trying to. I had not wanted to kill him. I had not wanted him to die. Pain and fear wrapped around me. I fought against the blood in my lungs, the sensation of drowning from the inside out. The last thing I remembered was hands on my face, my Master's gentle hands, and the sound of his voice but I didn't understand what he was trying to say. The world around me swam and when the blackness came I was grateful.

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I was aware of floating and the taste of bacta. I faded in and out of consciousness, in and out of pain and in between I dreamed but I could not remember what the dreams were about. When I surfaced and became aware of where I was I panicked. I had never been

submersed in bacta before and even with the face mask and oxygen I felt as though I were drowning. The fluid was thick and viscous. It had a terrible taste and it was everywhere, even in my ears. I flailed and fought against the harness, banging legs, knees, arms, elbows, hands against the sides of the tank, until someone sedated me. Time moved forward without me noticing it at all.

When the bacta had done its job I was taken from the tank, cleaned and moved to a bed. I slept a lot. I was in a world ruled by pain. It hurt to breathe, to move, to cough. Every motion brought with it its own variant of agony. I was grateful for the drugs they pumped me with that kept me in a twilight of semi consciousness. I had no idea where I was or what day it was and I didn't care but eventually they weaned me off the sedatives and the painkillers. Days had turned into weeks and I had not noticed.

Slowly the world which had fragmented about me began to piece itself back together again. They knew I was on the mend when I began insisting that I be allowed to shower and get rid of the last of the sickly bacta stench that seemed to permeate everything. Moving still hurt and I was not that steady on my feet. After an hour of me complaining they all decided that the only way to shut me up was to either sedate me or let me shower. I was grateful they decided on the latter.

I just stood under the hot water, leaning against the wall while one of the med-tech droids helped me scrub at my skin and although the droid was surprisingly gentle, it still hurt to be touched. I looked at the bruises on my body in awe; they were works of art in vibrant colours of purples, blues and greens. When I came back to bed, the IV line still miraculously in my arm, the sheets had been changed and a doctor brandished a powerful sedative my way. I didn't argue, sleep was a welcome escape from the lingering pain and the fragmented memory of what had put me in this unnamed medical lab in the first place.

When I woke again, I had no idea how much time had passed but it was early dawn. My mouth was dry and my throat hurt. I could not recall the last time I had had anything to drink. I glanced at my hand, the IV line was gone and a bruise was the only tell tale sign of where the needle had been. I came back into the world slowly and only after a bit did I realize I was not alone in the room. I turned my head to look beside the bed. He was lounging in the uncomfortable chair, with his long legs stretched out in front of him, one leg crossed over the other, his arms folded across his chest. He was still in uniform but he had removed the jacket. His eyes were closed but he wasn't asleep. I moved and that brought him back to the world. He opened his eyes and turned to look at me.

"Welcome back to the land of the living." Thrawn said. He got up and filled a glass of water from the jug on the nearby table. He placed a hand at my back, helping me as I sat up. I took the cup he offered, sipping the water slowly.

"Why is it, Miss Gabriel, that I seem to spend so much time watching you recover from grievous bodily harm in a hospital bed?" He asked setting back down in the chair that was right beside the bed. I searched for anger in his voice but there was none. He just sounded weary.

"You have lousy timing?" I asked.

He just shook his head slightly. He did not appreciate the joke. "You appear to attract trouble and brutality the way light attracts moths and ships attract mynockes."

I handed him back the empty cup, which he set on the table. "It's not what you think." I told him. "Lord Vader didn't do this."

He arched an eyebrow. "I am well aware of that." He said tartly.

I lay back down with a sigh. I wasn't in the mood to fence words with him. "When did you get back?"

"Very late last night or very early this morning, depending on your point of view."

"Where is here?" I asked realizing I had no idea where I actually was and had never bothered to ask.

"One of the smaller medical facilities in the Palace." He replied.

"I have no idea how I got to this place." I whispered.

"No, I do not imagine you would." he said. "You were in particularly bad shape."

"How long?"

"According to Doctor Hayes you've been here for almost three and a half weeks and of that time you were in the tank for just over a week."

My fingers touched the ribs that had been broken, they were still tender and my shoulder ached. "Still hurts."

He nodded. "Bacta is a medical wonder but some things still require time and rest to heal, especially broken bones. How do you feel?"

I pursed my lips. How did I feel? I was not quite certain how to answer that. "I killed someone." I said. "I don't know how I feel yet." If I closed my eyes I could still hear that sickening crack in my mind as my foot connected with Riori's head.

Thrawn leaned forward in the chair and studied my face carefully. "As I heard it," he said evenly. "You walked away from the chance to end the boy's life and it was he who gave you no choice. You showed incredible restraint and mercy. He forced your hand. You took his life out of self defence and not out of blood lust."

I sighed. I wasn't up for debating this. "How do you know what happened?"

"I had the honour of meeting Taisto Kjestyll when I arrived here." He said.

"How is he?"

"Concerned for his student, relieved that you will live and angry at the situation which took place." He told me simply.

"It wasn't his fault." I said. "No one could have seen this coming." I sighed.

"Perhaps..." He said cryptically.

This was not how I had envisioned seeing him again, not how I had imagined welcoming him back. Instead of wearing something pretty, making cheerful banter and being happy, I was laid up in a hospital bed, I looked like hell and I felt tainted somehow, ashamed but not for any reason I could put my finger on. I had touched a darkness inside of me and what scared me more was I had liked it. Part of me wanted to tell Thrawn to go away and leave me alone. I sighed and closed my eyes.

"The doctor informed me that you might be able to leave at the end of the week." He said after a moment's pause. He was making small talk and slowly I realised that he was at a loss for words. He didn't have to be here, he could have just returned from space to his Coruscant apartment but instead he had come straight here and was sitting by my bed in an uncomfortable chair waiting for me to open my eyes. This realization made my heart ache. I looked up into his face and found him staring at me intently. For the first time since I had woken, I met his gaze.

"It's good to see you again. I'm glad you are back." I said and I meant it. "How did you know I was here?"

"Word gets around." He said vaguely. "You've managed to become the topic for gossip in certain Imperial circles."

I laughed a little and then regretted it. It hurt to laugh, it hurt to move. "I don't remember much of what happened after the fight ended. Riori came after me, even though I had backed down. He won and he still came after me." I shook my head.

"He didn't want to win, from what I heard, he just wanted vengeance."

"It's all a bit of a blur" I said.

"Not surprising with the injuries you sustained. You very nearly died. You have a bad habit of giving people who care for you something to worry about." He said.

"I'm sorry, that's not really my intention." I spoke softly. "I hadn't planned on any of this." I felt tears building up in my eyes.

"No, I don't suppose you did, Sjiu' Tekari." He smiled a little and reached over to caress my cheek with the backs of his fingers and then absently moved a stray lock of hair from my face. True to form my eyes started to leak, just a little. "You can be such a distraction." He told me quietly, with a subtle shake of his head. He stroked away the escaping tears with his fingertips.

"Is that good or bad?" I asked, falling into a familiar pattern of it. His hand was warm on my skin and his touch reminded me of goodness, of kindness and other things I had forgotten about. I reached up and brushed his fingers with my hand and he took it gently in his own.

"I'll let you know, when you are fit enough to handle the stress." He said with a slight smile.

I nodded and closed my eyes. I was still so tired. He sat back, withdrawing his hand from mine. I heard him settle back into the chair and draw a deep, thoughtful breath. If there was more conversation I didn't hear it because sleep got the better of me. When I woke up he was gone with no sign that he had ever been there at all. I wondered if I had dreamed the whole thing. I didn't feel any better, I just felt empty.

When they finally let me out of the small clinic that was tucked away in the confines of the palace to go back home I was almost jumping for joy. There was nothing I hated more than being cooped up in a med lab facility. The smell of bacta permeated everything, not to mention the cleaning solutions and the medical droids. Even though the small palace facility had been quiet and I had been given a little private room all to myself it was still not the greatest place in the galaxy to be. The doctor was reluctant to let me go but I whined just enough that he finally gave in on the condition that I stay at home and call immediately or better yet show up should anything not feel right. Despite my very loud protests I had been taken back to my flat in a repulser chair, and two of the med-tech aides had come along to carry all the flowers and holo cards that I had been sent during my recovery. I was grateful when everyone left the flat and me alone. It felt odd to be back but I was glad of peace and quiet.

The bacta had done its job healing the worst of the broken bones and internal injuries. The bruising had mostly faded to a sickly purple-yellow colour and I winced just looking at it. My ribs were still tender and my left arm and shoulder were immobilized by a contraption that I was convinced had been invented for torture. I was under doctor's orders to rest for at least two weeks and despite my desire to get back to a normal life I was grateful. I had damaged the bone and torn the ligaments as well, so it hurt, a lot around my left shoulder socket when I had popped the arm back in place.

"The socket bone and soft tissue was badly damaged. We had to surgically repair it. The bacta will have healed the soft tissue damage but the brace stays on for another week or so. I will be sending a med droid to you every second day for bacta shots and progress checkups." He said as he had given me one last exam before letting me go home.

I had nodded dutifully. The doctor had prescribed pain killers but I didn't take them unless I could not bear the pain any longer. They made me stupid, dopey and slow witted.

I was supposed to rest and stay quiet but that didn't mean that everyone else had to and on my third day home Shiv dropped by with a bunch of bad holo films and takeout food. He had been horrified to learn what had happened and was even more annoyed that he had not been allowed into the medical facility to see me. It had been a nice evening of the best food I had tasted since before the fight and probably the worst but funniest holos I had seen in a while. Laughing had hurt but it had been worth it.

The day after Shiv's visit I was surprised when Makki who dropped by later on. He stood sheepishly at my doorstep holding a bouquet of flowers and a holo-card everyone had signed. I invited him in and at first the conversation was awkward, stilted until he burst out with, "You fight like a crazy person, do you know that?"

That had made me laugh which had hurt my ribs which had made us both laugh more. He had stayed for tea and once the awkwardness had passed he proceeded to tell me all about the fight I had been a part of as though he were describing a holo vid to me. It was strange and surreal but also interesting.

"I guess all that training with Lord Vader paid off, huh?" He asked.

I shrugged with my good shoulder. "Maybe. I wish it had never happened though."

"Never killed anyone before, huh?"

I shook my head. "No, why have you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, shortly after my graduation from the Academy, I did a rotation in riot control. Out on one of the mid rim planets, things got out of hand and it got bad. Three of the guys in my platoon were killed and I don't know how many of the rioters were taken out but I know some of them I killed." He shrugged. "It's not the same thing as hand to hand, I guess, but it sure didn't feel great."

"Killing is killing." I told him. He had just nodded. We drank our tea in silence for a few moments before he brushed that mournful topic aside and began to chatter about other things.

I was surprised at the number of get well cards and flowers that were delivered. Even Cati sent a little note but the one person I wanted to hear from was nonexistent. I was becoming more and more convinced that Thrawn's visit in the hospital was nothing more than a fever dream I conjured myself. I missed him terribly.

One week after I had come back home, early in the evening, my doorbell rang. My heart took a little leap because I figured it was probably Thrawn and half expected to see a glass or something equally obscure sitting on the door mat, instead when I opened the door I stared into the eyes of my master.

"I hope that I am not disturbing you, ke'ashj Merlyn." He said. He held a large flat box in his arms.

"Of course not." I stepped aside and invited him into my flat, closing the door after him.

"May I offer you some tea, master Kjestyll?"

"That would be most welcome." He replied.

"Please sit down anywhere you can find space, I'm sorry it's a bit of a mess." I said as I went to boil water.

I had never known anyone who could sit as still as my master and when I brought in the tray of tea things it was almost as though he were made from stone. He watched as I poured his cup first and waited until I had poured mine, then accepted the cup I held out to him. The fragrance of mint filled the air and I waited until my guest had sipped his tea first before sipping my own.

"Tatooine mint tea." He said with a smile. "It has been a long time since I have tasted this. It brings back good memories."

"My father sends it to me regularly." I said. "I missed it too much."

Master Kjestyll nodded. "Things which remind us of home are precious." He said. "I expect you are curious at my reason for disturbing your rest."

"Your visit is not a disturbance but I am curious." I answered.

He smiled then drew a deep breath. "I have come for several reasons. The first is I wished to see with my own eyes that you are recovering."

"I am, thank you, although slower than I'd like." I admitted.

He nodded. "You have a strong will to live, but the body needs time." He said.

"Secondly, I came because I wished to apologise for what happened...."

I went to protest that it wasn't his fault but he held up his hand. "Please allow me to finish."

I apologised and waited.

"The Rite of Tet'zais-tjiumei is an ancient tradition of the Bunduki arts that was brought about as a way to settle conflict between two parties when there were no more options for resolutions left. It was created during a time of great unrest and violence and written in the Palawa Laws as a last resort method of conflict. The Rite of Tet' is hundreds of years old and for the longest time had passed into memory and history, unused and almost forgotten. It was rarely used because of the dire consequences and results. In my life time I had only seen it called once, until now."

I sighed and plucked at invisible lint on my skirt.

"It was strange that these students knew of the Rite of Tet'. It is never spoken of and never taught. For decades now it has been thought lost. Perhaps that was our failing as Masters; we did not think to remember that such a thing existed. We have better ways of solving disputes than death matches." He sipped his tea. "You should be made aware that after this incident, the council of masters has agreed to remove the Rite of Tet'zais-tjiumei from the Bunduki laws. Its use will be forbidden. It is unfortunate that it took this event to push us into an action we should have taken years ago, but sometimes we are slow to undo tradition and like to believe that sleeping dogs will stay asleep."

He set his empty cup down and nodded when I offered to pour a second cup. After a moment of silence he continued.

"I and the masters who were at the trials have questioned Kiol Griff about his actions and we learned that it was more or less his older brother's idea. Riori had planned the whole event, including bribing the person responsible for pairing the students together so that Kiol would be paired with you."

"Why?" I asked, interrupting.

Master Kjestyll drew a deep steady breath. "Kiol told us that his family blamed Lord Vader for the death of his father, you know this already. They were furious and devastated, as you can well imagine, at the loss of their father and they had petitioned the Emperor to punish Lord Vader for his part in the tragedy."

I opened my mouth to protest but Master Kjestyll cut me off. "I am aware of the situation that occurred and where the blame actually lies is of no interest to me." He said. "The end result is the same; the Griff sons wished for retribution and after going through all the appropriate channels decided to follow a more unusual route. They learned from the Emperor, who had paid the family a visit after the memorial service, of the Bunduki trials and that you would be attending. I am unsure exactly how talk on the subject came about but given that the boys have been studying the Bunduki arts since they were very young, I think we can assume it was simply part of the conversation. The Emperor likes to be kept well informed about everything and if he took time out of his busy schedule to pay his respects to the family he would have known all there was to know about them. I can only surmise that it was after they learned who you were and that you would also be at the trials that they went about formulating their plan."

My mind reeled. The Emperor. Why was it that whenever I seemed to end up on the wrong side of someone's stick, his name was almost always attached to it somehow?

"Kiol told us that Riori had researched you, asked questions to students who had contacts in the Palpatine School. He was convinced that you were a lesser opponent. In many respects he was right, you began your training very late, and your skills in certain areas is less refined than perhaps it could be but he was gravely mistaken to think that you would be easy to kill. They did not anticipate your skill with a combat staff, or that you would even choose such a weapon. They, of course did not know you are also a force user and they had no way of knowing that you are often tested and tried under the hand of Lord Vader."

He paused and sipped at the tea. "The boys hoped for revenge, they had hoped to hurt Lord Vader by killing you, instead they compounded their family's tragedy. Kiol has



been removed from the Corellian school for his part in this incident. He will no longer be taught the Bunduki arts by a recognized trainer or master. It is he who is to be shunned. The youngest of Griff's sons had no active part in this so he will be allowed to continue his training but that will be difficult I fear. He must live with the shame his brothers have brought down upon their family, and I do not think he will remain at the school long." He paused. "Kiol was at a loss to understand why you walked away from ending the fight the way it should have been ended, he did not understand why you did not kill his brother when you first had the chance."

I looked at my Master. "I did not want to kill him."

He nodded. "I watched your face. I watched you struggle. You fought not only Riori but also yourself. Your powers grow but so too does the conflict within you."

I shook my head. "Why did he not accept that he had won?" I asked after a while.

"Because by walking away, by letting him live it was not he who had won the fight but you. Riori had built you up to be an extension of Lord Vader in his mind and when you proved him wrong he could not bear it."

I felt tears well up in my eyes and I fought them. "Stupid waste of life." I spat angrily.

He agreed with a nod. "You fought well, child. I was proud of you and the choices you made, which brings me to the third reason I came here. Three days ago, the masters and I had a conference and they have informed me that they wish to award you this." He handed me the flat box to open. "I am in agreement with them." He said.

I took the box from his hands and unwrapped the elegant paper, opening it to find a green coloured kej-ji'doh. I lifted it out of the box in awe.

"You fought with much honour and with skill far beyond your given level. I know that you held back on applying the lessons Lord Vader has been sharing with you as well as using your unique gifts. You are a good student, ke'ashj Merlyn. You deserve this."

I looked at the kej-ji'doh in awe. This meant I was being stepped up to level seven. I had not heard of this sort of thing ever happening before and was a little overwhelmed by it. "Thank you." I said after a few moments.

"There is something you wish to ask?" He asked watching my face.

I nodded. "I wanted to know if it would be possible to perhaps train with the other students from time to time. I had no idea what I was missing by being trained alone."

He grinned. "It is already something that is being arranged. I have spoken of this with the Emperor and Lord Vader."

"Does the Emperor know what happened at the trials?" I asked.

"I do not believe that there is much the Emperor does not know, child. I suspect that Lord Vader informed him of what have taken place after his visit to you in the medical facility."

I looked at Master Kjestyll in surprise. "Lord Vader came to the hospital?"

He nodded. "He arrived back from space the morning after the trials. He contacted the school, I presume to see how well you performed. He was told by master Fessi where you were and informed about what had taken place. He was not pleased."

"He's never pleased." I said with a sigh.

"He ordered you to be moved from the med-lab where you had been taken for emergency treatment. It was his personal medical facility you were transferred to. You were given the best care possible; probably it saved your life. There was a lot of internal damage and you did not do yourself any favours when you so violently relocated your shoulder. I am told you damaged the socket bone badly. There was some serious reconstruction work required. We will be doing much in the way of rehabilitation work before we can resume your training. I am quite sure that shoulder hurts far more than you are willing to admit."

I looked at my arm in the tight sling to keep it and my shoulder joint from moving at all. He was right, it did. It hurt with a ferocity that was almost unbearable at times. The pain medication worked when I actually took but I was scared to take more. In the back of my head I was afraid that if Jyrki came back I would be too stupid to do anything about it.

"I am told you will have to rest at least another week, perhaps two and that your next check up is in two days time." He said. "So, we will meet the week after next for breathing and relaxation techniques to aid you with the pain management. Now that, for the time being, you are not so mobile I think it is the perfect opportunity for you to learn stillness. After that brace comes off, we can start to build up strength in your arm once more."

I made a face. The regular check up and prodding schedule that had been set up by the doctor who had over seen my recovery rankled on my nerves. It had meant that I would be spending a lot more time than I liked being examined and poked at by medical droids and the doctor. He had let me return to my own flat reluctantly on the insistence that I adhere to a strict regime of rest. If something were to happen to my recovery it would be his hide not mine he had told me crossly. I had not been the best of patients. It hadn't occurred to ask what he had meant but now I had a better idea. I could not imagine for a moment that being Lord Vader's personal medical team was a happy job, although the gruff doctor seemed quite capable of taking what ever got tossed his way. He was a very no nonsense sort of man. He reminded me a great deal of Doctor Thracer, the one who had saved my life on board the Vengeance. I had been glad to hear from Thrawn that the doctor had survived the ship's destruction but Thrawn had been very uninformative on what Doctor Thracer was doing now. I hadn't pushed the issue. I was just glad the man was alive.

I poured more tea and then sat back in the chair, running my hand through my hair which I had not bothered to put up. Using Zenji sticks required two hands. It was all I could do at the moment to keep it clean and brushed out. Even so it was long and tangled easily.

"How have you been coping with what happened?" Master Kjestyll asked breaking me out of my thoughts.

"I haven't." I told him. "I try not to think about it to be honest. I tell myself that it was unavoidable and not my fault, but somehow those lies don't really work."

"Yet those simple facts are the truth." He said gently.

I nodded. "I don't know what to think or how to begin to sort out how I feel. Perhaps if this had happened two years, I would be more of a mess, but now I am just sort of numb and sad that it happened at all. I am also glad to be alive, but I feel as though it was a trade off, a piece of my soul for the right to still breathe and I don't know what to think about that. I don't remember much about the actual killing and I think that's a blessing, surprisingly enough I don't even dream about it. I still have nightmares about being held captive by Jyrki, but not about killing Riori, it doesn't make sense."

Master Kjestyll watched me carefully. "That is not such a surprise," he said. "You knew Jyrki Andando; you did not know the sons of Admiral Griff. Theirs was not a betrayal of your heart, his was."

"Perhaps." I said. "Or perhaps part of me just doesn't care much anymore."

He looked at me for a long time then said. "I do not believe that is the case."

I sighed. "I thought I would feel more somehow, worse, but mostly I feel nothing."

He nodded. "Give it time."

I stifled a yawn. I was surprisingly tired.

Master Kjestyll smiled and got up. "You must rest and I have stayed too long already. I will be in touch. We will have much work to do." He said pointing at my aching

shoulder. Then, looking at the new Khaji-dho which I held on my lap, he said. "Wear that with pride. You earned it, it was not a gift."

I saw him to the door and nodded at his words. "Thank you for coming, master." I said.

He looked at me for a moment. "If you should need me, contact me." He said.

I nodded.

"And thank you for the tea, it was very good." He added and he bowed.

I returned his bow and watched as he left my flat. I cleared up the tea things and went back into the living room. I found myself staring out of the window at the Jedi temple in the distance. So many unanswered questions rattled about in my head and now there was that niggling sensation of something else. I sighed loudly as I thought about the Emperor visiting the Griff family and then suddenly the whole series of events at the Bunduki trials. While nothing supported any evidence that he was behind it, I knew in my heart that somehow he had set the wheels in motion. Perhaps planted the idea in Riori's mind, mentioned how things used to be done. It would have been nothing big or obvious, just enough of a hint here and the right word there. The question was why? Did he want me dead? Or did he want something else? Or was he, as Lord Vader had once said, just testing me and if so why?? Whatever the reason it gnawed at me and for the first time since the fight I felt that nasty little worm of anger wriggle in my gut.

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Two weeks after the visit from my Master I decided to hell with the doctor's orders. With the latest version of Cynabar's Droid Datalogue in my hands I made my way into the office despite the fact that I was supposed to be under strict '*stay at home*' and rest orders. I was bored of sitting at home doing everything except watch incredibly bad day time HoloNet dramas or look at the holocron cubes uncle Vahlek had taken from the Jedi Temple. It wasn't as if sitting at my desk was stressful or strenuous and there at least I could get something constructive done. I greeted my droid and made spiced 'caf and as I sat at my desk reading through the pile of internal memos and news-reports I was grateful that some things never changed.

I was in the middle of reading a report on the latest terrorist attacks by the Justice Action Network. They had sabotaged and destroyed the Calabar Queen, a yacht from the Imperial Corusca line when Lord Vader marched in.

"You are not supposed to be here." He said with his usual cheer.

"I was bored." I replied. "Why are you here, I thought you were not due back on planet for another three days or so."

He looked at me and then said. "I am saving you from your boredom." He said. "I have a list of things that need updating and sorting out. I was going to give it to your droid but you can deal with it instead." He handed me a data file.

I skimmed through it and nodded.

"I take it since you are here, you feel up to doing some work." Which was Vader speak for '*you seem to be recovering*'.

"Yes, I am feeling much better thank you, though my shoulder still hurts. Master Kjestyll thinks that with serious work it will heal well enough..."

He waved a hand at me. "Enough babble, a simple yes or no would suffice." He said. "I require the new probe droids as soon as possible, no later than the end of the week. The rest you may accomplish as you see fit. I will not be on planet long, so if you want to reach me do it via the 'net.'" He said.

"Yes, my lord." I said looking at the data pad again.

"I was supposed to meet with Xizor tomorrow afternoon, you will cancel that." He added.

"Yes, my lord."

"Oh and do not bother to send me the schedule for Winter Fete when it crosses your desk. I have no intention of being here for it. If you wish to attend that nonsense you may do so at your discretion."

"Yes, my lord, thank you."

"And there will be a public unveiling of the Flag ship *Executor* scheduled sometime soon, make certain that my calendar is cleared for this event and you will also be attending. Dress appropriately. The details will be sent to you." He paced as he spoke.

"Yes, my lord, as you wish."

"My personal physician has informed me of your recovery status; while I understand your need to work, you are of little use to me lying in my personal med lab."

"Understood. I won't over do it."

He stopped pacing long enough to stand, hands clasped behind his back, to stare out of the window. "Your master informed me that you fought very well at the trials as well as against the boy you killed."

"Killing him wasn't on my list of things to do, you know." I snapped then clapped a hand over my mouth.

"Perhaps not but it was an inevitable conclusion to the challenge issued, was it not?"

"Well, it was either him or me." I said sipping at my 'caf.

"Master Kjestyll tells me that you surpassed your level trial and were elevated two levels above your previous one."

I nodded.

"You did not disappoint me." He said. This was Vader speak for '*I am pleased with your performance so I think I will let you live another day.*' He whirled around and strode over to the desk. His cloak flared impressively behind him and I was sure he did this just for effect. "Follow me." He said making a 'come here' motion with his hand and before I could even think to question him he was on his way out of the office.

I did as he had commanded and followed him. I had to trot to keep up. He made his way down the hallway, into the older part of the Palace, past where my flat was, turned left and continued down one of the smaller hallways until he reached a set of double doors. He opened the room up and much to my surprise he let me walk in first. I gasped out loud when I saw what was in there.

"You have proven your abilities; it was about time you had a proper place to train." He said.

I looked around the room. It was amazing. This had been an unused meeting room at one time; I had explored it almost two years ago. Now it had been transformed into a beautiful training room, complete with a sprung floor, a barre and full length mirrors along the wall kitty corner from the stunning, tall windows that over looked the north face of the city. Against the other wall was a weapons stand with two of the most beautiful combat staves I had ever seen. I had no idea what to say. For once he had rendered me speechless.

"It has been suggested that you should start training with others of your class, to do so in the old room you usually work in would be a disgrace and reflect badly on me. You will use this room from now on." He said.

I just looked at him and nodded. Had he been anyone else I probably would have hugged them in delight but hugging Lord Vader was not something I ever wanted to even think about attempting. So instead I mentally sent him a telepathic *thank you*. He got the message.

"Perhaps if I have time, when you are fit I shall train with you myself and see just how far along you have come." He told me. "Now, you have work to do, do you not?"

"Yes, my lord." I grinned. My grin broadened into a huge smile when he handed me the key to the room. He just shook his head and stalked out of the room leaving me to lock the door and head back to my office.

The next hour or so was spent cancelling Lord Vader's meeting with Prince Xizor, the prince's office wasn't impressed and the woman I spoke with was just plain rude. That didn't bother me much, when one works with Lord Vader rude becomes a way of life.

The droid manufacturer was a bit testy. It wasn't the number of probe droids being ordered that put him in a tizzy but rather the when they had to be delivered. He was quick to shut up when I reminded him about the money he stood to lose should Lord Vader take his business someplace else...I didn't have to mention that he might also forfeit his life.

I was about half way through Lord Vader's list and on my third cup of spiced 'caf when the door to my office opened and Thrawn walked in. My heart caught in my chest and I felt a jolt of electricity shoot through me, as though I had suddenly walked between two power couplings. Apart from his brief visit to my bed-side in the med lab, I had not seen him in well over a year. He had not changed. He was still tall and slender and moved with a languid, jax like grace. It had been a while since his hair had been cut severely short and I liked the length it was now, it made his face less hard looking. He smiled as the door closed behind him.

"I thought you were under strict orders to rest?" He said sitting down in the chair nearest the desk.

"I am." I said, suddenly realising why he had not come to visit me before now. I tried to contain my delight at seeing him and failed miserably.

He glanced around. "This is your office, not your flat." He said.

"I see your time in the unknown regions has not lessened your powers of observation any."

"And your time in the bacta tank has not dulled your sharp tongue." He crossed one leg over the other and folded his hands on his lap. His expression was that of a man thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Well, while bacta is a wonder it unfortunately cannot fix all ills." I told him, sipping my 'caf.

"So, my dear, why are you not resting at home?" he asked.

"Because I was bored out of my mind and it's not as if there is a big difference in sitting at home or sitting here." I told him. "Except that here I get to talk to people and barked at by Lord Vader. So far it's been a good day; he's kept his barking to a minimum." I said.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked.

I shook my head and glanced at the chrono to see what time it was. "Actually, I haven't even thought about it." It was later than I had thought and I realised that I was hungry.

"In accordance with your doctor's orders, I hereby declare you are now done for the day and you will now accompany me to a late lunch or an early dinner." He said standing up.

"Well, it needs to be something I can eat with one hand; I am a bit tied up at the moment." I motioned my head at the sling holding my arm firmly against my chest, which was hidden by my top.

"I think something suitable can be arranged." He said, waiting for me to shut the computers down and sort out my desk.

"I should go home and change if we are going out." I said. I was wearing a pair of comfortable wide legged trousers and a roomy, square cut top that went over the trussed up arm easily. I could not move that arm to get in and out of sleeves very well.

"You look fine. We won't be going anywhere fancy. A little trust Miss Gabriel." He smiled.

With nothing else keeping me at my desk I got up and joined him. With a hand warm on my back, he escorted me out of the office, out of the palace to his waiting vehicle. We didn't speak as he drove away from the Palace and as we neared our destination I smiled.

"We're eating at your place?" I asked as the speeder came to a stop at the personal landing pad.

He smiled as he got out and was at my side before I could even open the door. I slipped my hand in his and he helped me out of the vehicle. "I want to get out of my uniform and then we can discuss where and what to eat."

"Ah." I nodded as we walked into his flat. It had been ages since I was last here. It was a stunning apartment, high up in the Coruscant skyline with lots of space and light. It was tastefully decorated with elegant furniture and beautiful works of art. I smiled as I saw the ma'arilite sculpture that I loved so much.

"I'll just be a moment, make yourself comfortable." He said as he vanished into another room.

I wandered around, looking at the artwork and the stone sculpture. I moved around it, captivated by the shifting lights that danced within the stone. His flat smelled of a wonderful mixture of spices, some exotic soap and something indefinable. I was studying his book collection when he reappeared. Instead of the olive Imperial uniform he had been wearing he was dressed in casual black dress slacks and a long sleeved, form fitting crew necked shirt. I knew we were not going out to lunch because his feet were bare. I gave him a smile, he looked good in black.

"Find anything interesting?" he asked, nodding at the book shelf.

I shook my head. "Was just skimming." I said.

He made my stomach flutter. I was trying not to show the nerves that suddenly rippled through me and I felt almost as though I could not breathe. I just stood there, looking at him. He motioned for me to come to where he was standing.

"How is the arm?" He asked as I stood in front of him, my heart pounding, my mouth dry.

"Healing, slowly." I mumbled. I didn't want to talk about it. Two fingertips lifted my face upward to look at him.

"I did not expect to find you in a med-lab when I returned." He told me. There was a catch in his voice.

"Well, it wasn't really my plan to be there." I said.

"No I don't suppose it was." He said quietly and reached over to brush a lock of hair from my face. I had not bothered to tie my hair up; I needed two hands for that.

I wondered if the world had stopped, after all this time apart, he could still make my hands tremble, my heart race. I leaned into his touch with a sigh and perhaps that was the signal he had been waiting for because he pulled me to him and held me as tightly as he dared without hurting me. He buried his face in my hair and inhaled. I felt rather than knew what was on his mind but he didn't want to say these thoughts out loud and I understood this because I didn't either. There were no words adequate enough to describe the sensation of just being held. All the letters in the universe could not come close to the reality of it.

I just closed my eyes and breathed him in deeply. *Home*, his scent, his arms, and his warmth it all reminded me of home. He let go of me just enough so that I could look up into his eyes, so that he could cradle my face in his hands. He looked tired, just a little, and there was a weariness about his eyes that I didn't remember from the last time we had been together. My gaze never wavered when I met his glowing, red stare. If passion were a

stillness then we had enough for the whole galaxy as we stood there looking at one another without words. It was as if the entire galaxy was holding its breath, waiting. I hated waiting.

"I think this is the part where you kiss me now." I prompted for lack of anything else to say.

He did. Carefully, gently, completely as though in the time we had been apart he had forgotten what I tasted like, what I felt like. *Home*, I thought as I lost myself to his kiss. I slipped my arm around his waist and held on to him as tightly as I could. Words that had never been spoken rattled through my brain wanting to escape, wanting to be heard. I bit them back and answered his passion with my own. This wordless conversation was eloquent and fulfilling. I had missed him, missed this. Warm and sweet, he tasted of everything good.

Before desire took over completely, he drew back from me. I dropped my head down to rest it against his chest, concentrating on catching my breath. He stroked the tangles from my hair and didn't fight when I pulled away from his warmth. There was no doubt about the fact that we complicated each other's lives and while I could not speak for him I knew that in some indefinable way he also completed mine. I just wasn't sure how.

"Welcome back to Coruscant." I said looking up at him.

He smiled as he caressed my face. "If that is the sort of welcome I am going to receive when I go away I shall do so more often."

"Don't you dare!" I said crossly. "My hand is still recovering from having to write all those letters!"

He laughed and pulled me to him again, forgetting my arm in the sling so that I yelped when it bumped hard against his chest. He apologised and stepped back. "How long before you are free of the brace?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Sometime this week was what the med droid said at my last check up."

"And pain?"

"It's not so bad. Master Kjestyll has been helping a lot with pain management exercises. Now it's mostly just a dull ache but three weeks ago I wouldn't have let you near me."

He nodded not saying what he really wanted to say in favour of keeping the mood light. "It does make pre-emptive strikes against teasing a little difficult. The plan when I returned to the Core was to seduce you, not hurt you."

It was my turn to laugh. "Well, seduction sounds like fun but lunch is a necessity. I'm hungry, what were you planning on making?"

"I thought we'd order in, I know a great Zabracki place that delivers. Very spicy." He said.

"That sounds wonderful, I love spicy food. Traditional Tatooine cuisine is very hot."

He picked up a menu and handed it to me as I sat on the couch. I had never eaten Zabracki food before so after reading through the list of offered dishes a few times I gave up and handed it back to him. "You pick." I said. "What about something to drink?"

"I thought I would surprise you." He said.

"And then?"

"That's a surprise as well." He said, "But you are under doctor's orders to rest so it's nothing strenuous." He took the menu from my hand and then placed the food order. Once that was done he vanished into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of a deep burgundy wine.

I took the glass he offered. He touched his to mine and I whispered the Cheunh toast. I sipped it and marvelled at its rich, deep flavour.

"Chall berry wine from Naboo." He said. "I keep a good supply in the wine cellar; this was a very good year."

"You have a wine cellar?" I asked looking at him over the rim of the huge bowl glass.

He smiled. "Doesn't every well bred alien?"

I shrugged with one shoulder. "I don't know. I am not on such close personal terms with too many well bred aliens." I gave him a look.

"Careful, Miss Gabriel the evening is still young." He warned.

"You don't scare me!" I told him.

"Oh?"

"Okay, maybe just a little." I said. "But in a good sort of way not a Jyrki-Vader sort of way."

He had to turn away from me because he'd almost choked on the sip of wine he was taking. I guess it would have been undignified to see him splutter wine everywhere. Drinking and laughing at the same time didn't really work.

The food, when it arrived, was delicious and spicy. We ate slowly, catching each other up on the news and the details that somehow had not found their way into our letters. Thrawn spoke in his native language and I attempted with some funny results.

Writing in Cheunh was one thing, but speaking it aloud was quite another. More than once he ended up laughing at something funny I had not meant to say, but practice with a native speaker was priceless and there wasn't an abundance of Chiss around so I didn't let my embarrassment at making mistakes stop me. As was tradition, we kept the conversation at the dining table light but when we moved back into the living room, wine glasses in hand, we began to talk of more pressing, serious issues.

He asked about the Bunduki fight and I told him everything I remembered, I also gave him Makki's version and then I told him what master Kjestyll had told me. He was quiet and thoughtful as I spoke about my fears, my suspicions about the Emperor's interference. He reached over and stroked my cheek when I recalled, haltingly about the actual moment when I killed Riori. I told him how I felt about it all, because I knew he would ask and when I was finished he just nodded. I didn't feel much like getting into a huge discussion about it, there wasn't much to discuss so I asked him about his time in the Unknown Regions, changing the topic. He didn't mind.

He refilled the glasses and took a thoughtful sip. "We are setting up small bases out there. Enlisting other worlds not wholly associated with the Galactic Empire to be a part of it. It is easier to convince these worlds, these people's to be a part of this Empire without actually enforcing all of the bureaucratic nonsense or that ridiculous Tarkin Doctrine because it is all so far away from the Core. We provide the security and stability of the Imperial world without the restrictions that will eventually bring about this Empire's downfall." He said candidly. "Of course, I tell you this in confidence." He added.

"I understand." I told him. "And what would I say to anyone else anyway? The gossip around the court is that you get sent away in disgrace because you over step your place with the Emperor one too many times." I said. "It's not my place to correct these idiots."

He nodded. "That is the idea. The less people actually know about what I am doing, the better. The xenophobia of this Empire is a major handicap to its growth, so the fact that we have contact and work with many alien species would not be welcome. Plus the megalomania and interference of the Emperor himself is something that we avoid due to the distance. As long as the reports are positive and the numbers add up, Palpatine doesn't much care what goes on so far away provided it is not a threat to his seat of power. The original idea stemmed from possible enemies that could come from beyond the boundaries of this galaxy, Far Outsiders, my people call them but this project has grown into something else, something larger more encompassing. I must admit I am quite pleased with its progress so far."

"How long are you staying here, then? In the Core, I mean?" I asked.



He shrugged slightly. "Difficult to say. I have business here at the moment and much to discuss and plan with the Emperor. While I have managed to accomplish a great deal in the time so far, there is still much more to be done. I have need of certain facilities and technologies which I have yet to convince the Emperor of, as well as the need for more manpower and ships. All these things cost money and must be budgeted for in such a way that the rest of the High Command does not suspect what is actually going on. If the council of Grand Admirals were to find out the real truth behind my mission in the Unknown Regions it would spell disaster for the project. Their jealousies and petty grabs for power would come into play and they would see my work as an attempt to thwart the current regime or that I was trying to create my own empire and eventually overthrow this one. A ridiculous notion, I no more want to rule an Empire than I wish to go nude sunbathing in the Dune Sea on your home world."

I giggled at his last sentence; the image was just too funny. He just smiled and topped up the wine glasses with the last of the bottle.

"What is it like working out there, so far away from the Core?" I asked.

He drew a deep breath. "Worlds are further apart, there is less trade and commerce and beings generally tend to keep themselves to themselves with a few exceptions. The Chiss Ascendancy is out there but, as I have explained, we are a cautious people so our space expansion is long term and progresses slowly. It is not the Chiss way to go in and conquer any one. The Csillian Government is unhappy with my work in the Unknown Regions, they view my and the Imperial presence there with great distrust. I have long since given up trying to explain my methods to them. Eventually, it is my hope they will come around to seeing my view on these things." He sipped his wine thoughtfully. "You'd like it, I think, out there. There are some gorgeous space anomalies and some of the planets are astoundingly beautiful, very unlike anything I have seen here. We have been mapping out the region as we go; this is what takes the most time actually. That and getting to know each new species we come into contact with. I think this is the part that has the majority of the command staff under me confused. While they don't come out and ask me directly they do question why we spend so much time collecting language and cultural data on each of the new planets we explore."

"Well, Imperials are not exactly taught to appreciate culture, alien species or art, are they?"

"No, it is a major flaw in Imperial thinking and a huge opportunity missed, I think." He said. "Speaking of art," he said getting up. "I have something for you."

I watched as he vanished down the hall into another room. He came back holding a box carefully in both hands. I set my wine glass on the table and took the box when he offered it.

"I found this on a small world called Nejrion IV. Its inhabitants are quite peaceful and very intelligent; a highly advanced civilization of beings that have developed some of the most amazing technology I have seen in a long time, primarily in the areas of communications and passive defence systems. They don't feel the need to fight because their defensive capabilities are quite astonishing. Unfortunately their technology and Imperial technology would be utterly impossible to combine. Still, they agreed to cooperate with us and were very open about sharing their linguistic and cultural data. I saw this piece in one of the artisan workshops they allowed me to tour and I knew it had to be yours."

I opened the box slowly and took out the gift, wrapped in a fine tissue paper. Carefully I unwrapped and was rendered speechless by what sat in my hands. It was sculpture about the same size as a small melon. It looked as though it had been carved from a stone that greatly resembled the dark coloured ma'arilite I loved so much. The sculpture itself was abstract; carved into the shape of a wave or maybe a sand dune,

something curved and sinuous. It was hard to say exactly what it was representing but the true amazement came from touching it. As my fingertips brushed the glass smooth surface so ripples of vibrant, dancing colour was left in their wake. It was amazing, my touch altered the colour of the sculpture, making it move, come alive.

"The stone is called Ndajat'je, and the light effects are a molecular change triggered by touch. For each species the effect is very different." He said and brushed the stone with his own fingers. I smiled, in the wake of his touch the stone had rippled and the colours were oranges and red-golds not pale greens and blues tinged with pale yellow as they had been for me.

"Why does it do that? How does it work?" I asked.

"I do not know and the Nejri would not tell me. They enjoy their mysteries and said that keeping the magic of this art a secret maintained the beauty and the value. In this particular case I didn't see a reason to press or argue."

"Mysteries are good for the soul." I smiled, stroking the stone, delighting in the dance of colour and light that this created.

"Does it please you?" He asked.

I nodded. "Very much. It's beautiful and I don't know what to say. You always give me the most astonishing things. Thank you."

I set it carefully on the table and reached over to stroke his face. Wrapping my hand around the back of his neck, I pulled him to me and gave him a kiss to thank him. The wine made me bold and a sudden flare of lust made me needy. The kiss turned hungry as passion overrode any common sense I might have had.

It was awkward to kiss sitting side by side and the shoulder brace made it even more difficult. Before he had a chance to do anything I moved first and straddled his lap, much more comfortable and much easier to kiss him. He tasted of Chall wine and my lips still tingled from the spiced Zabradi food. I sensed his hesitation and drew back to look at his face, to try and read what he was thinking without using the force. His hands rested on my hips and for a moment there was perfect stillness.

"I am quite certain this is not what your doctor had in mind when he prescribed rest." He said gently.

"I don't need rest." I said bluntly, almost crossly. "I need you." I was tired of waiting, tired of the games, tired of the long separations. I wrapped my hand around his neck and pulled him to me and kissed him. I didn't want to hear any more about doctors or rest I just wanted to be with him. He ran his hands up under my shirt; they were warm against the skin of my back. Only when he touched the straps of the shoulder brace I was forced to wear did he stop, hesitate, sigh and withdraw.

"A'myshk'a..." He began but I shut him up with my fingertip on his lips.

"No." I said. "I waited for you to come back. I waited for well over a year, with your teasing letters and hints of things to come. There is no one else in my life like you, like this and you didn't bring me here this afternoon just to chat. I feel your desire, it is as powerful as a sandstorm, so don't tell me to sit back down like some good little girl, because I won't do it!"

"Then what do you want?" He asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know... exactly, I just know it involves you."

He smiled. "For the sake of not rushing into everything all at once would you be happy if we just continued our ... conversation?"

I made a noise of disgust and frustration. "Why do you keep me at bay? Do I not interest you?"

He sighed and made a face. "My dear, if I *were* disinterested you would not be in my home, sitting on my lap having this discussion. Has it never occurred to you that perhaps I wish for our first time in bed together to be if not perfect at least as close to as possible?"

That I want to see you whole and unhurt when I undress you and see you naked? That I want to feel only your skin beneath my fingers, my body and not this uncomfortable looking thing they have strapped to you to keep your shoulder and arm from falling apart? That I do not want hurt you or add to your current pain?" He looked at me. "There is so much more to this than just fulfilling some physical need. It is a special thing, even for a man, contrary to what you may think, and especially so for a Chiss. I want it to be something you and I remember and smile about not look back and regret because wine addled our senses and too much time apart made us impatient. Being bedded for the first time should not be a drunken, hurried affair. "

I didn't know how to answer that. The combination of drink and desire had made me selfish in my need. It had never occurred to me that he would be interested in more than simply coupling. My experiences in the field of men had ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous but nothing had prepared me for one who actually cared more about me rather than his own pleasure or weird ideals and self interest.

I just leaned into him, resting my head against his shoulder and sighed. He wrapped his arms around me and held on snugly. I couldn't help but think back to the first time we had met, to the first time when I realised he was trouble. Well, he was still trouble but I had gone past caring what sort of trouble he was. I lifted my head up to look in his face, usually I had to look up because he was a lot taller than me but sitting in this manner made me equal in height and I looked directly into his eyes. My hand traced the contours of his face and he watched me carefully.

"Okay." I said after a while. "So converse with me then, let's see what new tactical linguistic tricks you have learned in the Unknown Regions." And with my permission he proceeded to demonstrate just how artful a conversation without words could be.

I blame it on the wine that once we had stopped exploring every new possible way to converse with a kiss and had returned to side by side sitting on the couch, cuddled and close, talking of idle things, I fell asleep. When I woke up I was fuzzy headed and clueless about where I was. There was a pillow under my head and a soft blanket had been draped over me. I felt as though some wamprats had died in my mouth and kicked sand in my eyes in the process of their death throes. As a rule I never napped in the afternoon because when I did it always disorientated me. I got up slowly and noticed it was dark out. There was one lamp on in the living room, in the corner and soft music playing from somewhere down the hall. With the blanket wrapped around my shoulders I went into the kitchen and downed two glasses of water. Then I went in search of Thrawn.

There was light and music both coming from the room at the far end of the hallway, the door was slightly ajar but I knocked anyway. I wasn't so comfortable in his home yet, that I felt I could just walk in everywhere.

"Come in, A'myshk'a."

I pushed at the door and walked in part way. I looked about the large room in awe. It was a study that doubled as a library. The walls were lined with books and the large ornate desk at the far end of the room was obviously an antique. He was sitting in a well worn, comfortable looking high backed chair, in his hand was a book; his finger marked the page he had been reading. This was his favourite room.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

"How do you feel?"

"Like a herd of creatures died in my mouth." I told him. "What time is it?"

"Just after two in the morning." He answered, placing a marker in his book and getting up. "Come with me."

I followed him back down the hall to the 'fresher and watched as he dug out various things from a drawer in the cupboard under the sink.

"Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap and whatever else you might need." He said, he brushed past me and vanished then returned with a towel and a facecloth. "Would you like a cup of tea?" he asked as I just stared numbly at him.

I nodded and waited until he had left before I gratefully unwrapped the new toothbrush and cleaned my teeth. I felt much better after washing my face with warm water, the scent of the soap reminded me of him. There wasn't much I could do about the rat's nest of my hair so I just left it. I would go to Bam's hair salon as soon as I could and get him to sort out the mess. By the time I was feeling like a human again and had wandered back to the kitchen, Thrawn had made white chaeya leaf tea.

"I should go home." I told him, sipping the hot drink.

"If you want to I will take you, or you could stay here till morning."

There was a moment's pause as his sentence sunk in then I said carefully, "I hate to break this to you but your couch is not *that* comfortable, you know."

He arched an eyebrow. "Well, I do have a perfectly good bed I am willing to share."

It was my turn to look at him. "I thought you wanted to wait before you ...we... well you know?"

He smiled. "I do, but it wouldn't be the first time you have just shared my bed." He said.

I considered his words and my options then said. "I need something to sleep in then, I hate sleeping in my clothes."

He nodded. "I think something can be arranged."

I sipped my tea thoughtfully then asked. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want me to stay?" I asked.

"Partly because if you are here, I know you are safe and not getting in to any mischief." He was partially kidding but there was a hint of truth behind his grin.

"You can't protect me from the galaxy." I told him flatly.

He looked at me carefully, "No, I dare say I cannot." He said.

I raised both eyebrows in question.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "It was never my plan to become attached to anyone during my time here. I joined the Empire with one thing in mind, how best to serve and protect my people, yet here you are, in my life." He sipped at his tea and then continued. "When I received the news of what had happened at your Bunduki trials what surprised me the most was how I suddenly felt. Fear is not an emotion I tend to experience often, so it took me by surprise. I cannot tell you when you became important to me but you are. I want you to stay because I missed you and as you put it, over a year apart is too long."

"Why did you not say that in the first place?"

He just grinned and left the kitchen. When he came back he handed me a pair of neatly folded, brand new pyjamas. The material was soft and fine, the colour of pale moonlight. I set my cup down and took the offered night clothes. I looked at them in my hand and felt the world shift ever so slightly. Staying the whole night, sharing his bed, sharing his world was something new. This wasn't like before when we were either on some crazy assed mission to an unknown planet or he was trying to help me recover from Jyrki inflicted trauma. He was giving me a place in his private life and I knew once I stepped onto this path there was no going back.

"I will take you home if that is what you want." He said again, as if reading my thoughts, giving me the choice.

I looked at his face for a moment. "You know, I wondered if you had missed me at all while you were gone. I mean, I know you wrote and sent gifts and stuff but I wondered about it all the same. Most of the time we seem to be dealing with one crisis or another, we

don't often have quiet times when nothing bad is happening or we are not on the job or when I am not doing something really stupid. I thought that maybe I had imagined there was anything serious between us but I guess this answers those questions, doesn't it." I wasn't sure if I should be terrified or elated. It was a very odd sensation. I felt as though I were holding my breath.

His expression softened. "It is what it is A'myshk'a, not more, not less. I would be lying if I said you were not on my mind when things were quiet and I had time to reflect but a man in my position can afford little in the way of emotional attachments. They get in the way and they complicate things...you..."

"I know. I complicate things." I finished for him.

"Well, I enjoy some complications. They make life interesting, challenging, and worthwhile."

"Glad I can help in that area then. If I challenge the Emperor's favoured tactical genius then I must be doing something right" I said and flounced off to the bathroom to change before he could find a suitable retort.

The night clothes were miles too big for me, so I suppose typical for a girl I stuck with just wearing the top which came down to mid thigh. The material was a brushed silk and very soft. He just laughed when I came back into the kitchen and handed the pyjama pants back.

"Well, I can see I have finally found a use for the tops I never wear." He smiled.

"You're too tall." I said which earned me his trademark arched eyebrow. "I would just trip and break my neck or something if I wore those." I flapped the arm in the sleeve that was way too long at him. He caught it and rolled the sleeve up just past my wrist. He poured more tea in my cup then left the kitchen.

I drank the warmth down and welcomed the quiet sense of comfort I felt in this place. As if it were truly safe and nothing could harm me here at all. I had not realised that even in the new flat in the Palace I was not completely at ease. Somewhere deep in my subconscious I was still very afraid. That realization made me sad.

When Thrawn came back he had changed, ready for bed. I could smell toothpaste and the soap he used lingering in the air. I set the half finished cup of tea back on the counter and let him take me by the hand to his bedroom which was large and airy and had its own 'fresher attached to it. The room was sparsely furnished. The bed was made from the same antique wood that his desk in the library had been made from and I wondered if they had been part of an estate collection. The bed clothes were plain white and the rest of the furniture was elegant but simple in lines and design. On the walls were three paintings. Two I didn't know but could see why he had picked them for this room. The third, the one directly across from the bed made me stop dead.

"When you said it was in private collection, you didn't say it was in *your* private collection." I whispered pulling my hand out of his to stand close to the Isonne Medaglia painting of Tatooine. The view she had painted was one I knew well and I felt a sudden pang of homesickness.

"Then I would have not seen you make that face." He told me.

"It really is stunning." I said softly, more to myself. I felt his fingers touch my arm and turned to see him staring at me. The expression on his face made my heart thump painfully in my chest. "If you want me to behave, stop giving me that look." I told him.

"Well then come to bed, I'll turn out the lights and you won't see me look at you."

I did as he suggested and crawled under the covers. I curled up on my right side, the only way I could sleep comfortably with the shoulder brace and waited for him to turn off the light. The room went dark and I heard him, felt him get into bed. I wondered how I would fall asleep because suddenly I was all nerves and jitter.

He slid an arm around my waist and curled his body protectively around mine. His warmth, his presence was surprisingly soothing. He began to talk to me in Cheunh, telling me how he had been able to track down and buy the Medeglia painting. I was tired and his voice was a lullaby. To my surprise I drifted into sleep easily.

In the quiet of the early dawn I woke up. The light from the rising sun was still pale, its quiet colours meandering their way into the night sky, mauves and pallid pinks. At sometime during the night Thrawn had rolled away from me, sleeping on his back, his face turned towards the window. I moved carefully so as not to wake him and not jar my aching shoulder.

I watched him for a few moments, marvelling at how different a person's face looked when they were asleep, how peaceful and free from the concerns of daily life. He was so beautiful to me and I wondered how anyone could hate him simply because he looked different, just because he was not human. I resisted the urge to reach out and stroke his face. It was early and I didn't want to wake him. Just watching him made my heart skip a beat, I wondered if that was normal.

I had never considered myself a particularly romantic person and after the resounding blow to my ego from Jyrki when I had declared how I had felt to him romance, such as it was, was a thing I shied away from. It was a word in the books that Bel secretly read and then left lying around for me to secretly read after her. I despised the women in these ridiculous stories. I hated the men too but that didn't stop me from pouring through the books anyway, just to see what would happen.

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I had asked Bel once why she read these books and her reply had been surprisingly shy. "Because in real life there is no such thing as romance." She had told me. "There are no larger than life heroes and no perfect men. These books are trashy, I know that, but I like them anyway because they aren't real. Love is a horrible thing, Merly, it just hurts you." She had said and I couldn't disagree with her because from my perspective at that time, she had been right. But, looking back I wondered, what had I known about that particular subject? Not very much. Unlike Bel I did not think romance was terrible but it was a bit of a mystery and I kind of liked mysteries....

I puzzled over the man that lay asleep next to me. He was considerably older than I was, alien and brilliant. He had told me on more than one occasion that he had not given much thought to having someone, anyone close to him in his life. His job came first, yet every now and then he offered me an opening, a small place in his world and I didn't understand why. I often thought about this but I never dared to ask him about it. My own insecurities had nothing to do with him and he knew his own mind better than anyone. If he decided I was a part of his life then who was I to question this?

I got out of bed slowly, and stole the robe he had slung over the back of the chair I suspected was there solely for that purpose and went to the kitchen. I made a pot of tea and then drank a cup leaning against the counter, watching the sun rise. This moment in time, this perfect stillness was something I had learned to treasure. That moment of the day before the air, the people, the world wakes up and everything comes alive.

Thinking about Bel and her crazy romance stories made me smile. I had been young enough the very first time I had found one of her holo books lying around that most of the innuendos had escaped me entirely. My crush on Jyrki had still been in its early stage and I was pretty clueless about the concept of sex and lust and its vocabulary. So reading this book had prompted many questions, not the least of which was about the strange descriptions of male and female anatomy.

I had asked Bel about one particular line describing what I thought was a description of the male reproductive organ and she had turned beet red, almost impossible for a Rodian and had spluttered some explanation about how I might want to go to the

library and look stuff up. It was very confusing. So I went and asked Jyrki next who had simply regarded me with his brittle blue eyes and then asked; "Yer smarter than that, Mouse, read something real not that rubbish." He had said and with that he had turned his back on me and gone back to work. That a he had also blushed had totally escaped my notice.

On that particular day there had been no one else about so I had gone to my father, shown him the troublesome passage in the book and asked him to explain it. Much to my surprise he had, clearly in plain language that made sense to me without visible embarrassment or hesitation.

We had studied biology in school and I had learned the very basic ins and outs of human anatomy and a little about being female. It had been Bedi who had helped me when I had first started my period and after that, I guess, everyone just assumed that someone else had taken the time to explain the ins and outs of human reproduction and all its complications or they had all hoped to avoid it.

So for over an hour my father and I had talked, or rather he had talked and I had listened. At the very end of his detailed explanation of sex and how it all worked I was still perplexed about a few things.

"What's still not clear, pet?" he'd asked.

"Why does everyone get so weird about this subject if it's so natural?" I had asked.

My father had just smiled. "It embarrasses people. It's such a private thing and what makes it so difficult for people to talk about is not the actually act itself but all the emotions and the feelings that go along with it." He had sipped his drink and continued before I could ask even more questions. "Merly, sex is not just about making babies and continuing the species, it's something that allows two adults to share their love, show how much they feel for one another in the most vulnerable, intimate way possible. It's the emotions that mess people up and makes us different from, say banthas. It's almost impossible to explain, you will just have to learn from doing and I hope that doesn't happen until you are very, very grown up."

"Why?"

He had shaken his head at my never ending curiosity. "Because I am your father for one thing and if I have anything to do with it, men won't be coming close to you until you're a hundred and fifty and I'm dead, it's a dad thing so don't ask for more explanations than that." He had said with a smile. "Also because it's a special time and you should share it with someone you truly love who loves you. Your first time is precious; don't throw that away on just anyone."

I had nodded but I had not really understood. After a moment's silence I'd asked a question that had made my father choke on his tea.

"So papa, why do they call it *a flaming hot rod of desire* and not a penis?"

Once he had stopped coughing up tea he had just shaken his head. "You'll have to ask the writers of those stupid books that question, pet. I have no idea. I can tell you this though; if I was a woman and read that I'd be more temped to run as far away as possible. This description makes men sound like diseased weapons rather than something good." And that had been the end of my first serious lesson on human sexuality. At least I had a better idea of what happened in general, what went where when and what could occur afterwards. The discussion on the emotional baggage that accompanied sex, lust and love came a lot later, after I was in the throes of a broken heart and impossible to live with and then it had been Bel who had come to the rescue.

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Now, in the quiet of the kitchen this conversation came back to me. For well over two years Thrawn had courted me, ignited a passion that was breath-takingly intense and shown a compassion for my well being that often left me baffled. I wondered what my

father would make of my relationship with this man, for that matter I wondered what to make of it all. I was so deep in thought that I didn't hear him get up and come into the kitchen to join me.

"Credit for them?" He said as he poured himself a cup of tea.

"Man parts." I answered without really thinking about what I was saying.

He just stared at me for a moment then decided it was too early to ask for an explanation, planted a kiss on my head, took his tea and went to sit out on the balcony. I followed him and we sat in silence watching as the sun lit up the city with a soft red- gold light. Only when I was cold enough did I go back inside and decide it was time to get dressed. I would wash up in my own flat, I wasn't so comfortable here yet that I felt I could just hop into the bath. I cleaned my teeth and washed my face, by the time I was done Thrawn had showered and dressed.

"Are you really busy this morning?" I asked as we drove back to the Imperial Palace.

"I could spare a couple minutes, if that is what you are asking." He replied.

"I wanted to show you the book Bel bought for me; I think it might be something you'd like to borrow, Tiveria Sekanis's poems are really wonderful."

He smiled. "For that I can make time."

For the remainder of the trip through rush hour traffic I watched out of the speeder's window and marvelled at how busy this planet was. We landed at the bay closest to where I lived and walked in silence to my flat. This part of the palace was, thankfully, quiet at this time of day so it was unlikely that anyone would see us together or ask awkward questions. While, for the most part, pairings between Imperial Officers and palace employees was ignored, it was still not officially allowed. The last thing I wanted was another Entertainment Holo-Net scandal or to get either myself or Thrawn into serious trouble, I had enough of that in my life as it was.

Coming back to the palace made me melancholy. I had not wanted the last twenty four hours to end. There had been a magical quality to the time I had spent in Thrawn's home, as though the rest of the galaxy and all my troubles no longer existed. Coming back meant facing reality and oddly enough being alone. I was lost deep in my thoughts as I dug my card-key from my pocket. It was Thrawn's arm suddenly clothes-lined in front of me, stopping me from moving forward brought me sharply back to reality.

"What the ...?" I asked looking up at him then following his gaze. My heart caught in my throat. The door to my flat was open and the lock had been ripped out. "Oh!"

Thrawn drew his side arm and motioned for me to stay back. I ignored him and went to barge into my home, angered beyond belief that someone would actually break in to my home.

He grabbed me by the arm. "Stay here!" His tone scared me. It was the voice of a man unused to having any order disobeyed ever.

I swallowed my anger and nodded my understanding, watching as he entered my flat in a way that reminded me sharply he was first and foremost a military officer.

"It's clear. There's no one here." He said when he reappeared from inside my flat after what seemed an eternity.

I pushed past him and walked in through the ruined door and just stopped dead at the total destruction that had once been my home. I didn't know where to look first. It was as if someone had let an enraged rancor loose. Everything that could be smashed, broken or ripped had been. For a moment I was shocked into a numb stillness and then anger writhed its way from my gut to my brain, followed closely by a sudden realization that I had things I truly valued, that I was afraid to lose.

I ran into the bedroom, ignoring Thrawn's protest. It didn't matter to me what else had been destroyed I just needed to make sure the most precious things I owned in the galaxy had not been discovered. This was how Thrawn found me. Kneeling on the bedroom



floor holding the wooden box which held his letters to me, the holocrons, and the few other treasures I owned. I was at a loss for what to do next and angry beyond words.

"I'll notify Palace security." He said touching my good shoulder. I looked up at him. "You will need to look around to see what is missing and give a report." He added.

I just blinked at him for a moment, then putting the box down I got to my feet. It was then, looking around, did I realize the extent of the damage done. All of my beautiful dresses, my shoes, and clothes had been taken from the closet, slashed to shreds and strewn all over the room. My voice caught in my throat and I covered my mouth with my shaking hand. This wasn't a simple break in, this was vicious and personal.

Thrawn activated his comm and contacted security, giving them details. He watched as I began to touch things, not pick them up or disturb how they were but just brush them with my fingertips. He finished speaking to security and went to try and stop me. I shook my head at him and continued until something gave up its secret to me. I gasped making him step forward but something in my expression made him stop mid stride.

"What is it...?" He began looking at my face.

I was beside myself with fury. "Jyrki." I spat.

There was a moment's stillness which was broken by the sudden arrival of half a dozen stormtroopers and security agents. I picked up the wooden box and left the bedroom. I didn't know how this could be explained, how could Jyrki have not only slipped back into the palace unknown, unnoticed but violently break into my flat as well. I brushed past the troopers and security agents to go back out into the hallway. I heard Thrawn giving them details but I didn't pay attention. I was blinded by anger. Only one of the things I had touched had given me any information but it had been enough. I had seen Jyrki's face twisted in rage as he slashed at my formal dresses. The thing that disturbed me more was that he had not been alone. I had no idea who the second person was, I had seen nothing of them, just sensed that there had been a presence, that someone else had been there with him. I slid with my back against the wall to the floor.

Thrawn finished with talking to the security agents came out to squat down beside me. "You need to give a statement." He said gently. I nodded and he helped me up. "Give that to me." He said taking the box that I had draped my arm over protectively.

The lead security agent, named Tam Erskari, was a tall, lanky man with soft blond hair and hard brown eyes. I told him everything I could and watched him mask his disbelief when I explained how I knew who had broken in. He didn't say anything but he didn't have to, his scepticism was obvious but I didn't care.

"At first glance is anything missing, Miss Gabriel?" he asked.

I looked around the chaos that had once been my living room. The stormtroopers, having no one to protect or shoot had retired outside the apartment and the other three agents were in the process of gathering whatever evidence they could.

"No, I don't think so. I don't have much of value, I guess mostly the clothes and they just destroyed those." I said. For the first time since discovering the break in my voice caught in my throat and I had to fight the wave of emotion that engulfed me. I bit back the threatening tears and fought the sadness in favour of anger.

He nodded taking notes. "Do you have any enemies who would do this?"

"I already told you who was responsible, Agent Erskari. His name is Jyrki Andando." I said not bothering to hide my annoyance.

He nodded and noted it again. "Anyone else? Anyone who works inside the palace?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't really know that many people here all that well." I said which was true. "Working for Lord Vader doesn't exactly make me popular, you know." I said. "But I can't think of anyone who would do this."

He gave me an unexpected smile and nodded. "Well, I am afraid we'll have to seal off the place until our investigation is concluded. Do you have a place to stay?" he asked.

I sighed and opened my mouth to tell him I had no idea when Thrawn answered for me. "Yes, Miss Gabriel will be under my protective custody until this matter is cleared up." He said. "Lord Vader will expect nothing less than the best for his Personal Assistant."

Agent Erskari nodded without raising an eyebrow and made further notation then left us to go and confer with his other agents.

"Under *your* protective custody?" I hissed at Thrawn under my breath.

He arched an eyebrow. "Yes. You do not have any place else safe to stay, do you? So you stay with me."

I opened my mouth then closed it again. "No way!" I told him, raising my voice so that the security agents all stopped what they were doing and looked up at me. Thrawn clenched his jaw and then not so gently taking me by my arm led me out of the flat into the hallway. The stormtroopers had all vanished. I guessed there was not enough action for them.

"What is the problem?" He demanded.

"I don't need a babysitter, especially not you!" I hissed.

"I thought you enjoyed spending time in my home?"

I blinked. "That's entirely different and you know it!" I said.

"Merlyn, please do not fight me on this, you will not win." He said. His tone of voice changing from concerned to authoritative.

"I don't want to live in your home. I want to live in my own!" I told him. "This is ridiculous!"

I was trying his patience. He drew a deep steadying breath. "I know that, I understand that but you need a safe place to stay away from the palace until this gets cleared up and security here can be sorted out. Jyrki Andando is a wanted felon and still he manages to not only elude the authorities here but get into a secure area right under everyone's noses and perform acts of vandalism. This isn't a game; your life is at stake." He said firmly. "You will not be a prisoner, you are free to come and go as you please, but at least I know you will not be attacked in the middle of the night at my place and if that should happen, well, I am a very good shot with a pistol." His attempt at a joke didn't go well with me.

This was not how I wanted things to be. I was furious, I desperately wanted to bathe and wash my hair and I was in pain. To top it all off, he was right about everything he had said.

Suddenly I looked at him. "Did you know this was going to happen? Is this why you wanted me to stay with you last night?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment and I wasn't sure if I had crossed a line or not but I didn't care. "If I *had* known, Jyrki Andando and his accomplice would be in custody and we would not be having this discussion." He said coldly. His words made sense and while I wanted to stay angry and direct my fury at him I couldn't, he was not the enemy. He knew he had won this round by the expression on my face. "Go and pack what you need for at least a week."

"A week...?" I began.

He cut me off. "Just do as I ask." He said in a tone of voice that stopped any further argument from me.

I stared at him, tight lipped and frustrated then turned abruptly on my heel and went back inside to salvage whatever clothes had been left untouched and gather the things I would need. As I began to look more closely at the damage that had been done to my home I realised that all my books had been strewn around the room. I knelt down and

picked up one of my books. It was the antique one that Bel had bought for me. As I tried to straighten out their damaged pages I began to cry.

"Merlyn...." Thrawn's voice was soft in my ear as he squatted down at my side. "This man will be found and dealt with." He said, taking the book out of my trembling hand. "Books can be replaced, you cannot."

"Why is he doing this?" I asked.

"Well, that is the question isn't it?" Thrawn said thoughtfully.

I nodded, indignantly wiping the tears from my face and got to my feet and continued to pack what I could. When I had stuffed a bag as full as I could Thrawn took it and the wooden box before I could protest.

"Miss Gabriel, we'll notify you via your comm when we have completed our investigation." Agent Erskari said. I just nodded numbly and as there was nothing else I could do I followed Thrawn back to his vehicle. There wasn't much to say and I was too angry to start a conversation just because the silence between us was heavy and uncomfortable.

I followed him back into his home, a place that two hours earlier I had delighted in and felt lost. He didn't say much as he led me down the hall to where his study was and opened the door across from it. I sighed and felt some of the fury in my gut lessen. He put my bag and the wooden box down on the bed. It had never occurred to me that he might have a spare room in his flat but then again I had never actually seen the whole place either.

It was a nice room, spacious and light, tastefully decorated. There was a bed, a beautiful dressing table, a comfortable chair next to a small bookshelf filled with books, a small desk with a holo terminal, a built in closet and a floor to ceiling window that opened up onto a small balcony. Before I could say anything to him he had vanished only to return with a set of towels.

"I know it isn't what you are used to but you will be safe here." He said then added, "I'm sorry about this, I truly am."

I just looked at him.

"I'll have someone drop a vehicle off for you to use." He said and then he handed me a card key. "This is yours. I told you, you are not a prisoner here, but I will remind you that you are under doctor's orders to rest and it would seem to me this is a good opportunity for you to do so. Take the pain killers that were prescribed instead of suffering." He said.

"How did you know I wasn't taking the meds?"

He smiled slightly. "You don't always do a very good job of hiding the fact that you are in pain."

I couldn't think of anything else to say so I just nodded my head again.

"There's plenty of food in the kitchen, help yourself, you'll find where everything is. I will return when I can although I don't know when that will be. I am in meetings all day and goodness knows how long they will go for." He said. "If you need anything you have my personal comm frequency, use it." I walked with him out to the flat's personal landing pad.

"Thank you." I said after a moment's awkward silence. I should have felt grateful but I didn't. Instead I was resentful and cross.

He cupped my face with one hand. "This *Pash'kja'anta* will be found and dealt with appropriately." He said.

I nodded but I didn't believe him. Jyrki was too good and he had inside help. For a moment we just watched each other, his hand warm on my face, and then with a slight nod he turned, got into the small air speeder and left. I watched until I could no longer see him and then went back inside, closing the doors behind me. This was not how I imagined my life turning out, this was not how I imagined spending time with Thrawn and I was furious

at the situation Jyrki was creating. There was nothing else to do except dig out clean clothes to wear, run a bath, try to wash my hair and do as Thrawn had suggested, take the prescribed pain killers and then see what else the day brought. Still, I thought grimly as I stripped off my clothes, heaven help Jyrki if I ever got my hands on him because I would kill him and not even think about it. I wasn't sure what he hoped to achieve with his acts of terrorism but if teaching me to hate was one of those things then he was more successful than he knew.

By late afternoon, despite taking the maximum allowed painkillers prescribed I had not been able to sleep or even settle. After a bath and a fairly frustrating attempt at washing my hair I had dressed in comfortable clothes and made a pot of white chaeya leaf tea. Neither the painkillers nor the tea were enough to relax me instead I became more and more addled. Sometime close to midday panic completely clouded my judgement. I broke down and used the holo-net to contact my uncle. I needed his help, I needed his advice. What I got was my father.

"Papa?" I was surprised. "I was trying to reach Zte'sa Vahlek."

"Merly? Is everything alright?" he asked. "Vahl's off planet, when he's unreachable he routes his calls to me. What's wrong, pet?"

I shook my head. Suddenly I didn't know what I wanted to say.

"Merly, what happened to your arm? Are you okay?" my father asked, suddenly worried.

"An accident, it's nothing, I dislocated my shoulder." I said then promptly burst into tears. I felt as though I were four years old again and had skinned my knees or something. It was ridiculous and I felt stupid. The fuzzy, blue holo image of my father made me realise how far away I was from my home. He spoke to me the way he always had when I foundered and after the crying jag had ended I told him about the break in to my flat. I didn't tell him the truth about my shoulder.

"You're sure it was Jyrki?" My father asked when I was done.

I nodded. "Absolutely."

"Where are you now? Are you safe?" He asked.

"Yes, I'm in protective custody." I said, hoping he would not ask for any details.

He just nodded. "When Vahl checks in, I'll get him to contact you." He was angry but the light years that separated us prevented him from doing or saying anything else other than comforting me.

When the connection was severed I had another crying jag then decided I was being foolish and took the holocron from out of the wooden box. For the next four hours I sat on the bed in Thrawn's spare room, listening to the girl who would grow up to become my birth mother talk about her daily life at the Jedi Temple. She was vibrant and chatty, smart yet vulnerable. She talked to the holocron almost as though it were her best friend. She spoke of her training and her routines at the Temple. She often spoke about her friend Rikka Nari who I knew as Rikka Blane. It was odd that I would find comfort in the words of a long dead, ten year old girl but that was what happened. Listening to my birth mother talk about her fears and troubles made me forget my own. Learning how to operate the holocron was a bit of a challenge but eventually I figured it out and could go forward or backwards easily. After watching almost three months of A'kali L'uanna's life I stopped the recordings and just sat holding the cube, lost in thought.

I sat on the bed, knees to my chest, chin resting on my knees. I thought about my birth mother's life and how strange it must have been to grow up without a family. It made me realise how lucky I was. I wondered if the Jedi kept records on all the children and people who had lived at the Temple, if I went back if I would find out anything more about my mother, perhaps who her parents had been, my grand-parents. Then I wondered if there were records about Jyrki and that thought made me shiver, not in a good way. I lay

back and tried not to follow this thought up. I didn't want to go back into that building but the more I tried not to think about it the more that became the logical conclusion. With these thoughts in my head I eventually fell asleep holding the holocron in my hand.

A soft but persistent peeping sound broke into my sleep addled brain and woke me up. It took me a few seconds to realise it was my comm, dopey and slow, I activated it.

The image shimmered into place. "Zte'sa...?" I rubbed the sleepiness out of my eyes.

"Lei'lei, did I wake you?" My uncle asked already knowing the answer to his question.

I just nodded. "That's okay, what time is it? Where are you?"

"It's mid afternoon here," He said not being specific about where 'here' was. "On Coruscant it's past one in the morning. What's on your mind, your father said you tried to reach me?"

The panic that had gripped me earlier had subsided and now I wasn't sure what to tell him.

"What happened to your shoulder?" He asked. "Kit said you sounded panicky, what's going on?"

I took a deep breath and then I told him everything. I told him about the Bunduki trials and about the break in. They were not connected but I didn't want to lie to my uncle, I wasn't sure why this was but I wasn't about to start.

"You didn't tell Kit about the trials did you?" My uncle said. "He would have mentioned that when he told me about your *pest* problem."

"I don't like to worry papa. It's not related to Jyrki and it was an isolated incident." I had downplayed the seriousness of what had happened but my uncle was not stupid and worse, he knew what the Rite of Tet' meant. I had seen the expression that had crossed his face when I had mentioned it; even with the holographic distortion I knew he was angry.

My uncle sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You are the silliest girl I know." He chided. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

I took a deep breath. "I need to go after him, Zte'sa. I can't just sit here and let Jyrki wreck my life. But I need to know how to find him first?"

My uncle regarded me for a moment and the holo graphic image of him flickering as the signal wavered. "You don't."

I did not want to hear these words. "Zte'sa, if I don't deal with this then I will be scared for the rest of my life or until he kills me first! I can't live like this!"

The hardness in his expression was unmistakable and I knew I was not going to like what he had to say next. "Listen to me very carefully when I tell you not to even think about doing what I know you are thinking about doing. From the looks of it you are in no fit state for a showdown with a man who is obviously obsessed with stalking you. What would you do when you found him? "

"I don't know, shoot him?" I answered crossly. It annoyed me that he was right.

My uncle shook his head. "Lei'lei, I am not joking about this. Leave it alone." There was a nasty warning in his voice. "When the time is right, a confrontation will happen. Don't push it before you are ready to fight him on equal terms. Right now, it sounds as though he is playing with you, push him and he will go over the edge. He'll just try to kill you. Right now you are not exactly ready for that confrontation, are you?"

"What do you know about it!?" I asked raising my voice.

"Far more than you will ever understand." He said very quietly.

"What am I supposed to do, sit back and wait until the next time when he shreds me to bits instead of my clothes? Spend the rest of my time hiding, too scared to step outside? This is not how I want to live my life, I won't do it!" I was shouting now.

"Are you safe where you are?" He changed the subject abruptly, the calm tone of his voice never changing.

I nodded. "Yes."

"And the appropriate people know what is happening and are dealing with the situation?" He pressed.

"Imperial security knows, Intel knows, I think by now the entire blasted galaxy probably knows but it doesn't seem to matter! He gets by the security, he has inside help! How in the name of the Sarlacc do I fight him? He's like a ghost!"

My uncle ran his hand through his hair. Wherever he was it was windy. "Listen to me and listen to me well. I want you to promise me you will not try to hunt him on your own." He said and then waited. I said nothing. "Lei'lei, when the time is right I will help you if that's what you want. I will track this man for you and I will deal with him myself but right now I am a thousand light years away on a job and I need to know you will not do anything stupid. So, please promise me you will sit tight and let others do their work."

After what seemed forever I gave in. "I promise."

He nodded, visibly relieved. "I am in the middle of something I can't get away from right now but when I am done we can deal with this, I will help you. I give you my word. It's bad enough he seems to be able to evade Imperial security without you inadvertently helping him!"

I was angry but he was right. I nodded. "Okay, okay! I get the point!" I wasn't going to make him any more promises. Maybe I wouldn't be able to track or go after Jyrki but I could still, maybe find out more about him. I had not made any promises about not going back into the Jedi Temple.

There was a sudden sound of blaster fire in the back ground and my uncle turned to look over his shoulder then back to me. "I have to go. I'll be in touch. If you are some place safe, stay there!" He told me and then in the middle of another volley of blaster fire he disconnected the holonet.

I sat in the bed, holding the transmitter in my hand and realised I was trembling. Blaster fire? What had that been about? He had not told me where he was or what he was doing. He hadn't looked scared just annoyed and surprised. I sat back against the head board and sighed. The sound of the door to the bedroom opening made me jump.

"I heard voices, is everything alright?" Thrawn asked. He was holding a pistol in his hand. He had been sleeping and my shouting had woken him.

"It was my uncle wanting to make sure I was okay." I said, blinking as he switched on the light. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to wake you."

He didn't answer the question and we just stared at each other for a moment. Something fragile wavered between us. He lowered the gun and nodded. I realized I didn't know what to say, how to bridge this apparent gap and suddenly my hatred for Jyrki doubled. Not only was he destroying my physical life, my home, and my things but somehow he was somehow managing to destroy everything else I cared about as well.

"I don't suppose you have any brandy in the house, do you?" I asked, breaking the silence.

He nodded and turned to leave. I followed him. He went to his bedroom first; re holstered the gun and pulled on his robe. Then wordlessly he went to the kitchen with me in tow. I watched as he pulled out two brandy glasses and dug out an unopened bottle of Corellian brandy. He poured a generous glass and handed it to me. He touched his glass to mine and we drank in silence.

After what seemed an eternity I said. "You must think me incredibly ungrateful."

He leaned back against the counter, folding his arms across his chest and regarded me carefully. "No, my dear, far from it. I think you are angry and scared and that you don't know what to do about it." He said.

He had pretty much hit the nail on the head. As I sipped my brandy I nodded.

He continued, "I understand how you feel perhaps better than you might think, A'myshk'a. Were the situation reversed I imagine I would be lashing out as you do now, that's what happens when one gets backed into a corner, but tell me this; would you rather be locked in an Imperial safe house under the watchful guard of security agents you do not know and who do not know or care about you? Babysitting you would be just another job and I guarantee you they would not have decent Corellian brandy in stock."

"Well, when you put it that way..." I couldn't help the little grin and was relieved to see the expression on his face soften. The tiny shadow of doubt receded but my anger at Jyrki remained.

"So, what was the shouting about?" He asked after another lengthy silence.

"Just my uncle reminding me that I am as stupid as I am brazen." I said. "He made me promise not to go after Jyrki on my own. I protested."

Thrawn raised an eyebrow. "You were considering that as an option?"

I nodded.

"Then he's right."

"I know that!" I said stamping my foot like a spoiled child. "That's what makes it so annoying. I feel utterly useless, helpless. I don't like it!"

"No, I don't imagine you do." He said gently.

I just gave him a look that said *what would you know about this?* He ignored it.

"He's quite mad, your friend Jyrki. Perhaps when he first broke into your flat in the palace to rescue you, this wasn't the case. He was truly concerned and thought he was doing the right thing but something tipped him over the edge. When you did not go along with his rescue attempt it pushed him in the wrong direction. You became a mission. He kidnapped you believing you would come around to his way of thinking. That turned into a battle of wills." He sighed. "In his head he is trying to save you from what he believes is the ultimate evil. He is obsessed, violent and very clever. This is not a particularly good combination." He paused for a second. "He knows you well enough to know what buttons to push and I think that somewhere along the line he is hoping you will try to find him, in fact I am certain he is actually counting on this fact. Setting you up, driving you in a certain direction. Your uncle is right. The best thing you can do right now, is nothing which is the hardest thing of all."

I wondered, as we stood together in his kitchen drinking the smoothest brandy in the galaxy how it was he always knew what to say. Suddenly, I didn't want to lose him or these quiet moments that lay between us, open and easy. He had never talked down to me. He had always been honest and for reasons I could not fathom he seemed to enjoy my company. I just looked at him and my heart just seemed to stop. Almost since the day I had started to work for the Empire this man had been in my life. He had become my friend, my shoulder to cry on or sleep on and something much, much more, something indefinable and precious. He had shared his world with me, his language, and in as much as he was able to his life and its secrets.

He watched me watch him but he kept his expression unreadable. Silence hung in the air as I put the brandy glass down and went to him. Wrapped my good arm around his waist and held him tightly. I heard the clink of his glass against the stone of the counter, and didn't fight it when he lifted my face upwards, the world paused for a moment and then he kissed me gently. He tasted of brandy and hope. His hands were warm, one on the small of my back, the other under my hair, around the back of my neck, pulling me to him closing the small black hole that had threatened to open up earlier. I would not let Jyrki destroy me; destroy my life and all that was beautiful in it. I pulled back from Thrawn's embrace and looked him in the eyes. As much as my heart suddenly pounded in my chest, I had never been more certain of anything in my life.

"*Kej a' mai vamarae.*" I told him in his native language, beautiful, succinct and to the point.

He looked at me steadily for a moment, "Are you sure?" He asked finally breaking the silence between us.

I smiled, my face cupped in his hands. "Absolutely." I said. "I am not drunk on too much wine, my mind isn't addled and time together is something we seem to have been given. I don't want to wait any more for the perfect moment because what happens if that never comes? I don't want to die, if that's my fate, under Jyrki's hand without knowing pleasure under yours."

He nodded, his thumbs caressing my cheeks. "You are certain you wish this now, here and with me?"

I wondered why he would ask again and in such a manner. It had a strange ring of formality to it.

"Yes." I told him. "I want this, now, here and yes, with you. There is no one else."

He drew a deep breath, the expression on his face softening. "What about your shoulder?"

"You won't hurt me if that's what you're worried about." I told him. "No more waiting." I said, shaking my head. Three seconds seemed like three millennia.

He said nothing as he took me by the hand from the kitchen to his bedroom. In the soft light of the small bedside lamp he stroked my face with the tips of his fingers, as if he wanted to memorise every curve. His touch was sensuous making me shiver and when he brushed across my lips I kissed his fingertips lightly. He traced a line from my lips down my throat to rest lightly at the hollow of my neck then he began to undress me slowly, carefully as though I were a precious piece of art until I stood before him naked, except for the shoulder brace.

I felt like a small, wounded avian, a little scared and a lot foolish but before I had time to contemplate any of this he had removed his own clothes giving me something else to look at, something else to think about besides my own shyness. He watched my face as I studied him. It wasn't that I had never seen a man naked before but never one like him and certainly not like this. To my eyes he was extraordinary and I wasn't quite sure what to make of this new situation.

He smiled, sensing my hesitation and uncertainty. "Even with that ridiculous shoulder contraption, do you know how beautiful you are?" He brushed my face with his fingertips.

Beautiful? I had never thought of myself in that way, but through his eyes that is exactly what I was. Even wounded and scarred, he saw beyond all that and the intensity of the moment made me blush. His fingers reached out to touch the shoulder brace.

"Take it off me." I told him.

For a second he studied it and then looked at me. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "It's supposed to come off this week so a day or so early won't matter and," I added a little uncertainly, "I'm pretty sure that what you want to do with me will be easier without it? Get it off me, please."

He said nothing as he complied with my demand and I watched as with deft fingers he undid the brace and slid it off slowly. I let out a sigh as the tension on my arm released. There was a deep ache but it felt oddly good.

"Pain?"

I shook my head. "It's fine."

"I can stop if you want."

I moved the shoulder and arm experimentally. "No."

"A'myshk'a...?"



I reached up and caressed his face, puzzled by his sudden hesitation, "I want this. I want you. No more waiting...unless you no longer feel that way about me, if you're not interested...."

He gave me a long slow smile. "Do I appear disinterested to you?" He asked. I looked at his body and bit my lip then shook my head.

"From the first moment I met you this has been a possibility I have looked forward to. You have no idea how extraordinary you are." His voice was husky and full of an emotion I had never heard from him before. He didn't give me time to contemplate an answer as he drew my face upward so that he could kiss me. I sighed and closed my eyes so that I could kiss him back.

Under the touch of his fingers I trembled and felt that wonderful swell of desire which bloomed out of the deepest part of my being. His mouth followed where his fingers had explored, my neck, my shoulder, and my body. I know I whimpered but the sound seemed very far away as I did my best to keep up. When he paused I opened my eyes wondering what was wrong only to see him smile. He pulled me to the bed and under his guidance I lay down, hesitant, expectant and uncertain of what to do. Looking at him as he lay down beside me I wondered if maybe I had gotten in over my head. This was uncharted territory and he definitely had the tactical advantage.

He traced the vivid white scar on my thigh, the permanent reminder of our time on Myrkr. I watched as his fingers danced on my skin, creating sparks with each contact. His touch was slow, languid and teasing. I felt as though I had swallowed a power coupling which had gone into overload building up pressure inside of me. I looked into his face searching for answers, or at the very least a how-to manual.

"What are you doing?" I gasped as his hands grazed my body setting my skin on fire.

His eyes glowed. "In order to know how to achieve the ultimate goal in any ...first strike situation... it is of vital importance one knows exactly how best to navigate the strengths and weaknesses of one's opponent." He murmured.

"This is your plan of attack?" I asked, quivering under his touch. "You're going to explore me to death?"

He gave me a wolf's smile. "You require very careful study, my dear. Who knows what little surprises you might have in store for me?"

"You make it sound like I might explode or something." I said.

"One can only hope...."

When I didn't have an answer for that, he laughed then, careful of my shoulder, he shifted his weight nudging my legs so there was space for him. I looked up at him as he lay over of me, covering me. His skin where it touched mine was warm. Where he was gentle, I was nervous.

"I won't break." He said as I tentatively reached out to touch his chest.

With my right hand I traced the contours of his muscles, the strength in his arms, the beauty of his face, the silk of his hair. Still, my fingers trembled, cautious and shy. "I don't really know what to do." I said, "I don't exactly have any experience in this particular arena."

His expression softened, "I know."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Relax and allow me to lead." He murmured. "A little trust Tekari?"

I made a face but he shut me up as his mouth explored mine, slowly, carefully and I returned his kisses shyly but lust was beginning to win over my trepidation and my nerves.

"Let go of your fear and follow me." He whispered in my ear, the warmth of his words causing goose bumps to ripple along my arms. "I'll know if you don't like something I do."

"How?"

"Because your body will tell me."

I let the breath I had been holding out slowly and pulled him to me shifting to accommodate his weight, his mass. His scent was a spice-drug and desire clouded my brain. He took his time, careful and calculating. Allowing me to explore and map out the unknown that was his body. Touch and taste, murmur and sigh. He stroked and caressed me in such ways that his touches were making me crazy. He made sure that I was ready and willing for each and every advance he made. This was an elegant, intricate waltz and I was just a beginner but I was also a quick study and I had the impression this pleased him. With his hands, his mouth, his body along with the words he whispered in his native tongue he began to teach me how to move to the oldest dance in the galaxy.

Time spun out in every direction and under Thrawn's artful guidance as he joined his body with mine I learned what it meant to be bound to another in every sense of the word. I was awkward and uncertain but he was patient and an excellent teacher. In this dance, he owned me but somewhere deep inside of me I knew that I also owned him. He moved like water as I arched my back to meet him and gasped as our bodies collided. He set the pace slow and elegant but it quickened as I told him through sound and sigh that I was ready for more. This was like nothing I had ever experienced before. His hands, his mouth drove me crazy until the power coupling which burned itself to a fury deep within me finally exploded. For a moment I thought the galaxy around me had exploded along with it, but it hadn't and slowly, in his arms, I came back to myself. When reality hit coupled, cradled, and safe surprisingly enough, I wept. It was not a reaction I had expected.

"*Tjen'täjsei.*" He whispered in my ear. *Complete*, he had said in Cheunh.

I looked up at him, not understanding what he had meant but he did not elaborate he just stroked damp hair from my face. "Are you in pain, did I hurt you?" He asked as he brushed at my tears with his fingertips.

I shook my head. How could I explain the terrible, wonderful muddle of emotions that boiled inside my body and brain? I couldn't think straight, let alone make sense of how I felt. One of life's greatest little mysteries had just been very eloquently explained to me. There was no going backwards. The world had just shifted around me once again and I was in a place I had never been before. This was a moment, small and rare, and I was afraid that if I blinked I would miss it.

"Then why are you crying?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea." And the tears turned to laughter.

I reached up and stroked his face, his hair, while he just smiled and shook his head.

"Women, no matter the species, are a complete and utter mystery sometimes."

I just looked at him and then asked. "Is it always like that?"

"Like what?"

"Extraordinary? Magical? Powerful?"

He kissed me lightly. "When it's done right, yes." He answered with a smile.

"So...can we do that again? It was ...fun."

This remark earned me his trademark arched eyebrow and a smirk. "Given the appropriate amount of time, that could be arranged."

We separated and shifted to accommodate each other's body, curled one around the other. Pale blue wrapped around pale white. It was an extraordinary moment and had it been one of Bel's romance novels maybe we would have stayed like that for a long time, staring into each other's eyes, perhaps finding just the right words to say, sweet and caring but instead he just watched me silently and I was too restless, too full of wild energy to lie still.

"I didn't finish my drink." I told him after a moment. "It would be a shame to waste such good brandy."

He nodded and we got up. He handed me his robe as he slipped on his pants. I vanished to the 'fresher and when I came back he was leaning against the counter in the kitchen, glass in hand more or less where we had started from but somehow, now, the world looked completely different. The silence in the kitchen was deafening and suddenly I was scared but for whole different reasons than two hours ago. I took a huge gulp of my brandy, nearly choking on it because I did not know what to do or say. He watched me carefully for a few moments and then slipped his arm around my waist and drew me to him. His kiss wasn't timid or gentle; it was extremely possessive, quelling the irrational fears and questions that rattled through my addled head.

"Better?" He asked.

I nodded. "How do you always know what to do?"

"I am extremely good at reading the situation at hand." He said.

"Oh." I said taking another drink.

He just smiled.

"This complicates things doesn't it?" I asked after a while.

His shrug was nonchalant. "Complicate? No, no more than it already was, but it does change things a little."

It was my turn to make a face.

"It is what it is, Sjiu' Tekari." He replied gently. "You worry about things that haven't happened. I see that on your face. Don't ascribe actions to me based on your past bad experiences with another. I am not that person. I am not any of those people. Let go of your ghosts."

"So you mean you are not going to unceremoniously dump me now that you have had your wicked way with me?" I was teasing but there was a sliver of truth in what I said.

He shook his head. "Where do you get these ideas from?"

"Bel, mostly."

The eyebrow shot up. "I see I shall have to work on changing your views on this subject."

"Well, if my first time was anything to go by then that could be fun" I said with a shy smile. "

An expression I couldn't decipher flickered across his face and then he finished his drink, setting his Glass on the counter. He caressed my cheek with his hand which was warm and drew my face upwards while he leaned down to kiss me. "I am deeply honoured." He said gently.

I wasn't sure what he meant but I didn't want to ask either. I just sipped my drink and watched him from under my lashes. After what seemed a quiet eternity, with his hand on the small of my back to lead me once again into the bedroom.

"Now what?" I asked, feeling very loose endish and awkward. "I'm not tired."

"Good, neither am I." He said.

"Then why are we going back to bed?"

"Because the appropriate amount of time has passed." He breathed in my ear. "And I thought you might like to try that again."

"Oh...." My heart thumped and I gulped at my drink before he removed the glass from my hand and put it on the counter.

"Hey!" I protested.

He took me back to bed, substituting my brandy with his lips. A trade I wasn't going to dispute.

"Is your shoulder up for this?" He asked, stroking my arm.

"Yes." I told him. "Pain management is part of the Bunduki training."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk. "What else is part of this training?"

I just looked at him. "Don't you have a galaxy to save or meetings or something?"

"In a few hours actually, I have budget talks with HC and Palpatine."

I laughed. "You hardly slept at all and you have to meet with the High Command and the Emperor? Don't you need to get *some* sleep before dealing with them?"

"The Chiss," he said, "have amazing stamina." and then he kissed me before I could find a suitable retort. The rest of our conversation was more or less wordless.

I delighted in his every touch, every motion, which made my body sing but this time I was less awkward and tried to please him as well. The end result was astonishing and when my body exploded into a supernova of utterly aroused magic so did his. This time exhaustion mingled with a surreal bliss relaxed me and I curled into his arms while he caressed my bare skin until I fell asleep. For the first time in a long time I felt safe. I woke up briefly when Thrawn got up to go to work.

"Go back to sleep Tekari, you're welcome to stay here. You know where everything is and I won't be late." He kissed me lightly on the cheek.

"I have a medical appointment this morning and I'm supposed to go to my flat this afternoon."

"What time is your appointment?" He asked.

I told him and he nodded. "I'll have a speeder sent for you. I would prefer you don't travel on your own just now with Andando still on the loose."

"Okay." I murmured still half dozy and with his scent still on my skin I went back to sleep.

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The worst thing about coming back to my flat was not facing the destruction of my things, or the fact that I was alone trying to clean it up with one working arm but the strange sense of violation I felt. That Jyrki had broken in and done all this and no one had been alerted, no one had heard or seen anything amazed me. When I had expressed this thought to the security agent in charge of my case he had merely shrugged.

"The older part of the Palace isn't as easy to protect, Miss." He had said. "I would suggest you request accommodations in the new residence wing. We have much better security and better surveillance systems there."

I had nodded but I knew that was the last place I wanted to move. I had seen the new residence wing and it had reminded me of a prison not a place to live. Too many locks, too many security guards and far too many holo vid recorders keeping track of every little thing a person did. Plus I hated the design and the more modern style of architecture. It was a trade off, safety versus privacy.

By late afternoon I was tired and the pile of destroyed clothes and things to be thrown out was far larger than any of the other piles I had started. I was furious at the wanton destruction of my material life but there wasn't much I could do about any of it. I was taking a break with a cup of tea when a soft knock at the broken door interrupted my feeling sorry for myself.

"Hey, Rim Girl!" Shiv said as he walked in. "I heard you were here thought you might want some company." He motioned for me to stay seated on the couch and came to me. "What a bloody mess." He whistled.

"This is tidy compared to three hours ago!" I told him.

He gave me a hug and did that kiss kiss thing. "You poor thing. Maintenance says they'll have the new door by tomorrow afternoon and security said there will be a better lock system in place. I came by to see how you were holding up?"

"I'm doing okay, just tired." I said.

"Well I don't imagine you would get much sleep after this." He agreed. I had to bite my tongue. "I heard a rumour that it was Admiral Thrawn who saved the day?" He was digging but I didn't mind.

I nodded. "He happened to be with me when I discovered this mess." I said.

"I heard he took you in, 'protective custody'?"

I made a face. "Oh for goodness sakes!" I swatted his arm. "You are so noseey!"

"Well...?"

"He has a place away from the palace and a spare room. He was kind enough to offer it and I was too much of a mess to think twice about accepting. It's not what you think!" I said but it was exactly what he was thinking and I was pretty sure he could read that on my face.

"Uh huh!" He nodded giving me a grin then his expression turned more serious. "Are you really okay? I mean first that," He pointed to my shoulder, "And now this, you don't have much luck." He said.

"I don't know about that. I was lucky I wasn't here when the break in happened. I mean it's not as if I am in the best of shape to be fighting at the moment."

"When you put it that way..." He looked around the room and caught sight of the pile of wrecked clothes. "I guess we need to go shopping soon?"

I grinned. "Yeah, they didn't approve of my wardrobe I guess, every single one of my dresses was shredded." I sighed. "The girl at HR said to provide a list of everything that was damaged or destroyed. Apparently news of this break in reached the Emperor and he was 'most distressed' to hear about it. They said they'll replace everything but I'd have to shop for my own clothes. Cati will have something to say about the destruction of her works of art I am sure."

There was a moment's silence and then Shiv looked at me seriously. "Why would someone do this to you? Does this have something to do with that fight thing that almost killed you? I heard rumours that someone put a contract out on you."

I sat back. "No, this is a different thing, not related." I said wondering if the part about the contract on me was true. If it was, things could get awfully interesting and awkward around here pretty fast. I hoped it was just gossip doing what it usually did, running wild.

"So put me to work and maybe we can go out for Corellian cheese cake afterwards or does the Admiral have you on a strict curfew?" He grinned. I rolled my eyes and with Shiv at my side began to finish the job of cleaning up and sorting out my wrecked home.

By the time we had done as much as it was possible it was later than I had thought. I turned down Shiv's invitation for late night tea and desert at our favourite café and went back to Thrawn's. While I wasn't under any sort of curfew, I was reasonably sure that something would be said about me staying up all night sorting out my flat, doctors orders to rest and all that, I didn't want or need that sort of grief from Thrawn. I needn't have worried the apartment was empty and silent when I returned. I glanced at the chronometer and sighed. It seemed that late nights were the norm rather than the exception when one worked for the Empire. I washed up, changed into night clothes and made myself tea. I was bone weary but not tired and I knew that lying in bed would be futile and annoying so I curled up on the couch with a book.

He came in well over an hour later. He glanced at me but said nothing and the look on his face told me to leave him alone so I did. I knew that look well enough because I had worn one just like many a time after a normal day with Lord Vader. I went to the kitchen and poured us both a brandy. I handed him the glass wordlessly when he joined me on the couch twenty minutes later. He had showered, his hair was still wet and he smelled like spice and soap. He had changed out of his uniform and, wrapped in his robe, he was ready

for bed. He sipped his drink thoughtfully and then reached over and kissed me on the forehead.

"Thank you." He said.

"Were you in meetings all this time?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, if there is one thing the leaders of this Empire love to do it is to listen to themselves talk."

"I take it they weren't productive meetings?"

"Sometimes I have to really wonder how this Empire can run at all. It is no wonder there is a Rebellion brewing. If the bureaucracy and self interest of the majority of the advisors and High Command doesn't destroy us, then the megalomania of the Emperor will." He told me with an angry shake of his head.

"I thought you were involved in budget discussion?"

He nodded. "That was this morning. Military spending is out of proportion with the money that needs to be assigned to infrastructure and support systems, especially for some of the Outer Rim planets. The way these people talk you would think that nothing exists beyond the Mid Rim. It is no wonder that smuggling is out of control and the petty thugs who run the Outer Rim planets have more control over the populations than the Imperial garrisons and outposts do." He shook his head. "Zaarin's new TIE designs were also unveiled. Very impressive, but the costs of producing these ships will far outweigh any advantage they will give us over the X-Wing designs the Rebellion is using. It will be very interesting to follow this project and all its possibilities." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "To top it all off the Emperor's new and improved battle station that one that's being built to replace the original one which was destroyed at Yavin has now well exceeded its budget costs with no end in sight."

I blinked at him, it was the most critical I had heard him speak in a long time. "Wait, he's building another one?" I asked in disbelief. I had not known about that. "Why?"

Thrawn shrugged. "Ego or perhaps he didn't like it that his last toy was broken, I have no idea." He said. "Vader not was overly impressed about the amount of credits being spent and made no bones about showing his displeasure. Sparks were flying between him and Palpatine."

I couldn't help the short laugh. "Lord Vader is rarely impressed with anything like that. He was against the first one as well; he thought it was a total waste of time and money, man power and technology. He wasn't quiet about it then so it doesn't surprise me that he hasn't changed his mind."

He nodded. "Yes, I am well aware of how Lord Vader feels on this subject. We have often discussed it." He said. "At least he is honest about his opinion on this matter and not a weak minded fool, nodding his head in agreement to further his career." He sipped his drink. "The problem is that in order to pay for this monstrosity taxes will have to be increased and there is a new demand for slaves to speed up its construction." He spoke the word slave with utter distaste. "How Palpatine and the rest of his yes men think this will hold the Empire together is completely beyond me. Fear will only serve to drive the already growing unrest further rather than quiet it. Hate and fear are not good motivators, despite what most people seem to think."

I sighed. "Maybe you should run for Emperor." I joked. It earned me a slight smile.

"I have no interest in ruling an Empire, Sji'u' Tekari; I wish to see law and order in place but that will not happen if the current government insists on following this narrow minded path. You cannot marginalise the alien and Outer Rim populations and expect them to cheerfully toe the line."

"Can you change anything?" I asked.

"That will remain to be seen." He said. "It is not going to be easy with the likes of Tigellinus, Zaarin and the rest of the council of twelve, along with the Moffs, bickering over

how gets more power and rights over territories. It is a waste of time. These men who are supposed to helping run this Empire efficiently are effectively driving it deeper and deeper into debt." He shook his head.

"It doesn't make you very happy, being here on Coruscant, does it?"

He looked at me for a moment, reached over and caressed my face. "Forgive me, I am tired. Normally I would not let these matters get under my skin." He sipped at his brandy thoughtfully. "I usually enjoy watching the political dance that goes on at these meetings but today it was just tedious." He said. "I apologise, here I am burdening you with all this nonsense and I have not even asked you how you are?"

"Well, I am fine." I said with a smile.

He finished his brandy and nodded. "You look exhausted so let's go to bed." He said. I didn't see any reason to disagree. After cleaning my teeth I joined him and curled up into his warmth. I lay in the dark of the room, in the circle of his arms with a billion things on my mind but no words to express them. I sighed.

"Stop thinking and go to sleep." He told me, stroking my back. Surprisingly enough, under his hypnotic touch, I did but it didn't last long.

I woke with a start, sitting straight up in the bed gasping for breath. Whatever had brought me out of my sleep did not linger in my waking mind long enough for me to remember, but the fear it left behind was enough. The disorientation receded slowly and as I remembered where I was I realised that I was alone.

I got out of bed and pulled a blanket over my shoulders then went in search of Thrawn. I found him on the balcony dressed in nothing more than the loose pants he slept in. He was seated in a chair with his legs stretched out and crossed one over the other and a cup of tea in his hands. I wondered how he could sit out in the cold of the pre dawn wearing next to nothing. Without the blanket I had slung across my shoulders, I would be shivering.

He looked up at me when I stepped out onto the balcony. "Did I wake you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Is there more?" I asked pointing at his cup. He nodded so I went back inside to fetch myself a cup of tea.

"So why are you not asleep?" He asked.

"I might ask you the same question."

He laughed slightly. "Yes, well sometimes I need to think, to meditate more than I need to sleep. What is your excuse?"

"Bad dreams, but I don't remember what they were about." I told him.

"They will pass." He said gently.

I just nodded then asked. "What is on your mind? The meetings?"

He didn't say anything for a moment, sipping at his tea and staring out into the never sleeping city. "Partially, mostly I am trying to sort out my next moves within the confines of my time here." He said. "I have certain goals I wish to accomplish. I have to work out the best way to achieve these things. I find that sitting in the quiet of the night often aides me in my thinking."

"It's too chilly out here to think but then again you don't get cold do you?" I asked.

He grinned and shook his head; we had often had this conversation. "Not like you do. I find it quite refreshing actually, but then I don't come from the giant ball of sand with an over abundance of solar power."

I shook my head at his teasing. I was leaning with my back against the balcony railing, the soft wind tugged at my hair. "I like my sandbox home!" I said.

"Mmm, I know." And we looked at each other and smiled. We came from opposite ends of the galaxy, from planets with climates that could not be more diametrically opposed and somehow we still managed to get along. I marvelled at how comfortable I felt

with him, here in this place. It should not have surprised me, really, we had known each other for a long time and had shared a lot. Perhaps the fact that actual time spent in each other's company was limited and precious made these moments together all the more remarkable. I didn't know and I wasn't sure I wanted to know either. Just like some secrets, some mysteries were not meant to be unravelled. When I truly thought about it, aside from my family, this man knew me better than anyone else in the galaxy, perhaps even better than my family.

"When will they get your flat sorted out?" He asked breaking me out of my thoughts.

"The door will be done tomorrow, I mean today, and the cleaning crew is scheduled for the day after. I have to be there to let them in because the new door comes with a new a new lock. Then if I understood the HR girl right they will deliver new furniture to replace the damaged stuff in the afternoon after the cleaning crew is done. So I guess things will be finished at the end of the week."

"So you will stay in that flat and not move someplace else?"

"The alternatives are not all that appealing. The new residency wing is more like a prison and off palace living is expensive." I said. "Besides, I really like living in the older part of the palace and all my stuff, well what's left of it now, is there."

He nodded. "How do you feel about it?"

I sighed. "Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"I'm a little scared." I said.

"Then why stay there?" He asked puzzled.

I sighed. "Because if I do leave because I'm frightened by what might happen then Jyrki wins and I lose by giving into my fears. I won't do that. I just don't really know how to live this way. It is starting to feel as though I am waiting for him to make his next move rather than live my own life."

"So you will choose pride and fear over safety and peace of mind?"

"You make it sounds as though I have a choice." I snapped. "I do not

He drew a deep breath. "A'myshk'a, I have a proposition for you. One I have been considering discussing with you for a long time."

I nodded, listening.

"I know that you want to move back into your own home, maintain your independence and I understand that but I want you to keep the keycard to this place." I went to speak but he held up his hand to silence me. "I am more often than not off world and this perfectly good apartment, which I own outright, is empty and unused for long periods of time. After your kidnapping I had your name added to the papers on this flat. Should anything ever happen to me, ownership will be transferred to you." He said.

"Why would you do that?" I asked very quietly.

"Partially because I want to know that you have a safe place to go that is away from the confines of the Imperial Palace and secondly I would feel a lot better knowing someone who truly loved art would be looking after mine." He said. "And I wanted you to know that you are welcome here, any time whether I am here or not. This place is as much yours now, as it is mine." He said and then watched my face carefully.

I had no idea how to respond to this.

"Is this a good silence or a bad silence?" He asked after what seemed an eternity, beckoning me with his hand to come closer.

I took a deep breath, put down my cup and went to him. He took my hand in his and pulled at me to sit on his lap. I just rested my head on his shoulder. His fingertips brushed the wind from my hair and I could feel the beat of his heart as I leaned against his chest. No one had ever given me what he had, the beautiful books and treasures. My hand went to



the pendant I never took off. Now he was giving me a safe haven and I had no idea how to put into words how I felt. He watched me carefully, waiting.

"Why did you wait until now to tell me?" I asked. "It's been well over a year since that *delightful* little event."

He nodded. "I wasn't certain you wouldn't see it as interference and then you left the planet for Tatooine. I felt you would be safer there than on Coruscant. Telling you wasn't necessary, but now," he shrugged slightly, "well, the situation has shifted somewhat."

"The situation?"

"You and I. *This* situation." He said looking at me as he lifted my chin up to make sure I got the full meaning of his words.

My lips formed a silent 'Oh.'

"I am reasonably certain had I made this offer some time ago it would have been very politely refused outright. Lack of independence is not one of your problems and I suspect you would have felt awkward about co habitation in what you would see as my space."

I nodded. "You're right about that. So why now?"

He shook his head a little and smiled. "The desire to keep you chained to a desk under the watchful eye of stormtroopers is starting to become overly tempting. This seemed a better compromise."

"That's not really an answer, you know."

"Of course it is, it's just maybe not the one you expected to hear and, for the record, you have still not answered me."

"Because I don't know what to say." I told him after a moment. "Thank you seems too small for something so huge."

He stroked my hair. "Will you consider the offer then?"

"Yes." I nodded, yawning. "But you won't mind if I chose to stay in my own place?"

He shook his head. "Of course not, I merely wanted to give you a second option." There was just a hint of untruth in his words but in this case I didn't mind.

"Options are good to have." I nodded. "Now, will you come back to bed with me? It's freezing out here and I don't need to watch the sun rise for a third day in a row." I asked getting up.

His answer was simply a smile.

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The med-lab smelled like a medlab and the droids hovered too close making me edgy. My shoulder immobilizer lay on the examining table beside me and the doctor was man-handling my arm and shoulder. I had to bite down on the squeal of pain.

"Can you move it slowly?" Doctor Hayes asked.

I did as he asked showing him the range of motion I had that was as close to pain free as possible and then gasped as he manipulated the arm and shoulder to cross that threshold. He nodded and as I gritted my teeth and grunted trying not to hurt him back.

"Well, it is much better than I thought it would be. Taisto Kjestyll has informed me he will be involved in your physiotherapy." He said.

"You spoke to my master?"

The doctor nodded. "He came to me. We have discussed the best course of action for the quickest path of healing. Now with bacta injections and the pins holding the bone fragments in place your shoulder socket is healing nicely. I think you will recover fully but it will be painful for a while yet. When you smashed the joint back in place you not only shattered the bone but you damaged the muscle and ligaments, even bacta can't heal everything quickly." He told me and after easing some of the terrible stiffness out of the muscles, he then stuck two very long and painful needles of bacta into my shoulder. I just

gritted my teeth and shut my eyes. I figured that my session with Master Kjestyll later on would be ever harder. I wasn't wrong.

The new training room was perfect but I wasn't. Master Kjestyll spent two hours trying to teach me how to breathe while he was manipulating my arm and my shoulder.

"Breathe out, child." He said as he move my arm in a way that made me gasp.

"Ow!" I finally complained.

He stopped and looked at me. "This pain will pass when the ligaments and the muscles relearn what they are supposed to do. You need to stop fighting it and breathe as I showed you along with the movements."

I sighed.

"Now concentrate." He said and the torture continued for another hour.

My day had been mostly about sifting through paperwork, sorting out my flat and waiting for people to come to do the things they were supposed to do and pain, lots and lots of pain so when I returned to Thrawn's flat, I was grateful for his gentleness and good supply of excellent wine.

He had cooked and after dinner we sat on the couch, the holonet babbling in the back ground. My arm was now in a small, removable sling. Everything was much easier without that horrible brace, even sitting was more comfortable. He listened as I told him about my day, trying not to exaggerate the agonies and failing miserably. He just smiled.

"So, I can go back to work and I can move back to my own flat tomorrow. Then I'll be out of your hair." I told him.

"You are not in my hair." He said. "You have work at the moment? I thought you were still under rest orders and that Vader was off world?"

I made a face. "I always have work to do, it's the Empire. We'd drown in bureaucracy given half a chance." I sighed. "It doesn't matter if Lord Vader is around or not. In fact it's often worse when he's not here." I explained. "And yes, he's off-world. He got called away suddenly to Mimban. The governor of the planet contacted him saying that the rebel he's been looking for was being held in custody. He went off like a shot. I have no idea when he'll be back. He's incredibly focused on finding this boy." I said.

"Well, that doesn't surprise me." Thrawn said.

"Oh?"

"Luke Skywalker is his son."

"You know this?" I asked after a moment's pause.

He nodded.

"How?"

He gave me a slight smile. "This is the Empire, there are few secrets kept here from people like me. So, yes I know. I have done for some time now."

"So much for secrecy." I muttered, not arguing the fact that he had not actually answered my question.

Thrawn raised an eyebrow and for some reason I found this hilarious and I started to laugh and I couldn't stop. My laughing jag turned into a short unexplainable crying jag followed by more laughter completed by spending the rest of the night in bed with the most amazing man I knew. For the fourth morning in a row I was awake to watch the sun rise. It was a good thing I could go back to my own apartment, there were far too many distractions here and I desperately needed my sleep.

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It was strange to be back in my own flat. The furniture that Jyrki had destroyed had been replaced and security in this part of the palace had been increased, although not by much. I had spent the afternoon with Shiv clothes shopping, an hour of which had been spent at Cati's. She had been both stunned and delighted at my predicament. Shocked at the destruction of her creations and pleased that she got replace my entire formal and semi

formal dress wardrobe with her latest designs and creations. She had not wanted to redo the same designs as I had before but there were two dresses I begged her for and after considerable whining on my part and a *'please for the love of peace do as she asks'* look from Shiv she relented.

The order was huge and would take her several weeks to complete. But she had promised not only to have a dress ready for the unveiling of the Executor but also to have my favourite dress redone in time for Winter Fete and for that I had hugged her.

After our visit to Cati we had gone to Bam's hair salon. Bam was horrified when he saw me but in difference to the first time we had met I did not threaten to break his fingers when he played with my hair, I just let him work his magic on it and thoroughly enjoyed the process. When we were done for the day, we polished off the afternoon by having afternoon 'caf and desert in our favourite café.

As I had expected, Shiv gave me the third degree.

"So what was all that about at Cati's?" he asked. "You tell her your secrets but not me? I'm hurt, Rim Girl!"

I made a face and stifled a yawn. Cati had asked me how my 'gentleman' was and I had blushed enough while answering to raise some eyebrows.

She had grinned and simply said. "Glad to know all is well in your love life, at least."

Shiv had watched this back and forth with great interest but wisely had kept his mouth shut. Now we were alone in the café he wasn't so circumspect.

"It's not a secret to you that I am spending time with him." I told him.

Shiv had given me the hairy eyeball. "I guess I wasn't aware of just how close you two were becoming. You usually do a much better job of hiding how you feel." I had just made a face and he had laughed. "Don't worry, Rim-Girl, your secret is safe with me. Just don't advertise it to the rest of the court." He said. "Your Admiral doesn't make a lot of friends even if he has the Emperor's ear and favour. I am quite certain that Rufaan Tigellinus would leap at the chance to have Thrawn disgraced somehow, I would hate to see him use you for that."

I nodded. "That wasn't my plan." I said.

Shiv made a face. "You don't plan for anything, Merly, that's your trouble." He said.

I just sighed. "I know that, but Shiv how does one plan for working for Lord Vader and everything that goes along with it?"

That had made him laugh. "I don't know." He said. "It's a miracle you are still alive!"

"More than you will ever know." I said quietly. He just shook his head and the topic moved on to more mundane things.

Once I was back in my flat, surrounded by new furniture and new clothes I wondered about Shiv's comment on my not planning anything. It was hard enough trying to keep up with Lord Vader and his ever changing schedule let alone trying to sort out my own life. I was grateful to be free of the shoulder torture device better known as the shoulder brace. The small sling was a lot easier to deal with and the latest bacta injections had made a huge difference. I used the dermal patches the doctor had given me for the pain and did the exercises Master Kjestyll had given me as home work. My latest check up had shown I was healing well enough which was a good thing because I was certain the doctor was getting tired of seeing me. As I put away my new clothes, I wondered about what was driving Jyrki to do these things to me. Thinking about him led me to think about the Jedi Temple. I had left the box of my treasures at Thrawn's, under the bed in his spare room. It was the only thing I had not taken back with me when I returned to my flat. I didn't want the holocrons or Thrawn's letters to me in a place that wasn't secure. After putting everything away I sat in the living room with a cup of tea. It was true, I didn't plan anything. Shiv was right.

Sitting was not the answer and before I gave myself a chance to consider what I was doing I changed into clothes easy to move in, grabbed my satchel and flashlight and was out of my flat. I thought about Shiv's words as I made my way through the empty hallways to the little library which was quiet. I switched on just the side wall lights and locked the door behind me. The bookshelf that covered the secret passage had not been moved and it took every ounce of my strength and a bit of force push to shift it enough that I could slip behind it through the panel that slid opened when I activated the lock. For the longest time I just stared at the pitch black hole and then taking a deep breath I stepped through it, shutting the panel behind me.

The journey through the tunnel, under the city to the Temple seemed longer this time, probably because I was on my own. There were moments when I could feel panic rise but I fought it. When I reached the other end I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I opened the door and slipped back into the only place my uncle had ever told me to stay away from.

The temple was eerie and silent. I didn't stop to explore as I made my way back to the main library. I was grateful for my perfect sense of direction. It didn't take me long to reach the great archive room. I stood in the great hallway and looked around at the endless rows of data, holo books and files. If there were ghosts around then they were staying out of sight.

In the holocron diary my birth mother had mentioned the archives many times. She spoke of the head librarian, Jocasta Nu with a comical mixture of awe and fear. She had also mentioned the data terminals that stored all the indexes and help files. It didn't take me long to find one and I jumped with fight when it activated under the touch of my hand. For the next hour I spent utterly immersed in learning how to use the antique system. Once I had figured out how the index worked the rest was a lot easier. I wanted to find Jyrki in the system but personal records were under classified files and I had not figured out how to slice through the security. I wasn't even sure I could. I was able to find a full map of the temple, which surprisingly enough gave a listing of who lived where. My heart leaped in my chest when I saw A'kali L'uanna's name pop up. I memorised how to find her room and then went back to my search for Jyrki. Eventually, I found him but it hadn't been easy. While he had kept his first name his last name was different. I was glad there had been an image of him as well. There had been no mistaking those blue eyes. He had shared a dorm room with three other boys. I figured out how to get there and without considering anything else, that's where I went.

The Temple was huge. Next to the Imperial Palace it was the largest building I had ever been in. I could not imagine it during the light of day, filled with people and I was a little sad that I would never know it in this way. Being careful about what I touched, I made my way through the halls and up the stairs to find the dorm room where Jyrki had slept. Many beings had been killed here but there were no bodies. I wondered what had become of them. It had only been twenty three or so years since the massacre here, if the dead had been left where they had been slain, the remains would still be around, just another mystery that would probably never be answered.

The living quarters in the Temple were sparse but spacious. My birth mother had often talked about the lack of possessions that a Jedi owned and it showed in how they had lived. I found the room easily and walked through the door when it opened. I shone the torch and looked around. There were four beds, four dressers, four small desks and one large closet. I took a deep breath and stepped into the room. My heart pounded in my chest but I refused to let my fear to get the best of me. I found my center as I had been taught so many times to do and began to touch the furniture.

The memories were scattered and fractured. I had trouble sorting them out. Pictures of children I didn't know flashed through my head, laughter and tears echoed in my mind as though they were real.

The third bed was where Jyrki had slept. I don't know if it was my connection to him or that I was in tune with him but the visions that I saw were powerful and vivid. I sighed when the images released me. I began to open drawers and look through them. His clothes were still there, all that he had owned still sat in the drawers. It reminded me that the people who had lived here had not left willingly; they had been killed quickly and violently. The beds had not been made and there was a strange sense in the room as though the boys might return at any moment. I pulled out some of the clothes and looked at them. They were small tunics, reminding me that he had been a little boy when all hell had broken loose here. Some of the things I touched gave up memories and some did not. In the space of half an hour I had learned more about Jyrki from his past than I had in all the time I had known him in person.

He had been a quiet, wilful boy. He was not the instigator in some of the pranks that were played but he went along with them. He had not laughed much, even as a small boy and that made me sad but I didn't know why.

In the small desk drawer I found a lightsaber. I touched it but it did not give up any particular memories. The weapon was generic; Jyrki had not made it he had only used it for practice. I took it out and looked at it. I had seen Lord Vader use his often enough that I knew how to turn it on. The instant hum of the brilliant blue blade gave me a start and I dropped it. The blade vanished instantly. A safety mechanism turned it off the moment I let it go. I picked it up off the floor and studied it closely then tucked it in my satchel. I had not wanted to touch or keep the one my mother had sent to me, but this one was nothing more than a weapon. I thought it might be of use.

I searched further but found nothing else. I guessed that even as small children the Jedi initiates took the rules seriously and did not keep any personal possessions. I was about to turn away when I thought about this for a moment. Maybe Jedi younglings were brought up to believe in no possessions and no attachments but that was not how children were. I sat on the bed for a moment and tried to think where I would hide my precious things if I were forbidden to have them.

I looked under the bed. I looked under the bed's mattress. I went through the clothes drawers again, emptying them out, looking for false bottoms and hidden compartments. Nothing. I went back to the desk and began to search through it. My fingers found what they were looking for.

The false back on the small bottom drawer had been cleverly designed. The memory showed me Jyrki making it in the quiet hours of the dark. I saw him put it together and the vision showed me how to unlock it. The soft click was rewarding and I pulled the tiny secret box out of its hiding place. It buzzed in my hand and I opened it cautiously.

He had lined this small box with a soft swatch of fabric. Lying in this cloth were two things. One was a simple ring, a man's wedding band and the other was a pendant. The locket opened up to show a tiny holo-image of a young couple holding a baby and a lock of dark black hair. I wrapped these items up in the small cloth and slipped them in my bag. They had secrets they wanted to give up. I had not touched the wedding band and the locket had not been locked shut. Underneath the cloth at the bottom of the tiny box was a very small holo-transmitter. The kind used to send short messages. I didn't activate it. I just slipped in long with the other treasures into my satchel.

I tried to put the things I had disturbed back the way I had found them and when I was satisfied that at least on first glance no one would know anyone had been here I left.

I had no idea how much time had passed or how late it was. I wasn't tired but I was suddenly aware of where I was and what had happened here. The overpowering sense of evil that I had felt the last time was not present but a slow sense of unease began to creep into me. A niggling itch between my shoulder blades that made me feel as though I was being observed.

I made my way back into the great library and went to stand in front of the door to the room where uncle Vahlek had found the holocrons from my mother but something whispered through me not to push my luck. With a sigh I made my way back to the safety of the Imperial Palace and my library.

I didn't bother to move the bookshelf back into place instead I shifted it as much as I could to the right of the passage and then back against the wall. At least this way it looked as though it belonged. When I closed the panel that hid the entrance to the tunnel I was relieved to see it was invisible. I left the library quietly and made my way back to my flat ignoring the sensation of being watched.

I sat down on the couch and emptied the contents of the satchel. It was the holo transmitter I wanted to see. It sat in the palm of my hand and I activated it. The image of an older man appeared.

*You don't know me son, but I am your grandfather. I don't know if this message will reach you or not but I have to hope it does. I have terrible news for you. Your parents are dead. They were killed two days ago when their ship was mistaken for a separatist's vessel and was shot down by the Republican army. They missed you so very much, Jyrki. Not a day went by where your mother did not think of you, hope for you and pray for you.*

*You were just a baby when the Jedi came to take you to the Temple. They said you were strong in the force, that one of their people had sensed your powers. Your family did not want to give you up but the Jedi said it was for the best. I will never believe that. I have tried a few times to come and find you but I have not been able to and so I am sending you these things, your parents would have wanted you to have them. The locket was your mothers, it has a hologram of you all together a day after you were born. I took the image and gave her the necklace, a gift to commemorate my daughter's child. The ring was your father's wedding band, he had taken it off before the flight because his fingers always got swollen in space and it was in the jewellery box with the locket. I know that you will have no memories of these people but they created you and brought you into the galaxy. They loved you and they were your family.*

*I have found a man who says he can locate you and get these items to you without raising suspicion. His name is Vahlek Akosh and you will know him by his white hair and the scar on his face. He will know how to get in touch with me should you ever need my help. I am the only living family you have left now and you are mine, I would very much like to hear from you, son.*

My hand shook. My uncle Vahlek had delivered this message to Jyrki. I tried to think back about all the conversations I had ever had with my uncle about Jyrki. I was certain that I had never asked him if they had met before.

I picked up the locket and clasped it in my hand. There were sharp memories of Jyrki's grandfather giving to his mother. She wept tears of joy when he had placed it around her neck, but it was the second set of images that really jolted me. It was of my uncle, looking much younger, talking to a very small boy with ice blue eyes, handing him a small package and telling him to keep it very secret. Then my uncle had handed Jyrki something else and had told the small boy that should he ever need help he was to use the tiny transmitter.

*"Why are you doing this, sir?"* Jyrki had asked.

*"I owe your grandfather a favour."* Uncle Vahlek had told him, laying his hand gently upon the boy's head and then he had vanished leaving Jyrki to ponder the carefully wrapped items he held in his small hand.

I dropped the locket down as though it had stung me. My uncle had known Jyrki and he had said nothing to me about it. Why? I was surprised at how angry I was and with a very deep breath swallowed it down. I picked up the wedding ring and was overwhelmed

by memories of a happy marriage. There was nothing special in the information the ring had to share, just that Jyrki looked a lot like his mother but he had his father's eyes. I knew, as I sat in my living room alone and wound up that I would have to go back into the Temple and find Jyrki's records, find out where he had come from and who his parents had been. I wondered if his grandfather still lived, though I doubted it. Most of all I wanted to know what uncle Vahlek's connection to all of this was.

I picked up the lightsaber again and studied it closely. It was an elegant weapon. Not clumsy or awkward like pistols and blasters. It had the feel of a combat stave or sword but with a far more deadly blade. I had watched Lord Vader often enough to know just how deadly a lightsaber was. I sighed and picked up everything I had found, tucked them all away in the small satchel and hid it in my hidey hole in the bedroom. It was very late and I was tired. I got myself ready for bed and was grateful to crawl under the covers. However, instead of falling asleep like I really wanted to, I lay there awake feeling very alone and troubled.

Every noise, every creak, every strange sound made me aware that I was sleeping in a flat which had recently been broken into and vandalized by a man intent on hunting me. Pride had made me insist to Thrawn that I would be fine. He had given me a look that I had not been able to decipher but had said nothing. I wanted to live my life in my own place but I was regretting this now. I missed his presence and his warmth next to me and puzzled over how I could have gotten used to that so quickly. I also missed the security that his being there gave me. For the first time in as long as I could remember I was truly scared to sleep in my own bed. I would not make this mistake again.

In the end, after an hour of tossing and turning I got up and fetched the lightsaber out of the satchel from the secret place. Only then, holding it in my hand, under the extra pillow did I fall into a restless, listless sleep. It never occurred to me that this was probably not the smartest move in the universe and that I could have accidentally turned it on while I was sleeping and sliced my head off.

### **Chapter 3**

Lord Vader paced. He hated waiting almost as much as he hated any official function at which he was required to appear. This one was especially bad as it would be simulcast across the galaxy via holonet. The Emperor had spared no expense for this event which would display the military might of his Empire to all, the unveiling of the *SSD Executor*.

The Emperor had decided that the main ceremony would be held at the Imperial Palace, reinforcing the statement that this was the center of the galaxy and the seat of power, but holo-net cameras would show the ship's unveiling from the undisclosed space dock where she had been for the past two days for cleaning and last minute repairs.

When it was time for the procession everyone was told to get into their places. I watched with some amusement as the people who were standing behind Lord Vader gave him a fairly wide berth. The only men who did not seem terribly concerned about being near him were Thrawn and Zaarin. Everyone looked amazing in their dress uniforms or finest clothes. The reception, after the speeches and actual unveiling, would be one for the largest and most extravagant in some time.

I, along with the others who had been privileged enough to join the before party but did not need to walk behind the Emperor and stand on the main dais made our way into

the great hall and sat in chairs that had our names in very elegant cards on them. Shiv had arranged it so we sat together and I was grateful. Sometimes it really helped to know the person in charge of organising events.

The lights in the hall dimmed as the Emperor walked forward to address the waiting crowd. I could feel the excitement and tension ripple in the air. While for me the *Executor* was not a new toy, for most of the people attending this function and almost the rest of the galaxy watching the holonet, this would be their first glimpse of the Super Star Destroyer. No wonder they were all excited.

"Loyal citizens of the Empire I welcome you all here today, to this auspicious occasion." The Emperor began, his eerie voice echoing through the silence that the crowd below gave him. There was a pause and people clapped and cheered. The Emperor made a slight hand gesture and the hall was once again silenced.

"For over twenty years now, the Empire has over seen peace and prosperity in this great galaxy and today we crown this achievement by unveiling the newest addition to our glorious Imperial fleet. With this new ship we shall be more so than ever have the ability to maintain law and order throughout this galaxy, protecting its citizens and providing the military might against outside threats that might wish to harm the peace and harmony we have worked so hard to achieve. For the last six months this latest addition to the fleet has been tried and tested, put through the most rigorous of training exercises with the very best of men and women the Empire has to offer, so without further ado I give you the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*!"

The crowd went mad as they cheered and clapped all the while watching as a giant holonet projection suddenly displayed the space dock where the *Executor* was cradled. In a slow, languorous movement the dock released its clamps and the *Executor* began to move forward so that meter by meter the ship was revealed. Flanking the great ship were two standard sized ISD's and the scale difference produced a collective gasp of stunned amazement from the audience watching.

When the giant ship was free from the space dock film crews on board smaller more agile ships began to show footage of the *Executor* from every angle possible. Even I was impressed with this show. When they were done showing the ship off from the outside a crew that had stationed inside switched their live feed on and we suddenly were shown the bridge of the ship.

Admiral Ozzel, Captain Piett and the rest of the bridge officers all stood smartly to attention in their dress uniforms while the holo feed panned around to show off the sheer size and scale of the ship's command deck. The last image that was broadcast was the view from the forward windows and the response from the crowd in the hall said that this had done its job and the populace was suitably impressed enough to forget that not only had taxes been raised significantly in the last year to help pay for this but that shortly they would be raised again.

There were more speeches made by various other members of the High Command and Imperial Council and then we were allowed to make our way from the great hall to the room which housed the Grand ball for a very large, no expense spared reception that would turn into a party.

"Well, she's impressive." Shiv whispered in my ear as we meandered out of the hall like a herd of domestic banthas.

I nodded. "Yep. Lord Vader's baby. I hope they don't scratch the paint."

That remark made Shiv laugh.

We were joined by Antygra and Ynyth when we entered the Ball room. Shiv snagged champagne glasses from a passing waiter and we all touched glasses together and toasted to the Empire.



"I have to ask," Antygra said. "Why does the Empire need such a huge ship? Surely she can't be agile enough to go chasing down all the threats the Empire faces?"

"She'll be used more as a space oriented command center." I said. "But she's more agile and faster than you might think."

Antygra gave me a look. "Of course you would come to its defence."

I glanced at Shiv for an explanation to Antygra's sudden animosity. He shrugged. "Tygs isn't happy about this because the defence budget was given a huge increase but the budget for his department has been cut by thirty percent for the second year in a row."

"I had to fire five of my people last month." Tygs said. "You work for Vader, Merly, tell me is there really a need for all this fire power?"

I sipped my champagne. "Lord Vader doesn't actually discuss such matters with me but with the Rebellion doing all the damage that they have been doing, along with groups like JAN, not to mention the rise of pirates and smuggling I don't know that I have a problem with it. The *Executor* makes it easier to coordinate defence from space, the command center can travel to where it is needed most as opposed to being fixed on one planet. This makes it more secure. The Rebels are less likely to be able to find it and blow it up like they would a space station or even a planet."

Shiv nodded. "That makes sense. I heard that the costs alone from the sabotage done by the Justice Action Network could fuel half the Imperial fleet for a year. If this new ship can help sort that mess out then it's worth it."

Ynyth nodded her agreement. "Yeah, I heard what they did to the Coruscated Line Yacht and the undersea mono rail in retaliation for Earnst Kamiel's execution. I think I agree with Merly and Shiv. Increased Imperial defence presence is a good thing."

Tygs shook his head. "Tell that to my family. They've had to sell off half their property on Corellia in order to be able to cope with the tax hikes. It seems to me that if you are really rich you get all the breaks and if you are really poor no one cares but it's the middle class who ends up paying for everything." He sighed and then in a whisper added. "Sometimes I wonder if the rebels aren't right."

I just looked at him. "You should be very careful about what you say on that topic." I said quietly.

"Why? Are you going to report me?" He asked a little nastily.

I opened my mouth to reply but Ynyth got there first. "Hey, Tygs, leave her alone she's in the same boat we are."

Tygs just gave me a look. "They arrested two people in HR because of you." He told me. "One of them was a good friend of mine."

"What?"

He nodded.

I looked at Shiv and then back at Antygra. "Okay someone needs to explain this because it's the first I've heard of it."

Shiv sighed. "The word going around is that you complained about the lack of security and blame HR for someone busting into your flat."

"That's an outright lie!" I said my loudly enough that the people around us stopped talking and looked our way.

"Keep your voice down, Merly." Shiv hissed.

I looked at Antygra. "First of all, I did not complain to anyone about a lack of security and secondly why would I blame HR for someone breaking into the flat? That's a security problem not a human resources issue!"

"Well, rumour is you are still on the outs with Priss." Shiv said.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh please, I care as much about her and what she thinks as I do about the spice mines of Kessel. The break in had nothing to do with HR and I certainly did not imply otherwise."

"The HR people are all scared of you; they half expect you to send Vader down on them at a moment's notice. You get special treatment from the Emperor and they don't know what to make of that. I heard the Emperor himself commented on the break in." Tygs said.

"He did, but I didn't talk to him about it, in fact I was surprised he even knew." I said. "Who is starting these rumours?"

Antygra shrugged. "I heard it from Bobbyn who said he was told by a guy down in security whose sister works in HR."

I shook my head at the way the rumour mill worked. "I can't believe you even listen to this stuff or that you think I would be like that!" he went to say something but I wasn't finished yet. "I have family out on the Rim, and they suffer because of the tax hikes and the increased patrols as well. My father runs a docking bay and transport service for Sarlacc's sake; do you think it's easy for him? He doesn't get any breaks because I work here, in fact if anything it's made things worse."

"So you don't abuse your position and job to get what you want?" Tygs pressed and I could not believe the weird turn this conversation had taken.

"I don't know what you mean by that. It's not like working for Lord Vader is easy you know! Just how would I abuse it?"

"Well... some of us wonder how it is you do stay alive when everyone else who has worked closely with that monster ends up either dead or banished to some garrison in the middle of nowhere!" his argument was losing steam but I was getting annoyed with him.

"So doing my job well in order to stay alive means I am abusing the system?"

"Well, you do seem to get a lot of special attention from some important people." Tygs said nastily.

"What are you implying?" I was angry now. I had never seen Antygra so hostile before.

"Maybe you want to talk about why a certain Grand Admiral is courting you?" he asked.

"You're talking about Zaarin right?" I asked. "I don't ask for his attentions, in fact I go out of my way to avoid them!"

"Why are there more?" he asked. Then added, "Oh that's right you also like aliens as well... I guess you'd sleep with the damned whole High Command given half a chance!"

I didn't even think about what I was doing as I shifted into a stance that made me ready to strike out at Antygra, but before I could even think about raising my hand to slap his face Shiv intervened, standing between me and Tygs. "Hey, this is supposed to be a celebration you two."

Antygra looked at him and then to me and then said. "Well you know what? Suddenly I don't feel like celebrating." And with that he left.

I stared at Shiv and Ynyth for a few seconds unable to digest what had just happened.

"I'll go talk to him. It's not you, Merly, he's just not himself lately." Ynyth said and she hurried off to follow Tygs as he left the room.

Shiv sighed. "One of the HR people arrested was his girlfriend. He's really pissed and he's really worried about her. I tried to tell him you had nothing to do with it but somehow the rumour got started it was your fault and he needs someone to blame. I think his family is having a difficult time at the moment and he's not handling any of it very well."

I nodded trying to calm down. I had been a hair's breadth away from hitting Tygs and I wasn't happy about it. "Well he should be careful with the Rebellion talk. That kind of chatter could not only just get him arrested but shot for treason." I sipped my drink and glanced around the room. "How long has he been this angry?"

Shiv shrugged. "Hard to say, been building a while I think. Things got really weird after the destruction of Alderaan but then he seemed to calm down and be okay. We all thought it was because he had family on Alderaan. He's moody sometimes and he tends to go off when he gets stressed. He often complains about things just usually not like this, never in public and not about you. It's just recently he's been spouting a lot of negative stuff about the direction the Empire is going in. Don't take it personally, Merly. He's just going through a rough patch right now. I think he's been listening to his uncle too much. Harkov doesn't seem to have much love for his job right now either, I guess the two feed off one another's moods. "

"Admiral Harkov is Antygra's uncle?" There had been rumblings about Harkov's allegiances and Lord Vader was not pleased with him at all.

Shiv nodded. "Yeah, on his mother's side but not many people know that. He doesn't let that fact get around, scared people will think he got his job through nepotism."

I just shook my head. "Well, I did not complain to anyone about HR or security. I would very much like to know who is starting these lies."

"Maybe your Admiral friend mentioned something about it?"

I shook my head. "That's not his style, Shiv. He tackles problems straight on and he would have talked to me about this first, I think."

"I figured as much, but I wanted to be sure." He said. "Safe to say someone on the inside doesn't like you all that much."

"That's for sure." I said quietly, thinking about the person who I had sensed with Jyrki when he was destroying my flat.

"Come on, let's mingle before we get a reputation for being stuck up as well." Shiv said.

"Too late for that for me I think." I grumbled.

We walked through the chattering crowd; the excitement over the *Executor's* unveiling made the room buzz. There was nothing like a huge party to celebrate a very big and expensive toy to put the Imperial world in the festive mood, but as I mingled and made small talk I could not help but think on Thrawn's words and Antygra's outburst. On the outside everything seemed shiny and wonderful but on the inside I began to think that maybe the Empire was starting to rot, just a little.

I came to stand at Lord Vader's side, Shiv had been pulled into a conversation about palace décor and I escaped before I was asked my opinion about the newest fad which involved Gungans. I sipped at my drink and looked around. It occurred to me that in three years of working here I had not really gotten to know many people all that well but this thought did not make me sad.

"*People seem impressed.*" I told Lord Vader telepathically.

"*As well they should.*" He replied.

"*How is your arm?*" I asked.

Lord Vader looked at me sharply then went back to staring at the crowd. "*One mechanical arm is much like the other. It functions as it is supposed to.*" He told me.

I had been in the med lab when he had returned to have some of the mechanics fine tuned. Once Vader had left the room, the doctor had told me that Lord Vader's arm had been severed on Mimban.

"*Did it hurt?*" I asked, curious to know if the artificial limbs were as real as they were supposed to be.

"*Pain is irrelevant.*" He told me. "*But if you wish to learn more about it I can slice off your arm and have you fitted with a prosthetic one then amputate that one and that would answer your questions.*"

"*No thank you.*"

"*The artificial limbs are far stronger than flesh and bone.*" He said. He thought he was being funny.

"*I'm sure they are, my lord, but I am kind of attached to mine.*" I said. He chuckled.

"Miss Gabriel, how lovely to see you again, you look well." Said a voice off to my side.

I turned to see Zaarin standing just behind me. "Thank you Grand Admiral Zaarin, as do you."

"Come now, how many times must I ask you to call me Demetri?" He chided.

"Surely you are not this formal with everyone all the time are you?"

"Miss Gabriel is a fountain of good manners, Zaarin, get used to it, it can be quite tedious and I think she does it just to annoy." Lord Vader said much to my great surprise. If I didn't know better I would have thought he was sticking up for me.

"She cannot be that annoying, Lord Vader, after all she still lives." Zaarin said.

I sucked in my breath. "*You could sever his arm and maybe that might shut him up.*" I suggested to Lord Vader.

I was certain his response would have been fun but at that moment the Emperor made his way over to us and joined the conversation. I curtsied and Zaarin gave a crisp military bow.

"Merlyn, my dear, how delightful to see you here. You look as lovely as ever." The Emperor said.

"Thank you, Excellency."

"Zaarin, if you would be so kind as to convene the Council of Twelve in the small conference room, I believe we have matters to discuss."

"As you wish, Excellency." Zaarin said. "Miss Gabriel, Lord Vader always a pleasure." And with that Zaarin vanished. He had been dismissed and he had not liked it much but he dared not argue with the Emperor. I was certain I was not the only one who had sensed his anger ripple about us.

The Emperor turned his eerie yellow eyed gaze back to me. "And you, my dear young lady, how are you feeling now?"

"I am well, thank you." I said.

"I see you have recovered nicely from the terrible incident at the Bunduki Trials." He continued. I felt the force ripple and shift about us as suddenly Lord Vader became more attentive.

"Yes, thank you. The medical staff performed miracles. Had it not been for their expertise I am quite sure I would be dead."

"And that would have been most unfortunate." The Emperor nodded. He paused a few seconds then added. "I must admit I was surprised to hear of what had happened and that you had survived. I did not think that such a pretty young thing as yourself had it in you to kill."

The surge of sudden hatred I felt for this man was uncontrollable. Lord Vader looked at me as though I had kicked him and I was certain that I would be punished but instead the Emperor just gave a slow, low chuckle. "There, Vader, you see? There is hope for her yet." He said softly. Vader returned his masked gaze back to his master but said nothing.

I just stared at the Emperor; for once my anger outweighed my fear. "Even the smallest wamp rat will tear its enemy apart when it's cornered." I hissed. I would have said more but Lord Vader's sudden and very painful grip on my arm stopped me, reminding me that while maybe I could get away with a smart mouth with him, this was the Emperor and I was being disrespectful.

The Emperor waved a hand, ignoring my remark. Vader released my arm. "And what about your home, is everything back to order now? All the damage repaired and your

belongings replaced. The break in must have been a dreadful shock for you?" He bantered lightly but there was something underneath his tone that told me nothing here was as it seemed.

Lord Vader's head turned sharply to look at me once more. I hadn't told him about the latest incident with Jyrki, I had just assumed he would learn about it. Obviously that was wrong.

"It was but I am starting to get used to these incidents." I said, he ignored the barb and I continued. "Things are slowly getting back to normal. I appreciate all you have done for me."

"And you have moved back or are you still *under* Admiral Thrawn's protective custody?" He continued.

There was absolutely no keeping anything from the Emperor. I smiled. "No, I am back on my own now. It was very generous of the Admiral to allow me to use his spare room but I did not want to encroach on his personal space any more than I had to."

The Emperor nodded. "It has been most gratifying to see him find solace and company at my court. I am certain that he enjoyed his time with you; I know he thinks quite highly of your artistic sensibilities. He has remarked you are quite knowledgeable in this area. "

I blushed, hated myself for it and nodded. "The Admiral is very kind." I said.

"Not at all, my dear." He said, patting my arm. "Admiral Thrawn knows a good thing when he sees it. He has a remarkable eye for the more unique pieces in my collection. His ability to ascertain knowledge from the art he so carefully studies is most unusual. He is an intriguing individual."

I wasn't sure what we were really talking about any more so I just nodded and smiled but a shudder ran down my spine.

"There will be a private exhibition of Ermall Bernau's works coming up fairly soon, if I am not mistaken. I'll make certain you receive an invitation; perhaps you might want to ask the Admiral to accompany you, I believe he is quite interested in the art of Bernau."

I nodded, averting my eyes from his gaze. "You are most generous, Excellency. I shall do as you suggest." I got the sense that it wasn't really a suggestion.

"I shall look forward to seeing you both there then." He smiled and then with a nod to Lord Vader he moved away to speak with some of his advisors who had come over to discuss something with him. The moment they had vanished into the crowd Lord Vader rounded on me but before he could say anything I spoke first telepathically. I didn't want anyone over hearing my conversation.

"*Why does he toy with me?*" I asked, getting straight to the point.

"*Because he can, it amuses him. You amuse him.*"

"*Amuse him?*"

"*You are not the only one he tests in these ways. Be grateful that he shows such interest in you, it allows you much freedom.*"

I had no idea how to reply to that. I wasn't sure what it meant.

"*Is that what killed your assistant before me, they didn't interest the Emperor?*"

"*No, I killed them. They were inept at their job and they did not interest me.*" He replied.

I just nodded and sipped at my lukewarm champagne.

"*Explain to me what happened to your flat.*" Lord Vader said after a moment's pause.

I told him about the break in.

"*Why was I not informed of this?*"

"*You were away and I don't like to pester you with my problems.*" I said. "*You don't like to be bothered with trivial details, you've told me that a dozen times.*" Then

added. *"I thought you would hear about it from Intel or something. It isn't as if it's a secret."*

*"That my personal assistant is being stalked by a rebel sympathiser with force abilities is hardly trivial."* He admonished. *"Next time something of this nature happens, I wish to be told immediately."* I wasn't sure what had him more annoyed, the fact that Jyrki had managed to break in despite palace security or the fact that he had not been told about it.

*"Your Bunduki master informs me that your shoulder is healing well, how is it now?"* he asked abruptly changing the subject.

*"Better."* I nodded.

*"Good. I thought that you might be interested in learning how to use a lightsaber as a weapon. I tire of using combat staves to spar with you."*

I shivered. *"I would need to find a lightsaber to use?"*

*"You told me your mother had left hers behind for you. You can use that."* He said.

*"Did you tell the Emperor about that?"*

*"No, I do not bother my master with such trivial details."* He said tersely. *"Just because you interest him does not mean you are important to him. Do not over value yourself."*

I just nodded and with that our conversation ended because several people required his presence and they did not want to speak in front of me. He flicked his hand at me and dutifully I moved away to mingle and maybe find Shiv.

As I meandered through the crowd and found my way through to the balcony I realised I was excited at the prospect of learning how to use a lightsaber which surprised me. I leaned against the balcony parapet and stared out at the city. The day had given way to evening; the lights from the buildings twinkled and lit up the Coruscant skyline. I listened to the sounds of the party behind me. The mindless chatter and underlying networking that went on at these functions drove me crazy. After three something years I still hadn't figured it out.

*"Are you as bored as you look?"* A warm, familiar voice said in my ear. I smiled.

*"I thought there was a big meeting going on."* I said answering Thrawn in his own language.

*"The Council of Twelve is meeting, yes."* He said coming to stand at my side.

*"Without you?"*

He gave me a look. *"I am not a Grand Admiral."* He said.

*"Yet."* I said.

He nodded with a slight smile. *"Yet."* He followed my gaze to look over the city. *"You have not answered my question."*

I glanced at him. *"Yes. I am absolutely every bit as bored as I look."* I told him. *"I hate these functions and you know this."*

*"Well, you had a sneak preview of the main attraction so this wasn't exactly a big surprise for you was it?"* he said.

I looked up at him. *"I suppose it would be very politically incorrect for me to ask you take me home with you?"* I asked him.

*"I think forward would be a better way of putting it."* He said casually.

I nibbled my pinkie absently.

*"Is everything alright?"* he asked.

I just shrugged. *"This is the Empire. Nothing is ever alright."* I told him.

For a moment he just watched me in silence, debating whether or not to press me on why I was in such a pissy mood, and then said. *"I have some things to finalise before I leave, I can come by your flat and pick you up if you wish, unless you want to stay here."*

He paused. "Of course, the two of us leaving here together would add fuel to an already smouldering fire, if I heard some of the gossip mongering going on today correctly."

"Would that bother you?"

He looked at me sharply. "Gossip is a useless waste of time usually it should simply be ignored but occasionally it has some particularly harmful side effects. I am thinking more of you and your friends. Did you not have a rather heated discussion earlier with one of them, Antygra I think, that was the result of some fairly nasty gossip?"

"You don't miss much." I snapped.

"Not when your shouting alerts everyone to a problem, no, then I do not miss much at all." He chided gently. "You must learn to be more circumspect, my dear, in a world where every tiny piece of information can and will be used against you when given half a chance."

I sighed.

"You could head over to the flat now; you do have your own key." He reminded me.

I nodded. "Yes I do, I hadn't forgotten, but..."

"But you do not feel comfortable with that just yet."

I smiled and shook my head.

He nodded. "Very well, I should not be more than an hour. I'll come by your place. Do try to stay out of trouble between now and then." He said and then he left.

I woke up with a start. The dreams that plagued me in my flat followed me here as well. I sat up and concentrated on getting my breathing back to normal. Thrawn looked up at me.

"Nightmares?" He asked sleepily. His hand was warm on my back.

"It's okay." I said. "Go back to sleep." I got out of bed, stole his robe and made my way to the kitchen to make tea before he could really wake up.

In the quiet of the kitchen I sat and sipped tea. I had activated the little holocron and listened to my birth mother's voice as she talked about her daily life in the Temple. Mostly her entries were of normal, mundane things, sometimes they were a little dull even but the next entry made me sad.

*\*\*\* Today I heard some terrible news. Master Qui Gon Jinn is dead. He was killed on Naboo yesterday. I cried when I heard this because he was one of the Jedi Masters who was always kind to me and I don't know...he was a friend ... he was someone I could go an talk to.... \*\*\**

The entry was short because she had started to cry and had turned off the recorder. She had talked often about Qui Gon Jinn. He and her own master were close and she looked at Qui Gon almost the same way I tended to see my uncle Vahlek. I felt for her loss because in my own way I had known him too. I listened to the next entry.

*\*\*\* I saw the new boy today, Anakin I think his name is. The whole temple is talking about him. He is supposed to be the Chosen One. I asked Master Tane what that meant. He said it had to do with an old prophecy. ... "And in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a saviour, and he shall be known as: The son of the suns." This was what he told me, but I don't understand it.*

*Anakin is Obi-Wan Kenobi's Padawan learner, even though the boy is nine or ten, which is old to be taken into the temple and taught. There are some masters who are unhappy about this but they don't speak it out loud. They say Anakin is too old to start learning the ways of the force. Master Tane says this is because it is difficult to undo any imprinting that has already been done. In Anakin's case the love for his mother. I asked Master Tane why love was such a bad thing. He told me that love is not the issue but attachment is. I am not certain I understand what he means by this. He asked me how I*

*felt about my own mother. I said I didn't have any feelings about her, I don't know her. He smiled and asked did I love her. I said I supposed in a sort of distant way, she was my mother after all. He smiled and pointed out to me this is what he meant about non attachment.*

*I asked him then what age was too old because I remember hearing people say that Master Vos was also older than normal when Master Tholme brought him to the temple to be trained. Master Tane just shrugged and said; "Master Tholme had his reasons and the situation was quite different." He then went on to tell me that Master Vos is from the same planet my father was from and that I am half Kiffar. He asked me if I ever picked up images from objects that I touched and I wondered how he knew this because I don't talk about it. He told me that psychometry was a gift known to be prevalent amongst Kiffar and that maybe if I wanted to know more about it I could ask master Vos or master Tholme when they were not busy.*

*I don't like this gift and I try hard to ignore it. Sometimes I 'see' the worst images from things that I have touched. Master Tane just nodded when I told him this and then told me that this was all the more reason to try and learn how to use it properly. I must have made one of my famous faces because he laughed and told me to be careful in case the wind changed.*

*I haven't had the chance to speak to Anakin yet, he stays very close to Obi-Wan. Master Tane says that the boy is homesick, missing his mother and his planet. He comes from Tatooine. I had to look that up on the star map and could not believe how far away it was. It has a binary solar system so I imagine that he must find Coruscant really cold. I feel sorry for him, he always looks lonely.... \*\*\**

"What is that?" Thrawn's voice in the dark made me jump and the holocron switched off as I lost concentration.

"I thought you were sleeping." I said turning to look at him. He came to stand beside me and picked up my cup, sipped at the now cold tea and made a face.

"I was but when you did not return to bed after an hour I got worried that you had been spirited away. It seems I am getting used to your warmth at my side. Then I heard voices and wondered if there was a party going on I had not been invited to." He said caressing my face.

"I didn't mean to wake you." I said getting up to put the kettle on to make more tea. He sat on one of the kitchen stools and watched me.

"You didn't wake me, Sji'u' Tekari but your absence did." For a moment we just looked at each other. Tousled and sleepy he made my heart skip. He ran his hand through his hair and I realised that as jittery as he made me, so I also had an effect on him. The moment between us hung in the air and then broke when he picked up the little glowing cube.

"So, what is this?" He asked a second time. "And whose voice was I hearing?"

"It's called a holocron." I said. "The Jedi used them as data storage devices. They hold enough data to fill about a hundred standard data chips."

"Clever little device." He studied it carefully in the dim light of the kitchen. "And the woman speaking?" He pressed.

"My birth mother, A'kali L'uanna." I told him, pouring hot water in to the tea pot. "This is her diary."

He turned it over in his fingers. "How does it work?"

I poured two cups of tea then sat on the stool beside him and took the cube from his hands. "It's force activated. Watch." I said. I concentrated and felt my thoughts connect with the little cube.

I fast forwarded a little to pick an entry at random. The cube flickered on and the little holographic image of my mother shimmered into place. I wasn't sure what date of



entry I had picked but she was at least four or five years older than the entry I had been listening to when Thrawn had come into the kitchen.

*\*\*\*My friend Lorana is leaving and she isn't happy about it either. She came to me last night to tell me the news and today the whole place is a buzz. Six Jedi masters and twelve Jedi knights are leaving the Temple to go with the Outbound Flight Project. Nobody thought it was going to go ahead but Master C'boath managed to work it out....*  
\*\*\*

Thrawn looked up at me so suddenly and so sharply that my concentration slipped and the holocron switched itself off.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Did she say *Outbound Flight*?" He asked, there was an edge to his voice that I had never heard before.

I nodded. "Why?"

"Where did you get this from?" He asked ignoring my question.

I hesitated just long enough that he glanced at me, knowing I had considered lying.

"It is important to me." He said quietly.

"The Jedi Temple." I admitted.

He looked at me for a moment. "I thought that place was locked down, the doors all sealed and under tight security. No one can get inside. It is considered condemned and off limits." He asked.

I looked into his eyes. "There are ways around security."

He nodded his understanding. "Take me there." He said getting up.

"Now? Right now?" I asked. "It's the middle of the night."

"There are records in the Temple, yes? Archives?" he asked.

I nodded. "There is an enormous library there, why?"

"Can you access the files?" He asked heading to the bedroom to get dressed. I followed him not liking where this was heading at all.

"Some of them, but the system is old and I don't know how to use it all that well yet."

"Get dressed." He said. "I want you to take me there now, tonight." There was an urgency in his voice I had never heard before and didn't understand. It never occurred to me to refuse or argue with him.

I dressed as he had in clothes that were easy to move in. I slung the satchel with the lightsaber still in it over my shoulder and watched as he checked his pistol and then holstered it.

"We need to go back to the palace." I told him. "The entrance I use is there, but this is not a good idea, the Temple is a bad place to be." I told him.

He nodded. "Your concern is noted. Let's go." He said coldly and without further word we left.

In the darkness of the tunnels we walked quietly. I knew the way well enough I didn't really need the little flashlight I held in my hand and as he had often explained to me before, the Chiss had exceptional night vision. I concentrated on the force, stretching out as far as I could to see for hidden dangers. This wasn't a skill I was very good at but even the little bit I could do helped to ease my growing sense of unrest. Every now and then I felt the brush of Thrawn's hand on my arm reassuring me, a reminder that I was not alone.

"How did you find this passage?" He asked when we were about half way to the temple.

I told him about the blueprints in the library but not about my first trip to the temple with my uncle.

"And you have to be force sensitive to enter?" He queried.

"Yes. All the locks are opened by using the force but I don't know how to explain it. It is a little like the retinal ident scans that you sometimes see. It is as if what is holding to doors shut recognize the touch of the force."

"Interesting." Was the only thing he said to that and we were silent for the rest of the trip.

Once inside the temple I led him to the great library. I felt his awe and nodded a little. The soft light from the archives cast eerie shadows around us and I shivered. This was not where I wanted to be at two in the morning even with Thrawn. I went to the terminal I had used before and activated it.

"What do you want to know?" I asked him.

"Look for any information on the Outbound Flight Project." He said.

I nodded and began a search. It didn't take as long as I had thought. The project had not been a secret. I had pulled up the available files and began to skim through them. He stood behind me and read the information with me.

"Wow, that thing was huge!" I whistled looking at the picture of the actual ship, or rather ships that had been somehow bound together around a central core.

He nodded. "It was."

I looked up at him. "You sound like you saw it."

"I did." He replied coolly in a voice that said 'please stop asking me questions about this right now'.

"What are we doing here?" I asked him, tugging on his sleeve.

He turned to look directly at me. "You are helping find information on something that happened thirty years ago. I need some answers."

"Does this have to do with your brother?" I asked starting to recall some of our previous conversations.

"Partially." He admitted and then he looked at me. "Let's get this done first. I will tell you everything you want to know when we return home."

I nodded and stepped aside to let him continue. While he was busy I began to look around. The great library was huge, with two floors of shelves and stacks filled with data-logs and books. There had been busts and statues lining the main hall way but many of these had been toppled over and smashed or destroyed with blaster fire. Many of the holo-books had been destroyed but not all and although the library was peaceful now, it had been the scene of great violence. I shuddered. It was the first time I had taken the time to look around. The past two visits had been hurried and fearful. Looking around at the wilful destruction of what had once been an extraordinary peaceful place to be did not ease my fears any. This was not a good place any more. It was full of bad memories and restless ghosts.

"A'myshk'a, come here." Thrawn said calmly, his voice echoing about the room.

I went to him and peered over his shoulder.

"I need to find out more about this person." He said tapping the screen.

I looked at the image of Jedi Master C'boath and nodded. He moved out of the way and let me search through the system.

"There might be some more information in the other record's room." I said and went to the room where my uncle had found the holocrons from my mother. He followed me silently, watching with keen interest as I opened the locked door.

In the small room I needed light. I pulled out the small torch from my satchel and began to search. The ghosts here nagged at me, tugged at me and frightened me. After what seemed too long a time I found what I was looking for. The little storage drawer slid open under my touch. While the door to the room was force locked, the rest wasn't. I peeked inside and pulled out the data chips that lay there. They sat in my hand but did not give up any secrets. I looked at Thrawn and then handed them to him. Before he could say

anything I began to look for a name, Jyrki Andando, it was easy to locate but any information that had been removed. I brushed my fingertips over the drawer and let out the breath I had been holding. The last person to have touched this had been my uncle. I glanced over at Thrawn. He was inserting the chips into the terminal reader.

"You can do that at home." I said, angry without knowing why.

He shook his head. "It may be the data leads me to more information we can find here. You don't have to be a force user to access the information inside this room it seems."

I shook my head. "Guess the Jedi were a trusting bunch."

"It was a different time."

I sighed. Then, quite suddenly, I felt a tug from within. Something in the temple called to me, much as it had done the very first time I had been here.

"I have to go find something. Will you be alright here?" I asked.

He nodded, fished in his pocket and tossed me a small comm-link. "There's a built in tracking signal. So you don't get lost."

"I never get lost." I told him tartly.

He just smiled slightly but didn't say anything and before I had turned around to leave he had gone back to studying the information on the data chips.

Maybe I never got lost but I didn't know where I was going. Pulled by an invisible hand I made my way through parts of the Temple I had never been before. I didn't like how I felt. That itchy niggling sensation between my shoulder blades that I associated with very bad things was stronger than ever. I became aware that I was being pulled to the center of the great building, and when I stood in front of the turbo lift I hesitated. Then I stepped in, muttering to myself about what a really terrible idea this was. I didn't know what to expect when I stepped out of the lift but the council chamber wasn't it.

It was a huge room with an ornate floor and chairs of assorted sizes that had once been set in a circle. Behind the chairs were large picture windows. From this room you could look out over Coruscant for as far as the eye could see but it was not these things that stopped my breath. It was the remnants of chaos in the room that caused me to tremble. I walked in and stepped over clothes, broken furniture and what looked like dried blood. My heart raced. I had no idea what I was doing here and I was very afraid.

I walked around the room slowly, hugging my arms close to my body and staring out of the windows. There was so much power in this room and it frightened me. I resisted the temptation to touch the seats. They were all different shapes and sizes and I guessed they had been specifically designed for the person sitting in it reminding me that once upon a time aliens had been as welcome as humans in important roles in the Old Republic.

"Why have you brought me here?" I whispered to the dark but the dark had no answers for me.

Twice I circled the room and then because I didn't know what else to do I slowly and very carefully began to let my fingers brush objects. There were so many memories here that most of what I saw was jumbled and made no sense. I got vague images of the people and beings that had once made major decisions for the Republic's law and order. It was strange and unsettling but it did not answer the nagging feeling that still had not gone away yet. As I began my third time walking behind the seats in a circle I noticed a piece of clothing that had been almost brushed under one of the seats. Without thinking about what I was doing I picked it up. The little robe had belonged to a small boy. I was brought to my knees instantly by the images that the robe sent me. I clutched it to my chest as the visions crashed through me.

*It was night and they were hiding. She had told them to hide, Jocasta Nu, the librarian. "Go to the council Chambers and hide, wait for help!" The children had all hidden away from the noise, from the chaos and the screaming. They were very young and they were scared.*

*One of the little girls was crying. Sors Bandeam, the boy with the blond hair, tried to comfort her but she was too frightened.*

*"Shhh, Caitie, shhh." He was trying to hush her.*

*Caitie hiccupped and shook. "Why is this happening? The soldiers were killing them." She cried.*

*"Sors, what do we do if no one comes?" the owner of the tunic said.*

*Sors shook his head. "I don't know Kelou, trust in the Force, like master Yoda says."*

*All the children had clustered together, hiding behind the chairs. They waited in terrified silence until the sound of the turbo lift broke the night's hush, frightening them even more. They held their breath until the doors opened and a figure stepped out into the dimly lit room.*

*"It's Master Skywalker." Kelou whispered.*

*Sors timidly moved from behind the chair where he had been hiding. He stepped forward to face Anakin Skywalker and the others peeped from behind the chairs, watching.*

*Sors looked up at Anakin "Master Skywalker! There are too many troops! What should we do?" he asked.*

*For a moment there was absolute silence and then Anakin ignited his lightsaber and before anyone could do or say anything he had slaughtered Sors. The others were stunned into silence then Caitie screamed and tried to run. Anakin's saber throw cut her down. Kelou tried to grab the others, to get them to make themselves small, invisible but it was of no use. For a moment there was absolute chaos as the children tried to defend themselves but in the space of seconds Anakin had killed them all. As his lightsaber cut through body of the boy whose tunic I held in my hands, I felt the blow as though it were real, pain sliced through me and I saw the blackness of death as it sucked Kelou down into its maw. He had been the last of the children to die. He had watched all of his friends being murdered by Anakin's hand and his very last thought had been 'Why, Master Skywalker, why?'*

*I sat on the floor gripping the tunic in my hands so tightly I could feel my own nails cutting through the fabric into my palms. As the visions and memories faded, letting go of me I vomited violently.*

*"Why?" I whispered echoing Kelou's words, wiping the spit from my mouth with my sleeve. "Why did you want me to see this?" I was covered in an icy cold sweat and I was shaking. I grasped the back of the nearest chair to try and get to my feet only to be assaulted by a second equally powerful memory.*

*Anakin sat in the chair and looked around the room. The bodies of the children he had slaughtered lay on the floor. The air was filled with the stench of ozone, blood and charred flesh. As the rage which had flooded through him faded he realised what he had done. He had known these younglings since the day they had been brought to the temple. He knew each of them by name. They had looked up to him, admired him and wanted to be like him. They had come to him with their questions, their smiles and in the worst time ever they had come to him out of fear looking to him for protection instead, without thinking about it, he had killed them in cold blood. There, in the silence of the council chambers, Anakin Skywalker leaned back in the chair and covered his eyes with his gloved hand. He knew what he had done was wrong beyond all belief, he knew it but he felt powerless to stop it. He could feel the dark side of the force, its energy seductive and sweet course through him, twisting him from the inside out but somewhere deep down in his soul he also understood he had lost something very precious and he wept. It was there that the Emperor found him, when their eyes met Anakin knew there was no turning*

*back. The Emperor smiled gleefully, his laughter echoing around the blood tainted room and eternally into my brain...*

I might have screamed then but I wasn't certain. I had covered my mouth with my hands, pressing tightly against my lips to stop the terrible sounds that threatened to break out of my chest. I couldn't seem to catch my breath properly. This was how Thrawn found me, kneeling on the council chamber floor, with the stench of vomit on my clothes, trying to remember how to breathe. He didn't try to speak to me; he just pulled me to my feet. A surge of anger so swift and sudden raced through me that I didn't have time to think, I just acted.

I turned on him. "Why did you make me come back here? Why?"

"What happened, are you alright?" he asked.

"No!" I yelled at him, on the verge of hysteria. "No!" I slammed my fists against his chest not once but twice. I hurt him but before I could do it a third time he caught my wrists. I fought him, struggling and shouting at him. What came out of my mouth was gibberish, a mixture of languages and thoughts. I was out of my mind, caught somewhere between my own memories and the memories that did not belong to me at all.

"Merlyn, stop it. Stop it!" He said sharply, holding my arms firmly. I was hyperventilating. He pulled me to him whispering calmly in my ear over and over again. "Breathe Sji'u' Tekari, breathe, you have to calm down." Under the spell of his voice I did as he asked and slowly, slowly came back to myself. Only then did I sense how worried he had been.

"What happened?" He asked again when he knew I could speak. "Tell me."

But I couldn't. How could I verbalize what I had seen? What this room had shown me? What Anakin Skywalker, Darth Vader had done. What the Emperor had asked of him and what it had cost. How could I tell him about the pain of being cut down? How a lightsaber, as it sliced through one's skin, felt? What death looked like or smelled like? I pulled away from him slowly. I felt as though I were moving through soupy, murky water. Somewhere in my brain I knew I was not right, that something was very wrong with me but nothing connected.

"Did you get what you wanted?" I asked with my voice sounding to my ears as though it were coming from some place a billion kilometres away.

He hesitated a second and then nodded. "Yes." The half truth hung in the air. He was torn between his desire and thirst for knowledge and concern for my well being.

"Can we please go now?" I asked. I was scattered and unfocused, and using every ounce of inner strength not to let the rising swell of emotions the visions had created engulf me once more. The screams of the children clamoured in my head and the Emperor's laughter taunted at me, lingering like a terrible smell.

He nodded. He followed me to the turbo lift and we headed back down into the main hall. By the time we had reached the library I had become devoid of all feeling. I stopped in mid stride and looked around. My uncle had been right, I should not have come back here, not because there were dangers lurking waiting to kill me in the shadows because there were too many memories and somehow uncle Vahlek had known my talent was getting stronger. It wasn't the present that would hurt me here, it was the past. Thrawn said nothing as I led the way back to the passage under the city. We slipped out of the Imperial palace and he drove home in silence.

He opened the door to his flat and I pushed past him. I tore at my clothes, stripping them off as I fled to the 'fresher. I desperately needed to wash the stench of fear and the cold, sickly sweat from my body. I stood naked in the bathroom and looked around. I could not recall how I came to be in this room. I felt the kiss of cold touch my soul and the remnants of the Emperor's laughter rippled about me from the inside out. I could still feel the vicious burn as Anakin's lightsaber had sliced into Kelou's flesh, as though his body

and my body were one in the same. In many ways it was as though Anakin had murdered me along with the boy. It was just a memory but it was too real for my mind to separate.

Nausea welled up as my stomach rebelling against the visions and their reality. The taste of bile was bitter and acrid in my mouth, unwanted and unexpected rage, pure and white hot, along with a thousand other emotions suddenly exploded inside of me. I sank to the cold tile floor because my legs couldn't hold me up. I began to scream and I couldn't stop. I knelt on the cold floor, holding my head in my hands trying to block out all images which had branded themselves in my brain, hearing a voice I didn't realise was my own pierce the air. I knew something was really wrong but I was so far removed from myself, it was as though I were watching another person go quite mad from very far away.

I wasn't sure when I became aware of Thrawn at my side. He had wrapped a warm robe around my body and was rocking me back and forth. His arms held me tightly; one hand pressing my head against his chest as though holding me close to the sound of his heart would somehow make things better. He stroked my hair and whispered to me in his native language, eventually bringing me back to the present. The silence in the room was more frightening than my hysterical screaming had been. I sat ridged in his embrace, staring into a void only I could see, clutching at the invisible wound from a lightsaber that had never touched me. It burned.

"Are you calm now?" He asked after what felt like hours. He lifted my face up to look in my eyes. He didn't like what he saw, his worry was palpable.

I nodded but it was a lie. I wasn't calm, I was numb.

"What happened?"

I shook my head. "Can't tell you."

"Why not?" He demanded, there was no mistaking the hint of anger underneath the concern.

"I don't have the words." I told him. "There are no words, none..." I could feel the swell of panic begin to rise again, what I wanted to say tripped on my tongue and came out as babble. He silenced the rush of nonsense with his fingertip.

"Then show me, the way you do with Vader." He said firmly. He knew me well enough to understand that whatever I had seen, whatever it was I had experienced at the Temple was beyond bad but he didn't know what he was asking me to do, what he was asking me to do to him.

I shook my head. I wasn't even sure I could. I had never intentionally tried to share anything with him telepathically and this was not what I wanted to start with. I knew this method of communication worked with Lord Vader, but he was so powerfully in tune with the force it somehow seemed easy and I knew it wasn't. I had no idea how it would work for someone who was head blind to the force.

"Show me." He said punctuating each word, a command rather than a request, still holding my face in his hands, making me look at him. He nodded. So I opened myself up, just as Lord Vader had taught me, I could see the living force all around me, all around him. It danced and rippled. I brushed his mind with mine and felt him fight the invasion for a split second then he opened to me, just enough.

I did as he asked and I showed him exactly what I had seen and felt. Everything I had experienced in the council chambers flooded into him the same way it had done with me. I heard him grunt with the shock and gasp at the pain of it but I didn't stop. When I was finished all he did was hold on to me and he didn't let go. In the silence of the 'fresher I realised that whatever he had been imagining, he had not been expecting or prepared for that. Stunned, he wasn't sure what to do next.

Numb, I pulled away from him and got up slowly. I was chilled and stiff from sitting half naked on the cold floor. "I need to shower." I told him.

He nodded, letting me go. When he joined me under the very hot running water I didn't complain, instead because his kindness and his gentle touch were far more damaging to my ability to hold it together than harsh words or brute strength could have been, I wept. He caressed me as though he could take away the pain, the anguish with the brush of his fingers but it didn't work that way. I tasted of death and it coated everything thing. These memories which were not mine had been permanently burned in my mind, in my soul. I didn't want them and I didn't know what to do with them. After a while I stopped crying, I had no more tears left and just stood under the running water in Thrawn's arms. There was nothing left to do or say. When enough time had passed he turned the water off, covered me in a towel and lifted me up. He cradled me next to him.

"I am so sorry, A'myshk'a. I did not understand" He whispered in my ear. "This gift of yours, it is a terrible thing and I had no idea, no idea at all."

I nodded. "How could you have known?" I asked, suddenly weary beyond belief. I patted his shoulder so he would set me down. I wrapped the towel around me, wrapped my hair in another. I didn't know what else to say to him so I just left him to dry off. I dressed for bed and slipped under the crisp, clean covers of his beautiful antique bed. He followed me, curled his warm body around mine and held on to me tightly. Neither of us uttered a sound and for what little was left of the night we stayed that way neither speaking, nor sleeping. For the very first time in my life I wished that I was force blind, or better yet, dead.

What happened at the temple stayed in my head but I pushed it away to move beyond the horror. Jyrki had been right and I understood, now, why he had run away and why he would always run away. How could anyone ever be whole after experiencing that? For two days I just hid in Thrawn's flat, wrapped up in a blanket curled up on a couch. He worried for me but he also gave me space. He didn't say much when I finally got dressed and ready for work, asking if I could get a ride with him but he was relieved.

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I sat at my desk reading the memos I had missed, catching up on all the correspondence and trying very hard not to flash back to the images of Anakin slaughtering children. I was contemplating making tea when someone knocked at the door. I waved my hand and flicked the force to open it.

"I see you have the new Fete Week schedule." Shiv said as he poked his head around my door.

"Darth Vader and Grand Moff sock puppets?" I asked waving the data pad at him.

He shrugged. "Wasn't my idea, so don't blame me."

I shook my head and sighed.

"So are you planning on attending any of the big events?" He asked sitting on my desk.

"Maybe, depends on how busy I am." I smiled.

"Or how busy a certain Admiral is?" He countered.

I gave him a wan smile. "Ha ha funny." I said. "He's always busy, which you know, so I'll probably be either going it alone or hanging out with you lot."

"Don't sound so thrilled!" He said pretending to be hurt.

"How's Tygs doing? Has he calmed down any?" I asked switching the subject.

"Yeah, oh that reminds me, he said to say he was sorry for the outburst."

I shrugged. "It's okay, the job gets to us all after a while.

Shiv looked at me for a bit. "How are you doing? You look like you've lost weight and you need to do something about the black circles under your eyes, Rim-Girl. Maybe I am going to have to have a little chat with your Admiral friend about your health. Falling for someone is supposed to be good for you, make you all glowy and smiley, not wreck you." He grinned.

"Oh? Well, according to my Holloway books falling for someone is exactly what kills you. How does he put it, *to those on the outside an affair of the heart is a glorious thing but to those in the know it is a destructive demon that will burn your soul to ashes.*" I told him. I didn't dare mention that my two weeks of sleepless nights had very little to do with Thrawn and far more to do with Lord Vader's past.

He gave me a grin. "Okay I get the point, but you know that Holloway was a jaded spice addict who never had any luck with women." He said and he hopped off the desk. "Just came by to tell you that we're heading out to that new bar tonight if you want to come?"

"Thanks, but I have too much to do here. It's a mad house and Lord Vader has been particularly pissy lately and," I added. "I really need to sleep."

Shiv made a face. "Yeah, yeah. If I had a credit for every time I heard those words I'd be wealthier than the Emperor." He waved at me as he left. "And for goodness sakes, eat something; you are starting to look like one of those models Xizor has been dating recently."

I rolled my eyes at him as he left my office. The truth of the matter was I had a lesson with Lord Vader and if I was late or I missed it he would not be impressed. Twice he had arranged a time to start teaching me how to use a lightsaber, my lightsaber and twice now he had cancelled because something had come up. Hopefully the third time would be a charm and work out.

With master Kjestyll's help and guidance my shoulder was slowly getting stronger. It was a tedious, painful process and while I didn't complain much but he knew how I felt so when I had told him about Lord Vader's offer to instruct me in the ways of lightsaber use he was pleased.

"It will do you good to learn something new." He had told me while pushing me to stretch and use my shoulder. "I will come and watch. I have not seen lightsaber taught in a long time."

"Won't Lord Vader mind?" I asked. Sometimes he was tetchy about things like that.

Master Kjestyll had shaken his head and smiled. "No." but he had not explained further and had instead chided me for not concentrating on what I was doing. It had been a long lesson.

In Lord Vader's personal training room I waited with my Master who patiently guided me through a series of warm up stretches and exercises. I was in the middle of a very deep leg stretch when Lord Vader strode in.

"Master Kjestyll, a pleasure to see you as always." He said with a nod of his head.

"Likewise, Lord Vader. My young student here tells me you will instruct her in that most honourable of weapons. She is most fortunate. I hope that you will allow me to observe?"

"Of course." Vader replied.

I had dressed in my Bunduki clothes and had brought the lightsaber I had taken from Jyrki's desk. I didn't think that Lord Vader would know where it had come from or much less care. It was a lightsaber. He held out his hand and I gave it to him. He turned it on and swung it. The blade hummed in the air as it arced about with his motion. He moved it so fast all I saw was a blur of light.

"The blade had good balance." He commented. He was going to say something more but changed his mind at the last minute. He handed it back to me.

"Before we start I have something I want to say." I said.

Lord Vader nodded.

"I wish to keep all my limbs so no cutting off of arms, fingers, hands, legs or anything else. Are we clear?" I said.



Lord Vader laughed. I wished he wouldn't do that, it was very disturbing. "Very well." He said. "I shall refrain from severing anything important."

I shook my head. "Nope, you must refrain from severing anything at all."

This time it was my master who laughed.

"If you insist, now if you are ready...we'll begin." Lord Vader said tartly. "Turn the saber on and stand with it."

I did as he asked. He watched me and after a few seconds my lesson began.

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A soft knocking on the door woke me up. Thrawn walked in before I could say 'don't'.

"Were you asleep in the bath?" He asked, giving me a look. "I called your name twice and knocked. You didn't answer...."

I sank under the bubbles into the now lukewarm water and re-emerged washing the sleep from my face.

"No, I was just resting my eyes." I told him tartly.

"Drowning is very bad form, drowning in my bath-tub would be a terrible breach of decorum." He said handing me a towel. "Lord Vader would be most unimpressed. Lots of paperwork"

"Ha very ha." I said. "Do I smell food?"

He nodded. "Corellian take-out. I ordered you the noodles you like so much, maybe you'll eat them?"

I shot him a look from under towel I was using to dry my hair. But he was right. Ever since the night at the Jedi Temple I had neither eaten nor slept well. He just smiled and left me to dry and dress. I ached and falling asleep in the bath until the water was cool had not helped any. Lord Vader had worked me hard. I was hoping I would sleep the whole night through instead of waking screaming with nightmares built on memories that were not mine. I had suggested going to sleep in the spare room so as not to disturb Thrawn but he had just shaken his head saying; "If you do that I'll just have to get up to see if you are okay or are being murdered in your sleep."

While he changed from his uniform, I set the table. He opened a bottle of wine and we sat down to eat.

"I received the invitations to the Bernau art exhibit today." I told him.

He smiled. "When is it?"

"Next week." I chewed absently on the noodles and stir fried vegetables. "Will you be able to accompany me?" I asked with a grin.

"I'd be delighted to but it depends on my schedule." He said. "I cannot make you any promises."

I nodded. "Well, the Emperor mentioned that I ask you."

He stared at me for a moment. "He did, did he?"

I nodded. "I believe his exact words were *'I'll look forward to seeing you both there'*."

"He does not miss much." He said after a long pregnant pause.

"No, he doesn't." I added. "It drives me crazy. He makes all these innuendos but he never comes out and says anything straight. Speaking with him is like watching a holo with dual language soundtracks. One you hear and can understand and the other one is incomprehensible but you are still aware of its presence." I shook my head.

Thrawn nodded. "He enjoys these games."

"That's what Lord Vader says. But I don't understand it."

"There is a point, my dear, when power is not enough. He has all the power in the galaxy so now he plays with it. People become pawns and he manipulates them to see who is stronger, who can adapt and survive. He weeds out those he deems unsuitable by playing them against each other, the fittest survive." He sipped his wine and continued. "He has made a life time out of studying the fallibility of the beings around him, using their weaknesses, their desires and their fears to gain what he wants from them. It is almost poetry to watch sometimes. Most creatures in his court are completely unaware of it; you are among the few who at least see something is going on, to a certain extent."

"I hate it!" I said vehemently.

Thrawn smiled. "Of course you do. I know that as does he." He said. "He counts on this fact."

As I sat staring at the food on my plate a terrible thought suddenly came to me. "Do you suppose he knows that I can get into the Jedi Temple?"

"Hard to say." He replied. "But who gave you access to the Library where you found the blue prints to both the Imperial Palace and the Temple? You have to ask yourself, what were such valuable plans doing left lying in an unused library to begin with?"

Suddenly I wasn't so hungry any more. "What is it he wants from me?" I asked.

Thrawn shrugged. "Nothing and then again, perhaps, everything? You interest him. I suspect he throws these bread crumbs in your path to see which way you will go. How much use you could be? How far you can be pushed." He said pouring more wine in my glass, nodding at me to continue to eat. "The Emperor has at his disposal an exclusive group of people known as his Hands. They act as agents to his will. Most of them believe they are the only one, unique in a position created just for them, which could not be further from the truth. I have often wondered if he is not grooming you for such a place in his court. As I have said before, you are far too talented and clever to have your skills wasted as a mere personal assistant, no matter what you believe. Your language skills alone are remarkable enough to warrant a better job." He sat back and studied the wine in his glass. "It is your strange devotion to Lord Vader and perhaps Vader's own odd relationship with you that has allowed you to keep the job you love so much. Of all the things you are it is this one point that the Emperor does not quite understand and so he watches."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Understand?"

He smiled. "Perhaps a little more than Palpatine does."

I just made a face and then nodded. "What does he expect me to get out of the Temple then?"

"That I don't know, but then again maybe he does not expect anything, perhaps he is just looking to see what happens and what you do with the information you obtain." He said. "Does he know about your ability to read memories from objects? I remember you mentioning that it was a surprise to Vader when he learned of your talent."

I thought about it for a moment, my fork playing absently with the now cold noodles. "I don't know. Lord Vader has said often enough he doesn't bother the Emperor with trivial information about me. He hasn't told the Emperor about my birth mother, I am sure of that. I am not that important in his eyes and my psychometric gift isn't something the Emperor would just feel from me, it's not a force gift, it is merely enhanced by the force."

Thrawn nodded. "Perhaps then, he was just giving you access to a larger library, to see what you would do with it." He said. "Sometimes it is easy to ascribe too much meaning behind an action, over estimating one's opponent's intelligence or knowledge."

"Are you saying I am giving him too much credit?"

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. "It is just a thought. The Emperor is very powerful, make no mistake, but he is also very single minded sometimes. He believes he knows his servant, Lord Vader through and through yet you prove that this is not the case. Vader keeps information back from his master, perhaps for the simplest of reasons but still...." He paused. "Palpatine is a very clever man but he lets his desire for power and his desire to maintain that power cloud his sight sometimes."

"How do you know all of this?" I asked pushing the last of the food on my plate around with my fork.

Thrawn gave me one of those smiles. "I make it my business to know, my dear." He said, giving me his standard answer.

He did not fear the Emperor the way so many others did but rather seemed to study Palpatine, the way he studied works of art, looking for patterns and weaknesses. I often wondered why but I never asked. There was a moment's pause and then he asked. "Would you like something for desert?"

"What did you have in mind?"

And there was that smile again.

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Fete Week began with its usual bang. Galaxy News Service broad waved the opening ceremonies from Coruscant and I watched it from the comfort of my couch. I wasn't feeling very celebratory and the last place I wanted to be was in the middle of happy, cheering crowds that had been plied with too much liquor, egged on by fireworks and news-nets.

It had been a particularly stressful week. Lord Vader had been alerted to the fact that the Rebels he was searching for may very well have been on Coruscant and had then escaped to a base thought to have been established on Cheeyoom Matee. Needless to say this news didn't make him happy. I had been surprised that any of these people who were wanted criminals would actually dare to even venture onto Coruscant but Lord Vader had merely shrugged when I had mentioned this during one of our lessons.

"Sometimes," he had said, "the best place to hide was in plain sight."

"Will you go after them yourself?" I had asked.

"Only if incompetence dictates I must." He said tartly. "Now, if you have finished wasting time with your idle chatter, perhaps we can continue?"

And we did.

He had been using small combat training remotes and I had been forced to wear a blind fold. The little remotes had a nasty little charge which they shot out at me and if I wasn't quick enough with the lightsaber to block it I was stung painfully enough to remind me I didn't want to get stung again. The lessons learned were slow and frustrating. But even I had to admit I saw improvement when, as a reward, at the end of my lessons I was allowed to remove the blindfold and spar with Lord Vader. I sometimes thought, when watching him, that using a lightsaber was a little akin to dancing with light.

For all his temper and tantrums, he was a surprisingly good teacher when it came to this weapon and I enjoyed the time I got to spend with him. Using a lightsaber was not like a combat staff, for one it was a lot shorter and secondly, I only had to worry about one end, not two. He talked about the various styles of lightsaber techniques there were and explained to me in great detail about the styles he was teaching me. I think he almost enjoyed these lessons, although he would never admit it. Usually by the time we were done I was exhausted and he was just getting started. I would often sit and watch him practice against specially designed droids and far more advanced combat remotes. Sometimes my master would join us. I was surprised that he too was able to use a lightsaber and delighted

when he asked to borrow mine. It was an amazing sight to watch them practice against each other.

Fete Week meant that many of the non essential departments were closed for the duration of the holiday. I was not so lucky. Stuck in my office wading through the lists of things that Lord Vader needed done and the never ending sea of internal memos was not my idea of fun, it was made even more unpleasant when unexpected visitors barged their way in.

"Grand Admiral Tigellinus, what can I do for you?" I asked as he stormed into the office looking, for all the galaxy, like an enraged Rancor in a glass shop.

"Where is he?" he asked leaning with both hands on my desk so that his face was just centimetres away from mine.

I looked up into his eyes and smiled sweetly. "Could you be a tad more specific?" I asked.

"Vader! Where the devil is he? I have been trying to reach him all morning!" he snapped.

"I'm sorry Lord Vader is not in his office at the moment, perhaps if you'd care to leave a message with his secretary droid and make an appointment?"

"Pah!" He spat and spun away from the desk to start pacing about the room. "I know he's here! I demand to speak with him now!"

I folded my hands on my desk and stared at him evenly. "Lord Vader is not in his office." I repeated. "Perhaps if you would care to elaborate on the nature of your ....problem, I could pass the message along?"

"Elaborate!!! You of all people should know what the issue is!" He shouted.

I sighed. "Grand Admiral Tigellinus, I may be many things but a mind reader isn't one of them. Unless you let me know what the problem is I cannot help you. Lord Vader gave strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed." Which was the truth and usually meant he was in serious meetings with the Emperor. There was no way in the galaxy I was going to even consider bothering him of that was truly the case.

"That alien, Thrawn, is the problem!" Tigellinus finally spat. "Have you really not heard?"

I raised an eyebrow in response and waited.

"He is to be inducted into the Order of the Canted Circle and this is unacceptable! He is not nearly suitable and he is not even human! I want to speak with Lord Vader and ask him to talk to the Emperor about this!"

I nodded. I was quite certain I could tell Tigellinus Lord Vader's reply pretty much word for word, but I rather liked my job and didn't want to push it by being needlessly rude although it would have been fun. So instead I said. "I shall inform his Lordship of your problem and try to arrange a meeting for you with him as soon as is possible, but I have to warn you Lord Vader is extremely busy at the moment."

Tigellinus grimaced. "You had better tell him, young lady."

"Are you accusing me of not doing my job?" I asked.

He sneered. "Everyone knows that you have an *interest* in Thrawn, if he becomes a member of the Canted Circle then he becomes even more powerful. That would be most beneficial for you would it not?"

I smiled at him and he didn't like what he saw in my smile. "Grand Admiral Tigellinus, my personal life is just that personal and my interests wherever they lie are also my own. If you have an issue with how I do my job then I suggest you take it up with Lord Vader himself. I will do the best I can to arrange a meeting for you with him at his earliest convenience but make no mistake; he will not appreciate you wasting his time with trivial matters such as these. If I am to understand how the system for induction into the circle works, it is the Emperor who has the last say and makes the choices. If this is the case then

I doubt very much Lord Vader would wish to interfere with this process." The little tilt of my head said *'Do I make myself clear?'*

He regarded me for a moment then in a swift motion he rounded on my desk and once again leaned into my face. "Zaarin was right about you, you are nothing more than alien loving Outer-Rim trash. It is people like you who will cause the downfall of the Empire!" he hissed.

I blinked at him, my own anger boiling away in my gut. Then I just smiled again. "What century did you say you wished to see Lord Vader?"

Tigellinus made a noise of disgust and stormed out of the office. I counted to ten and when nothing else happened I got up to make spiced 'caf. Just as I was pouring a cup for myself Thrawn walked in.

"I don't suppose there is enough in there for two?" he asked. He sat down in the chair near my desk and accepted the cup I offered gratefully. He looked tired.

"Welcome back." I said with a smile. "You just missed Tigellinus." I added rolling my eyes.

"Thank the stars for small mercies. I suppose he gave you an earful?" Thrawn said, stretching his long legs out, crossing one ankle over the other.

I smiled. "Well, he wasn't happy." And I repeated the Grand Admiral's last words to me.

Thrawn just shook his head. "He's furious about this development. He sees it as an affront to his own induction. He hates me with a passion which would be funny if it weren't for the problems it creates. I only found out about the news last night when I returned. I would have told you but you were not home when I got there." He said. I searched for recrimination in his voice but found none.

I nodded. "I had a very long work day and then a very long training session and then Shiv dragged me out to a late supper because he's convinced I am going to starve to death. I stayed at the flat here, less distance to get into work this morning. Lord Vader scheduled a five am meeting." I said. "I guess congratulations are in order?"

Thrawn shrugged. "We shall see. The Emperor has pushed my name through and many people are very unhappy about it. It will be interesting to see how this all plays out, to say the least." He ran a hand through his hair. "The ceremony is in six days. Will you be there?"

"Probably." I grinned. "How long are you planet-side for?"

"At least the next couple of weeks." He said. "I can accompany you to the art exhibit if that's what you are asking." He smiled as he looked up at me.

"The Emperor spoke of it again yesterday, you know, in passing." I said repressing the desire to shudder at the memory of that meeting. "Asked if I had mentioned it to you."

Thrawn shook his head. "Of course he did." He muttered.

"More fuel for the rumour mill, people will start to assume something is going on between us." I said with a little smile.

"And they would be right." He replied tartly. "The social-political dance of this place never ends."

"Tigellinus is going to fight your appointment tooth and nail you know." I said.

Thrawn nodded as he stood up. "Yes," he said, "I am counting on this."

I just looked at him. "Okay." I wasn't going to ask; asking why would lead to a lecture and a lesson which would mean me spending the rest of the morning trying to figure out Thrawn's motives for this statement. I couldn't be bothered to play this game so early on in the day. I changed the subject. "So to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"I wanted to know if I should arrange food for two or just one tonight." He said.

"Gosh I don't know...eating my terrible attempts at cooking in my unsecured flat all alone with only the holonet for company or a decent dinner I did not have to cook with you

in your lovely home, followed by some interesting indoor activities.... tough choice." I said giving him a look.

"And you have no lessons this evening?" He asked dryly, ignoring my bad attempt at humour.

"No. Lord Vader is busy and Master Kjestyll is away for the next two days. I think my lightsaber techniques scare them." I said miming a swishy poke motion with a pen.

Thrawn laughed. "I can only imagine. I should be done by six, if all goes well. I will pick you up then." He said. "We can talk more tonight."

"Talk? Is that what they call what we do nowadays?" I asked cheekily. I was glad to see him back. I'd missed him.

He just cocked an eyebrow at me and shook his head. "Be careful, Miss Gabriel, one day that tongue of yours is going to get you into trouble."

"Ooh, something to look forward to." I said.

He shook his head. "Hopeless." He sighed, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. "I shall see you later, my dear."

"Not unless I see you first."

He gave me the 'okay okay you win' gesture and escaped my office before I could say anything else, smart assed or silly.

I sighed and went back to work, hoping that was it for visitors for the day, looking forward to the evening.

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We arrived at the Nona Shyr Art Gallery shortly after eight and were in plenty time to hear the Emperor's opening words and the organiser's thank you speech as the exhibition was opened.

Thrawn, dressed in his uniform, gracefully retrieved two glasses of some pale pink drink in oversized champagne glasses. He handed one to me and I sipped it quietly while listening to the speech being given by the artist's daughter. I glanced around and was amazed at how full the large gallery room was. Many of the faces I recognized and some I did not. I was glad I had chosen to wear one of Cati's more exotic dresses because everyone was dressed up in their finest, or like Thrawn, they wore a uniform. Even gallery openings doubled as a Coruscant fashion show. Every clapped politely as the speeches ended and the exhibition was opened up for all to view. Smartly dressed wait staff manoeuvred deftly through the crowds serving strangely coloured drinks and gorgeous canapés.

Ermall Bernau had been a brilliant sculptor and painter who had been born on Bakura, where he had lived until the age of forty seven. He had moved to Alderaan when he had met his wife and spent the rest of his life there. He, along with all of his family except his daughter, had been killed when the planet had been destroyed. His works were strange yet elegant abstract representations of humans and aliens. He elongated the figure and exaggerated the limbs as well as the more prominent features physical features. He had primarily used Galanium as his favourite medium, a beautiful mix of neutronium and gold favoured by many artists.

His paintings were more about colour and motion than any particular concrete form. In a book about his work that my mother had owned he had said that he couldn't be bothered with the finicky art of using a brush so he used his fingers and his paint buckets and slopped paint on the canvas, using his hands to play with the colours. I had often discussed with Bel about whether or not this could be considered art, after all, I often said playing devil's advocate, *a small child could do the same thing*. These discussions had often gone on all night.

Now in the very beautiful setting of the Nona Shyr Gallery I looked at his paintings in a new light. I left Thrawn's side to explore on my own, looking at each work, each painting and sculpture carefully, taking in the details of each piece. I was astonished at the vibrancy of his colours in the paintings and the tiny details of his sculptures that one never saw in books. I came to one painting called *The Fractured Force* and I was stopped in my tracks by it. I wasn't sure if it was the colours he had used or the way in which they had been blended and shaped but whatever it was, the painting took my breath away. I stared at it, mentally tracing the paths his fingers had taken through the paint that had been dripped and poured onto the canvas. I had never seen a painting before that literally cried out to me. A painting that physically made me ache with a sorrow that I never even knew possible. I had to swallow down the sudden desire I had to cry.

"This was my father's favourite, of all his paintings." said a soft, heavily accented voice to my side. I turned to look into the face of Bernau's daughter.

"Why?" I asked, curious.

She sighed for a moment and thought about her answer carefully. "He said that when he painted it, it was as if the whole galaxy was a storm which poured into his being. He painted it close to the end of the Clone wars, just as the Jedi were declared outlaws to the state. *When the madness really began*, he used to say. I think it was that which broke his heart. He said he knew at that moment, when the Jedi were being slaughtered, that the soul of the universe was fractured in two." She stared at the painting for a long time and then looked back at me. "I'm sorry. You must think me very rude. I am Anallya Bernau." She said offering me her hand. I shook it and introduced myself.

"Ahhh yes," she nodded slowly. "The Emperor has mentioned your name to me. He said you were very interested in art. It was he who suggested that I speak with you." She smiled.

"The Emperor is most kind with his words." I said glancing around to see him talking with Thrawn and Grand Admiral Zaarin. Lord Vader was not present. I had mentioned the show to him and his reply had been rude. I turned back to look at Anallya. "Why would your father think that way about the Jedi Purge?"

She shrugged slightly. "I do not know, he would never say exactly. He once told me that the Jedi had overseen peace in the galaxy for thousands of years and their destruction was a terrible blow for everyone." She told me softly. "When the Empire was created he stopped painting. After that he concentrated only on his sculptures. I was only five at the time. This painting was his gift to me when I left Alderaan to go to school here. He said it was to remind me of what could happen when chaos and greed clouded good judgement. I never understood what he meant and he died before I could think to ask." She said, looking at me with an expression I didn't understand. "You are the first person I have ever seen look at it exactly the same way he used to."

I nodded. "It's very powerful." I said softly. "I had no idea your father's paintings were so vivid. This is the first time I have ever seen any for real. Was it you who organized this showing?" I asked wanting to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"Actually it was the Emperor who requested a collection of his works. I am here as a token, I think. I must be very honest with you Miss Gabriel; I do not like art all that much. I am far more interested in mathematics and physics." She smiled. "But as the only surviving member of the family I felt it was my duty to come and see my father's work so honoured. It is a shame the show is private and just for this one evening, but it is for a good cause."

I nodded. Unlike me most of the patrons had purchased their 'invitations' at a huge price. All proceeds were to go to the preservation of Alderaanian flora and fauna. The exhibition was a veritable who's who of the Coruscant rich and famous.

I nodded. When Thrawn appeared, I introduced him to Anallya and the rest of the evening passed in a haze of interesting art discussion, polite, banal banter and subtly underhanded political back stabbing. I suppressed the desire to run when the Emperor came over to join us. Once the polite formalities of bowing and curtsying were done he began to converse with us.

"I see you two young ladies have met." He said casually to both Anallya and me. We nodded. She was in awe of him, me, I was just terrified.

"Well, Miss Gabriel how are you enjoying the show?" he enquired politely, with that slight smile that reminded me of dead things.

"It's very impressive your Excellency." I said, trying to avoid eye contact.

"And you, Admiral, what do you think? Do you share young Miss Gabriel's sweepingly general opinion?"

I frowned at his barb and his smile widened just a hair's breadth.

Thrawn cocked that single eyebrow and looked around the room. "I find the juxtaposition of the three dimensional works with his earlier paintings quite jarring." He said coolly.

"Why?" demanded Palpatine, leaning a little closer towards his only Chiss officer as he asked.

Thrawn drew a slow deep breath. "His earlier works stem from a time when he was more content and happy. His art is more free in its expressive nature; he explores the universe through his rather unconventional use of paint. One can see the sudden shift from this freedom of spirit and artistry when one looks carefully at the piece he called *The Fractured Force*, the last piece he ever painted, if I am not mistaken?" he looked at Anallya who nodded. "After he stopped painting he began to explore the world through three dimensional medium but this medium lacked the freedom his earlier works show. His sculptures are exaggerated images of beings that, when one understands how the Empire works, are the forgotten races, the alien races who now find themselves on the fringe of society. These sculptures are tight and constricted, bound by some law he did not feel when he painted. He found a way to enslave his talent and prison it in his sculptures, the same way the Empire enslaves alien races and binds them to work in the ship yards. This tells me he felt constrained to produce more conventional looking works, but instead he produced art which spoke of sadness and bitterness. To place the two styles together in one room is jarring. They are so diametrically opposed to each other. Freedom verses restriction. Light verses dark. He was not pleased with the fall of the Old Republic and it shows in his art. Were he alive today I cannot help but think he would be siding with the Rebel Alliance and not with the Empire."

Palpatine stared at Thrawn for what seemed an eternity. The air was suddenly thick and oppressive with the power of the force which Palpatine wielded. It was almost as if Thrawn had laid down some invisible challenge and the Emperor was deciding what to do about it. I stared at the Emperor for a second, waiting for his response. Then without warning the world around me seemed to shimmer and fall away. I found myself staring at Thrawn seated in a command chair dressed completely in white clutching his hands to his chest. It was not this strange scene that caused my heart to skip a beat but the look of surprise on his face and the red of the blood that ran from underneath his fingers. As swiftly as it had come so the vision vanished, leaving me shaking in its wake. It had been so quick, so brief and yet so real that for the barest of moments I had no idea where I was. I knew a sort of fear then, not for myself but for the man whose bed I shared, whose affections I held onto and did not want to lose. It was a sudden sharp ache and the sheer power of it made me clutch my pendant and gasp.

Palpatine turned to look at me. "My dear young lady, you are as white as an Alderaan lily, are you feeling quite well?"



I glanced at Thrawn who showed no emotion at all and nodded. "Yes, I am fine. Just a little tired." I said, trying not to show my trembling fingers.

Palpatine took my hand in his and patted it in the most avuncular manner. His skin was cool and dry. "Perhaps it is time the good Admiral here took you back home. You look as though you have seen some terrible spectre. I am quite sure Lord Vader would be most displeased should his favourite employee take ill."

I had to fight the urge to pull my hand away from his and nodded slightly, lowering my eyes so he would not see the emotion that boiled there. "I'm fine, really it's nothing. Too long a day and I didn't eat enough."

"Of course." Palpatine said in that caress of a voice which slithered down my back making me shudder. This time Thrawn glanced at me in a '*do you wish to leave?*' sort of look and I shook my head slightly all the while being observed by Anallya and the Emperor. With a deep steadying breath I found my center and put a lid on the fear that never seemed to go away whenever the Emperor was near.

"Well then, I must attend to my paying guests, I shall let you young ladies enjoy the evening." He said to Anallya and me. He turned then to Thrawn, "Perhaps you should look to Miss Gabriel's well being, Admiral. She does seem to blossom under your care." His words had a strange touch of threat to them which I didn't understand. "Perhaps at another time we shall discuss further your ideas about Bernau's works." He added and as we bowed and curtsied he moved off, his shadowy entourage moving with him. I stared at his back until Thrawn handed me another drink and Anallya began to ask Thrawn more about his own feelings on the show and art in general. Slowly I found myself able to think straight again and after a few sips of the incredibly cold drink I felt almost normal. The strange vision receded but the irrational fear it had instilled remained. As much as I enjoyed the event, I was grateful when it was time to leave. My face ached from having to smile so much.

A few days after the exhibition I was curled up on the couch with Thrawn watching a report from the Colonial News Nets about the recent activity by the Imperial forces. They had just taken the planet Lirra away from the Hutts in a dramatic show of force. The footage shown was quite astonishing. The reporter who had been embedded with the battalion detached to deal with this situation was currently shouting into his recorder about the bloody battle currently going on to free the Human slaves. He was elated about the freeing of the humans and I wondered as I watched this if the rest of the galaxy's non human population felt the same way. The Empire used slaves without apology, especially from planets such as Kashyyyk. Thrawn just shook his head at the report and was about to change the feed when the doorbell sounded. It was late enough that someone coming to call raised eyebrows. He made a *stay here* hand gesture and went to answer it. When he came back he had a large, flat rectangular box in his arms.

"It's for you." He said.

With his help I opened it. Inside the box, under the protective wrapping was the Bernau painting; *The Fractured Force*.

"I wasn't aware this piece was for sale." Thrawn said as he cleared away the paper and the packaging, setting the painting against the table so that when we both sat on the couch we could look at it.

"It isn't, wasn't." I told him. "It belongs to his daughter." I stared at the painting, feeling that strange emptiness in my gut and the sudden prickle of tears. I didn't stop them as they trickled down my cheek. I didn't understand my reaction to this piece of art at all.

"This was tucked in the back of the canvas." He said handing me an envelope. I took it from his hand and slipped the letter out but my hand shook as I went to read it. I was grateful when he took it from my hand and gave me a puzzled glance. I ignored it, wiping the tears off my face angrily.

He looked at me for a moment but didn't comment on my visibly visceral reaction to the painting. Instead he read the letter to me, his voice soothing the bizarre storm of emotions that made me ache.

*Dear Miss Gabriel,*

*I know this is quite forward of me and I hope that you will forgive any breach of etiquette. I told you that my father had given me this painting when I had left home to go and study here at the Coruscant Institute for technology to remind me of what could happen when chaos and greed clouded good judgement. What I did not tell you is that I really disliked this painting and he knew that as well. It frightened me although I never knew or understood why. I suspect that on some level he was aware of this and was hoping I would learn some lesson from it. My father and I never communicated all that well.*

*I had not wanted to keep the painting, I often discussed it with him because I was well aware of its market value and felt it was wasted hanging on the wall of a room I rarely used because I couldn't stand to look at it. He made me promise to keep it safe until I found a person who felt about it the same way he did. I asked him how I would ever know that and he said 'you will see it in their eyes, their body language and their face'. I never believed him until I saw your reaction to it at the showing and then I understood.*

*The conversation I had with my father about this painting, the one where I extracted this promise from me was the last one I had with him. Two days later he, along with everyone else who was on the planet at the time, was killed with the destruction of Alderaan. Every time I look at the painting I remember this conversation and it makes me sad.*

*As it was his wish and because I can no longer bear to have this painting in my possession I would very much like you to have it. I hope that you will enjoy and treasure it. I think you will, I saw your expression and I believe that this piece speaks to you in a way I am unable to comprehend.*

*I hope you do not mind that I was able to obtain the address of where you currently reside from the Emperor himself. The Human Resources office was a bit vague about how to reach you and I did not want to leave the painting just anywhere.*

*If you have any questions or would perhaps like to meet for non art conversation I would be delighted.*

*Sincerely yours,  
Anallya Bernau*

I sat back on the couch hard, watching as he folded the letter up and slipped it back in its envelope. His touch was incredibly gentle as he stroked my face.

"You seem to have made quite an impression; this painting is worth a small fortune." He said softly.

I shook my head. "It's priceless and she hated it." I told him. "And since when did this place become my mailing address? As far as HR and everyone else are concerned, my place of residence is still the flat at the palace." Anger leached into my voice taking the place of the inexplicable sorrow I had just felt.

Thrawn shrugged. "I have not advertised the fact that you often spend more nights here than there, but the Emperor does seem to keep a close eye on your whereabouts. I would not worry about it too much. He was probably concerned that such a valuable piece of art made it to where it was supposed to without incident. The loss of such a work of art would not look too good on the palace couriers."

I nodded but was unconvinced. In little, insignificant ways the Emperor made it known that he was a part of my life, a gentle guiding hand, a subtle suggestion whispered. I

loathed his interference almost as much as I feared it. That he knew I tended to spend more time here than at the flat in the palace bothered me. It made me wonder, if he knew then who else also knew and if that was the case just how safe was I really? I sighed and stared at the painting. It made me sad, touching something deep in my being that made me ache without knowing why.

"Can I hang this in the spare room?" I asked after a long silence. The spare room had become my room by default. It was where I kept my things that I didn't want at the flat in the palace, my study and place to go when I wanted to be by myself but to actually call it mine seemed to cross a line I wasn't quite ready for yet.

Thrawn nodded. "Of course. I have told you, that room is yours to do with as you wish." He said as if he could read my thoughts. He had stopped being subtle about his feelings towards me sharing his home. I was a part of his world and he did not regret his choices in this matter, but I was still uncertain. I made a face and got up, taking the painting and the letter into the room. I didn't want to look at it anymore and I certainly didn't want to think about all the implications that came along with it.

When I came back Thrawn had poured two brandies and was watching me intently.

"You have that look on your face again." He said as I sat back down beside him.

"What look is that?"

"The haunted one." He said.

I shook my head. "Well that would be because there are too many damn ghosts in my life, Za'ar." I said.

He stared at me steadily for a moment and then said. "There are no such things as ghosts, my dear."

I didn't answer him; I just sipped the brandy and settled back against his warmth. I knew he was wrong but there were just some things one could not argue with Thrawn about no matter what.

We also never spoke of what I had seen and experienced in the Jedi Temple. Thrawn did not bring the subject up and neither did I but I thought about it a great deal. Many nights I woke up crying from a nightmare where I watched the slaughter of those younglings over and over again. Each time the dream ended the same way, with the Emperor laughing, his hand upon Anakin's shoulder whispering the words, "*Well done, my young apprentice, well done.*" But Anakin had not felt that way. I remembered how he had felt, and he had not been proud, he had been scared and confused as well as angry.

On these nights where I would wake, unable to return to sleep, I would get up, wrap a blanket around my shoulders and sit out on the balcony, watching the city move around me, oblivious to the dark currents that ran underneath everything. I found it odd that I did not hate Lord Vader for what he had done, what he had become but rather a part of me pitied him. He had admired the Emperor; I knew this from my birth mother's journal. Anakin Skywalker had been a lonely often sad young boy and it was then Chancellor Palpatine who had befriended him in many ways becoming the surrogate father Anakin had never had.

But Palpatine had used and manipulated Anakin so subtly that Anakin had not seen it coming until it was too late, until there was no turning back. Now, no longer Anakin Skywalker, Lord Vader hated the Emperor and it was something the Emperor counted on but I didn't understand this. Everything about their relationship was wrapped up in lies and deceit and I knew that somewhere deep in whatever was left of his soul, Lord Vader was biding his time. I also knew that at the very heart of the matter was his love for the woman called Padmé and his mother but these were topics I could never talk with him about. He either got violently angry or silent and moody to the point of shutting himself

away for days. I had learned very quickly which topics were off limits. That had been a matter of pure survival.

Not for the first time, during these episodes, did I wonder if Jyrki had not been right about everything all along and I was the one in the wrong. Working for men who murdered younglings, oppressed rights and freedoms of non humans, whose only real goal seemed to be the accumulation of power, but somehow I could not justify what Jyrki had done to me either. Two wrongs did not make a right, as my father used to tell me, and I felt as though I were trapped in the middle. It seemed to me, sitting alone in the cool of the dark that the galaxy was slowly going mad, spiralling inward on itself and the only thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want to get caught in the implosion.

Thrawn left me alone on nights such as these. He would watch me, the questions on his lips, in his eyes and mind never spoken aloud, as I left the warmth of the bed we shared. He had tried, at first, to draw out my thoughts and discuss the situation but I would close up and, much like Lord Vader, become moody and peevish. He had learned that there were some things in my life that required space and time not discussion and classification. What was there to discuss? These memories were never mine but now they were a part of me and only I could deal with them. The one person who could have helped and given me clarity was the one person I could never talk with about them and so it was either sink or swim. My experience with the aftermath of a trauma had taught me that pure denial was useless and often ended in me doing something dramatic and stupid. So I would sit on the balcony of Thrawn's beautiful Coruscant apartment and allow the thoughts to work themselves through.

More often than not it was there Thrawn would find me, curled up under the thickly woven Dantassi blanket which had become my favourite, staring out at the slowly lightening, pre dawn sky. He wouldn't say much but usually brought me a cup of sweet tea and together we would sit in silence as night gave way to day. Somewhere along the line he had come to understand that his silence was as much a gift as his ability to analyse and unravel a situation through strategy and tactical thought.

It was times such as these where I knew that my downfall, as far as he was concerned, was complete. He had become such an integral, important part of my life that were he to suddenly vanish I would be utterly devastated. This was something I never told him, never spoke of and kept well hidden. I knew in my heart that while, for the time being, he was content to stay on Coruscant and play the political games, dance that elegant dance of court intrigue, it would not last. I would catch him sometimes staring up at the sky and the sensation of longing I felt from him was so intense it made me catch my breath. So I treasured what time we had together, knowing it would change. Everything changed, it was inevitable. Even the stars in the sky did not last forever.

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Lord Vader's cloak rippled out behind him as he walked down the long corridor to the beautiful botanical gardens. I trotted behind him trying to keep up and not trip on the cloak at the same time.

"Keep up, girl!" he barked.

"You try running in heels!" I hissed under my breath. I had my long dress gathered in my hands and I did my best to keep up. When we entered the Skydome Botanical Gardens the lively buzz of conversation that had filled the air stopped dead and everyone shut right up and stared at Lord Vader, then they glanced at me and then went back to their conversation. This was standard behaviour wherever and whenever there was a crowd. Lord Vader entering a room had a tendency to be a conversation killer, fortunately the effect wasn't lasting.

As we walked through the crowd I was amazed by the numbers of people attending Thrawn's ceremonial acceptance into the Order of the Canted Circle. I guessed that the induction of the Emperor's favoured alien was a great attraction for the curious. I looked around to see who I recognised. I saw Prince Xizor with his latest girlfriend; the council of Twelve Grand Admirals were also present, easy to spot by their brilliant white uniforms. There were many members of the Imperial navy present from many ranks and at least two thirds of the Imperial Court and palace staff were also present. Everyone dressed in their designer finest and I was no exception.

I had asked Cati for something special for this event and she had just given me a grin.

"I hear this event is quite a big thing for your gentleman." She had said as she wielded pins.

"Shiv has a big mouth!" I'd replied.

She had laughed. "I think the entire planet has heard about this event." She'd said.

"They just don't know about the two of you." She had added. "Yet...."

The dress she had designed for me was stunning. Made from a crepe silk and dyed in colours that echoed the ripples of colour in the milky Ma'arilite pendant I was wearing, it was deeply backless and delicate. Tiny sparkly gems lined the neck line and the slender straps that held it in place. I felt as though I were dressed in sky fire. As always, I wore shoes to match, with high enough heels that I needed to watch how I walked. I wore my hair up, pinned in place with the beautiful Zenji sticks that Thrawn had given. I felt about as elegant as I was able to so when Lianna came up to stand beside me I didn't feel as I usually did, like an Outer Rim desert rat.

"Quite the turn out." she said.

I nodded and glanced at her. As always, she was dressed beautifully wearing a pale lavender, off the shoulder dress. Her red-gold hair was elaborately coifed and curled and the necklace she wore was a very expensive Miastique design.

"I see Lord Vader is in fine form. I didn't think he would be here." She smiled but it never reached her eyes. She didn't like Vader very much. He was competition for the Emperor's attention and affections, such as they were, but somewhere along the line she had decided that I was no longer a big threat and the tension between us had eased a little.

"A case of *see to be seen*." I told her but in truth Lord Vader had actually wanted to attend this event and had insisted I accompany him. I wasn't complaining.

"No one in their right minds would miss this event. No one expected the Emperor to personally push for a non human to be inducted." She said. "Look, even Tigellinus showed up."

I stifled a laugh. The whole palace was abuzz about how vocal Rufaan Tigellinus had been against Thrawn's induction. "He's not shy, that's for sure."

Lianna shook her head. "He angered the Emperor though."

"Really, I thought that The Emperor encouraged that sort of rivalry between his 'sons of the Empire.'" I said using the most recent catch phrase that had been flying around, describing the lucky men who found favour in the eye of the most powerful man in the Empire.

"He does but Tigellinus pushed the limit. Palpatine doesn't exactly like having his decisions questioned especially not openly." She said. "I heard that he punished Tigellinus by stripping him of his recently acquired lands on Corellia, giving him just one more reason to hate Thrawn."

I nodded. "Well there are not many who seem to think much of Thrawn, though to be honest I don't really understand it. From what I've heard he's done a lot of good for the Empire."

Lianna looked at me as we idled our way through the crowds, following in Lord Vader's wake, to take our places and watch the ceremony. "Jealousy." She said simply. "The Emperor is curious about Thrawn and Thrawn is unafraid of the Emperor. Most of the people in Palpatine's inner circle and high command don't know what to think of Thrawn and they never get close enough to him to even begin to know him. He's aloof, more intelligent than most of them put together and he's not human. They hate him. And now he's being awarded the highest non military honour that can be given at the Emperor's insistence and no one can touch him."

"Things are going to get interesting, then." I said.

She made a face. "As if they weren't already."

Any further conversation on the subject was stopped when the ceremony began.

I watched with a mixture of pride and detachment as the members of the Order of the Canted Circle gathered with Thrawn kneeling on one knee before them. They were all dressed the same in floor length black velvet robes but the man who officiated the ceremony wore a robe that was more ornate and was finished with a large ornate collar and hood.

The speeches were long and spoke about the history of the Order, the goals and work that the Order was known for and lastly about Thrawn and his work. When the speeches were over the ceremony began and it was ornate and elaborate ending with a pendant that had the symbol of the Order, a canted circle, being placed over Thrawn's head. He was then told to rise and presented to the watching crowd as the newest member of the Order. The applause was polite and a little guarded.

For the next hour there was an elaborate reception, time allowed for the populace to congratulate the newest inductee. I mingled making mindless chit chat with the various people who stopped to talk to me. I made sure to avoid the Emperor and stay as far away from him as was possible and when I got my chance, I gave my congratulations to Thrawn.

"You should wear long black dresses more often, they suit you." I said. "You look quite fetching."

He gave me a small smirk. "I suppose I should thank you for the gift, Miss Gabriel and also apologise for not wearing it. The slippers you sent, while they certainly match the outfit, they were not approved dress code."

I just smiled. "So now you are a part of Coruscant's elite."

"Yes." He replied, casually looking around the gardens at the people milling around.

"When is the real ceremony?"

"In about an hour from now we will retire from this delightful party and slip away to the secret underground facility in the Imperial Palace and there I will be inducted in a more, how would you say, brutal manner."

I raised an eyebrow. "Brutal?"

"I'll show you the result later when I am able to escape this nonsense." He said.

I just smiled, raised an eyebrow and resisted the temptation to flirt. We were being observed. I sipped at my drink and watched as an Admiral I didn't know made his way over to Thrawn. I was about to wander away but Thrawn touched my arm lightly.

"Stay," He said softly, "you should meet him."

"Admiral Thrawn, congratulations!"

"Admiral Larsen, thank you." Thrawn said, shaking the offered hand. "Have you met Miss Merlyn Gabriel?"

"No, I have not yet had the pleasure." He said turning to face me. I extended my hand for him to shake it and instead he took it in that strange gentlemanly fashion and kissed the back of it.

Thrawn's lip twitched in a slight smile as he introduced me to Ged Larsen, one of the hottest young minds to come out of the Academy in a while. As he began to explain who I was and who I worked for Ged cut him off with a grin.

"I am well aware of who Miss Gabriel works for." He said. "Your reputation for staying alive is almost legend amongst us."

"Really, I suppose you also have a life expectancy pool going on like the internal palace departments?" I asked.

Thrawn raised an eyebrow but Ged just smiled. "You have long since surpassed anyone's bets." He said.

I laughed. "Yes, that's what Siavaan Rimanata told me as well. Glad I could beat the odds. I'm surprised we haven't met before."

Ged nodded. "I spend as much time as possible in space, primarily in the Fondor system." He smiled. "I don't get to the Core worlds that often. Fortunately for me I happened to be called back for some debriefings and it coincided with this event."

"The Fondor system, in the Tapani sector, yes? The great shipyards are out there as well as the Academy of Engineering if I remember correctly."

Ged smiled. "You do indeed, I had no idea that Lord Vader had such exquisite tastes in choosing his personal assistants, you are as smart as you are lovely."

He was very charming with twinkling hazel eyes and sandy coloured hair which he wore slightly longer than regulation. He was very good looking so I didn't mind the mild flirtation; it was distraction from the serious temptation standing at my side.

I returned his smile. "You are quite generous with your flattery Admiral. I hope that you do not expect it to win you any credit with Lord Vader I assure you he is quite immune."

Ged laughed. "Not at all although I was hoping it might allow me to ask you out for a drink after this shindig, if you are free."

It took every ounce of my self control I had not to look at Thrawn.

"That's very kind of you Admiral but I have a prior engagement this evening." I said with a smile and sipped at my drink as demurely as I possibly could. I was flattered and a little surprised. He was very charming in a cocky, self assured sort of way.

"Perhaps another time then?" he asked.

I smiled and nodded. "Perhaps." I said vaguely. "If you'll both excuse me... Lord Vader insists I mingle. It's good PR for his office." Both men chuckled politely and I slipped away into the crowds. As I made my way over to the buffet table I spotted Shiv.

"Hey Rim-Girl, you look stunning. I see Cati did another amazing job!" he said giving me a kiss on each cheek and a twirl around motion with his finger.

I obliged and he grinned.

"Where's your crew?" I asked.

"Ynyth and Tygs are on Corellia at the moment. Bobby couldn't be bothered to drag his sorry self out of his flat. I was going to call you and see if you needed a date but then I remembered who was being inducted..."

"Shiv hush! I am here with my boss; apparently I make him less menacing and more approachable." I said.

Shiv laughed. "Now I know why you were hired... the softer side of Vader! Does it really work?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea. But I did just get invited out for drinks by some Admiral I have never met before."

"Oh? Who?"

"A Ged Larsen. You know him?"

Shiv nodded and stuffed a canapé in his mouth. "The Emperor's boy wonder." He mumbled with a mouth full of food.

"Boy wonder?"

"Yep, he's youngest person to ever make Admiral in the Imperial Navy. It's in his blood though; his father was a big shot in the navy till he was killed. Admiral Degan Larsen was one of the Emperor's favourites on that fast track then his ship was destroyed by rebels and the son watched the whole thing. Apparently Ged went a little nuts and somehow managed to finish off the enemy with next to no ships or help. He's got that magic touch, if you know what I mean."

"He's force sensitive?" I asked.

Shiv nodded. "That's the rumour." He said reaching for another canapé. "Anyway word got around that he was quite good when he was backed up against the wall and eventually the Emperor heard about it and fast tracked the kid. He was like late twenties, early thirties when he was made admiral. It caused a big stir I can tell you. Then Larsen vanished and the rumour mill said he'd ticked the Emperor off and was sent away in disgrace but I think he was actually sent out on some top secret mission. He shows up periodically, stirs the waters up a bit, flirts with the girls then vanishes again. He's got quite the reputation amongst the courtesans."

"Glad I turned him down then." I said.

Shiv grinned. "Your loss kiddo, I hear he's really good..."

"La la la la...! Not listening!" I cut him off.

He laughed. "You're no fun."

"I prefer it that way." I told him airily. Then watched as the members of the Canted Circle left the great Botanical Gardens to go off to their secret underground space and do their secret rituals. The event would now wind down and when the free champagne and catered food ran out everyone would leave for other things.

"So now what?" Shiv asked.

I pulled his arm over and looked at his chrono. "I go home."

"I'd offer to escort you to your door but you're not talking about the flat in the palace are you?" He said sipping at his drink.

I just gave him a look.

"I've stopped by a couple of evenings wondering if I could drag you out to come and party with us but no one was home." He said quietly. "You get a secret place off palace or are you staying where I think you're staying?"

I shrugged. "I'm safe." I told him, giving him a look that said *do not push it*.

Shiv regarded me carefully. "Safe and happy?" He asked.

My smile told him everything he needed to know. "Keep this to yourself, okay?"

He made an 'I'm innocent gesture'. "I know nothing."

"I'm tired. It's been a long day. Lord Vader was in a fine fettle today. Xizor is driving him, and consequently me, mad. It would be funny if I wasn't the one having to deal with all the flying bantha poodoo."

"The prince has become a fairly permanent part of the décor, lately." Shiv agreed. We both looked over to where the Prince stood, his arm wrapped around the waist of his latest conquest.

"Who's the redhead?" I asked.

"Tandy Seline, some hotshot reporter for holonet news. We give this one about two weeks." Shiv told me.

"I'm in for two and a half, then. He goes through women the way Vader goes through droids." I shook my head.

"Well I am just glad I don't have to deal with him."

"He's an arrogant ...."

"Don't say it!" Shiv hissed in my ear. "The walls have ears you know..."



I drowned the words that wanted to trip off my lips with the last of my drink. "Why don't you walk me out to my air-speeder?" I said.

We left the reception and I was glad of the quiet in the large elegant hallways. When we were well out of earshot and alone Shiv stopped and looked at me.

"What?" I asked giving him a look.

"How long have you been sleeping with him, Merly?" He asked out of the blue.

"Shiv!" I hissed. "You don't ask that sort of question!"

"Yeah I do actually, all the time." He said with a touch of resignation in his voice.

"You forget what I do and who I have to take care of on a daily basis." He said.

"I am not one of your courtesans." I told him.

"Just answer the question."

I sighed. I knew that tone of voice and he wouldn't let up till he had an answer. "It started the night of the break in." I said, starting to head towards the entrance. "But it is something that has been brewing a long time." Hoping he understood.

He nodded. I had just confirmed what he already knew. "Are you taking precautions?"

"Precautions?" I asked looking at him blankly.

"Against getting pregnant." He said.

"Uhm..." I made a face. That had not even occurred to me.

"Merly! The last thing you need is this..." and he mimed a large belly. "I am certain that would not go over well with Vader or anyone else."

"I don't think it's possible, to be honest. In case you hadn't noticed, he's not human. Our chances of producing viable offspring are biologically not very good."

Shiv looked at me. "True but I want you to talk to one of the Doc's about it. Just as a precaution." He said. "And you should talk to Thr... your gentleman about this or have you already talked about it and I am just being paranoid?"

I shook my head. "This particular topic has never come up." There had been so many other things to think about that pregnancy was the very last thing on my mind.

We reached my little air-speeder. Shiv turned to face me and put both hands on my shoulders. "You need to deal with this. I can tell you right now that while an affair will be tolerated as long as you keep it quiet, a pregnancy will not, especially with a non human even if it is Thrawn. Not even Lord Vader will be able to protect you if that happens. So for my sake think about this, will you?"

I nodded. "Okay."

"Promise me?" He pressed.

"I promise. I'll bring the topic up tonight." I said. "Buggery sandrats, you're worse than my father!"

Shiv shook his head and gave me a hug. "Someone's got to keep an eye on you; you land yourself in the craziest situations."

"No kidding." I said and got in the speeder to go home. I waved to Shiv as I left the landing pad and entered crazy Coruscant traffic. Babies and how not to make them... this was going to be an interesting topic to bring up with Thrawn.

I came back home and was glad to shed the trappings of glamour. For over an hour I soaked in a bath filled with hot bubbly water, drinking a glass of Thrawn's very good wine. Candles and the lights from the city illuminated the gorgeous bathroom, dancing on the pale peach marble walls. When the water cooled I got out and dried off with a big fluffy towel. I dressed for bed, and wrapped myself in one of Thrawn's robes, the warm one. Then I made my way to the living room to curl up in the big chair that had effectively become mine, with a second glass of wine and a book. After realising that I had read the same lines over for the tenth or so time I gave up on the book. I turned off the main lights, lit candles and stared out of the floor to ceiling window that also doubled as a door to the balcony and

watched the city at night. It danced and sparkled like a courtesan at the Grand ball. I had been working for the Empire for just over three years and only now was I beginning to see some of the beauty in this place.

I wondered if it should worry me that I was starting to think of this flat as home. That I was getting used to being here, having a place to belong here, and sharing a bed here. Thrawn made it easy for me to live in his place, made no demands on me and allowed me my freedom to come and go as I pleased. Yet we shared meals together whenever possible and when time allowed we shared each other. He was a man of many talents and many passions most of which he kept well hidden. We would talk for hours about any and everything. I loved the sound of his voice, deep and velvety, it was a caress as he described the things he was interested in but the wistfulness that crept into it when he spoke about the work he had been doing in the Unknown Regions, or when he spoke about his home world was ever present. I had asked him one night as we lay side by side in the quite dark why he had bought a Coruscant flat if his heart was truly in space.

"I needed a permanent mailing address." He'd said simply.

"Seriously?" I had turned to look at him, leaning on my elbow, resting my head on my hand.

He'd nodded. "The bureaucracy in the Empire knows no bounds. HR does not consider living on board an ISD a permanent residence." He had said. "I refused to live in the Palace accommodations, too close to work and prying eyes. I did not want to rent, you have no control ultimately when you rent so I bought this place. I looked at many apartments and several penthouses but this one had the best view. It is far enough away from the palace that I do not feel as though I am constantly under the Emperor's radar. It has two secure entrances that can only be reached by vehicle and a view of the city on all sides. I suppose my line of thinking was, if I had to have a permanent address it might as well be a good one."

"But this is not really your home." I had placed the flat of my hand on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

He had smiled, covered my hand with his. "My home is thousands of light years away, Sj'iu' Tekari. This is a port in the storm, a place where I can be myself, where I can think and where the rest of Palpatine's court has no say in what I do when I am not on board a ship. This place is, in a word, sanctuary."

"Yet you gave me a key."

He had just looked at me then, brushed away the lock hair that always fell in my face. "Yes," he'd said. "I did."

It wasn't just a key and a safe refuge, he had also given me my own room to do with as I wanted and free reign of his home, making it in effect also mine. The only room I rarely went into was the library mostly because it was his room, his space. When he wanted to think, or meditate he retired to the library. I left him alone.

I smiled when I heard the back entrance door open and then close but I didn't get up. I heard him vanish into the bedroom and fifteen minutes later he re-emerged, showered and dressed, like me, ready for bed. I glanced at the chrono, it was later than I had realised but earlier than I thought he would return. I got up and went to the kitchen, brought the open bottle of wine and an extra glass and joined him on the couch. I thought we would talk about his day but he had other plans.

Without words he pulled me to him and nuzzled my neck. I shivered. With fingers splayed he ran his hand under my still damp hair, warm upon the back of my neck, guiding my face upwards. His kiss was demanding and not open to negotiation. I didn't debate him. His desire raced through him and showered over us both. I felt his need as keenly as I felt his touch on my skin. He had come home physically aching for me. His want was infectious and I was caught up in his scent, his touch, his voice before I could even think.

Like a glitterstim addict, he was a drug I could never quite get enough of and when laid before me I could never refuse.

"You smell like wild berries and tabjio flowers." He whispered in my ear, causing goose bumps to ripple up and down my arms.

"New bubble bath." I gasped as his hands began to explore under the robe, under the pyjama top I was wearing as a night shirt. Sense and sensibility were rapidly being replaced by an intensely powerful desire and a longing which only he could answer. I welcomed the flush of heat that shot through me. His ability to send me reeling never ceased to astound me but suddenly Shiv's cautionary speech about unwanted pregnancy reared its ugly face intruding in the middle of a spine shivering kiss. I opened my eyes, glanced up at him and pulled back.

He studied me carefully for a moment then sat back, catching his breath, then after a few moments said. "You have that look on your face."

"Which one?" I asked.

"The one that says some particularly unpleasant thought just utterly interrupted my nefarious plans for the evening." He said.

"Nefarious?"

He smiled. "What is on your mind?"

"Babies." I said before I could censure myself.

This earned me a raised eyebrow. "Is this a new method of defence against my advances or is there something else going on that perhaps I should know about?" he asked.

I shook my head. He cocked his own slightly to one side, waiting for me to explain so I did. When I finished he reached for his wine glass and sipped at it to stop himself from smiling.

"I see I shall have to have words with Siavaan." He said lightly.

"Well, he's seen firsthand the results when it happens to a courtesan." I said. "He worries, is all."

"Yes, and you do give us all reason to worry but not this time." He said. "You won't get pregnant, at least not from me."

"How do you know that?"

"My dear, do you think I would enter into this delightful dance with you and not do some homework first? The chances of you and I creating a child are very slim. There are enough differences to our species' physiology to make that particular biological wonder very difficult to achieve." He said, caressing my face. "And I have taken precautions to ensure that even with that slender chance it does not have the opportunity to happen."

"You have?" he kept surprising me at every turn.

"Females are not the only ones with such options available to them, you know. It would have been irresponsible to place both you as well as myself in a situation that could be compromising." He said. "You seem surprised."

"The whole baby talk thing surprises me, to be honest. It truly never occurred to me." I shook my head at my own stupidity. "Tell me something, are you prepared for every and any eventuality that life has to throw at you?" I asked.

He was quiet for a moment. "I'd like to think so." He said, and then added. "If I think of all the possible situations and outcomes through to their obvious and not so obvious conclusions then I am better able to solve the problems at hand. I enjoy the challenge of mentally walking through all the possibilities, even the very worst case scenarios. So, yes, I am fairly certain that I am ready for almost everything, within reason of course. There are always surprises which one has not or cannot account for, that one percent of chaos or chance." He smiled. "Even I cannot foresee everything, but I try to be as prepared as possible. Unlike you, who are the most chaotic, least predictable person I know."

I stared at him trying to decipher that and he laughed.

"Do you *ever* want children?" I asked after a moment.

He smiled slightly, ran his fingers through his hair and sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"Do you?" He asked evasively.

I shrugged. "Maybe, I don't know, I never actually thought about it before." I looked at him. "You haven't answered my question."

"Perhaps one day I would like to father a child, when circumstances are a little different, but not at the moment." He said thoughtfully, carefully.

I nodded. "So I can tell Shiv not to worry on this particular subject then."

"You can." He leaned over and kissed me gently on the forehead.

I smiled "So now that I have effectively foiled your grand and, how did you put it, *nefarious* plans for the night perhaps you can reveal all the secrets of your new club? I believe the word brutal was brought up earlier...?"

"Sj'iu' Tekari, the night is not over yet." He purred in my ear.

I gave him a stern look. "Secrets first, seduction later."

"You drive a hard bargain." He said, mocking me ever so slightly.

"I'm nosey, I grew on Tatooine and I work for Lord Vader. Hard bargains and aggressive negotiations are my specialty, so spill!" I poked him not so lightly on the chest.

"As you wish." He said with a slight smile, catching my hand in his before I could poke at him again. "But you need to promise you won't overreact."

"Overreact to what?"

"To this..."

He topped off the wine glasses and motioned for me to settle back against his body. I watched as he pulled up the sleeve of his robe and there, on the wrist of his left hand was something that made me look up at him, horrified. Now I understood what he had meant by overreact. I had to fight to calm down.

"Is that a brand?" I asked, looking at the raw looking symbol which had been burned into his flesh. I resisted the temptation to trace the serpentine line that bisected the circle.

"Yes. One of the various trials to go through is being branded with the mark of the order."

"Are you in pain? Did it hurt? Does it hurt now?" I was sitting up now, facing him.

"No, yes and no. The bacta salve does good work; it will heal well soon enough." He said casually, pulling the sleeve back down over the brand.

"That seems like an awful lot to go through just to be in a silly club." I scowled.

"It's more than just the silly socialite club many think it is. The Canted Circle is a very powerful organization and as a member I have access to much more information, more useful connections than before with which to work and I now have a certain status which makes me difficult to ignore." He explained a little tersely.

"You weren't exactly a shy-flower in the corner before, you know!" I snorted.

He tilted his head. He didn't understand my reaction even though he had anticipated it.

I looked into his eyes. "They branded you." I said flatly. I was angry but I didn't know why.

"You disapprove?"

"It just seems strange to me that you have to have your membership burned into your skin. That sounds less like an elite club and more like part of an exclusive nerf herd!"

He frowned. "You worry too much about the oddest things."

"Maybe." I shrugged, and then said. "I think it's barbaric."

He looked at me. "I wouldn't have thought that something like this would bother you so much."

"Liar." I retorted. "If you had thought that you would not have warned me about over reacting." I snapped. "Why would you even say something like that anyway? Because I worked at Jabba's, because I work for Vader, you think I am immune to brutality?" I asked, anger creeping into my voice. I had hit the nail on the head though and I saw it in his face and in the fact that he didn't answer right away.

"Sj'iu' Tekari, I apologise." He said after a moment of silence. "It does surprise me that it upsets you as much as it appears to, though. Every member bears this mark. It is a source of great pride for most of the members of the Order. It is just a small thing, a small price to pay."

"For most members? Are you not proud to be in this club?" I asked, consciously calming down, reminding myself it wasn't him I was angry at.

He gave me a grim smile. "Pride is a foolish waste of time. This is a means to an end, nothing more and nothing less."

"What is the end?" I asked with a scowl.

"Order out of chaos." He said. He didn't elaborate.

"That's not much of an answer." I told him, pulling the sleeve back from his wrist to look once again at the canted circle branded into his flesh.

"It is the only answer. I am doing what is necessary to protect those that depend on me." He chided. "It is a long road, be patient." He withdrew his wrist from my hand and stroked my face. "Don't be petulant, it doesn't become you."

Those were fighting words and sometimes I wondered if he wanted to dig at me, just a little, to see how far he could push. But he was right this time. I was being petulant and I had overreacted. It was not the first time I marvelled at how well he knew me and just how easily he was able to sometimes read me. I sighed and settled back against him, taking the wine glass he handed me with a mumbled thanks.

"So do you wish to hear more about my evening or shall I resume my wicked and iniquitous ways with you?" He asked. I could hear the smile in his voice.

I gave him a look. "And you say I have been reading too many Holloway books?"

He laughed. "It is entirely your own fault that you brought your set over here and conveniently left them where I could find them to read. You are changing the subject and not answering the question."

"Tell me more about your evening." I said.

He smiled. "Understand that much of what goes on in the underground chamber is a sworn secret and I will not betray that. This society is filled with many odd traditions and what I would call superstitions but that is to be expected from an organization that has been around for longer than most can recall." He said and then he proceeded to tell me as much as he was allowed to about his induction into the most elite circle of beings in the Imperial world. It was fascinating to hear but not all of it made sense.

"So the robes you wear at the public ceremony are different from the ones they make you wear at the private one?" I asked interrupting him for the umpteenth time while he described, at my request, what everyone was wearing.

He nodded. "There are symbols embroidered around the hem and the cuffs of the sleeves. They all have meanings and they mirror the symbols that are inlaid onto the floor. While much of the symbolism tells the history of the Canted Circle, some of the symbols are steeped in old beliefs based on a time before the Republic and some have meanings that have been long lost. This is an old organization, some of its ceremony has no meanings but tradition dictates that the old ways continue."

I nodded. "So, why do the other members hide their faces with hoods? You saw them all at the public ceremony." I asked.

"There are a set of trials one must go through as inductee, given at the hand of an elder member. Some of these trials are, shall we say unpleasant, meant to test the

candidate's faith, courage and physical endurance. The members prefer not to be seen when they inflict their particular tests. "

"Faith in what?" I interrupted.

He shrugged with one shoulder. "Faith in the Order itself. The Canted Circle has been around for a very, very long time, much longer than the Emperor and this empire. It has adapted and changed over the centuries to whatever faiths and governing bodies were in power at the time. While the ceremony reflects many of these changes and eras, it is a ritual nothing more. The Canted Circle has survived and that is what its members cling to. Working behind the scenes, this society has more power than most people would ever believe." He sighed. "All societies have them and the most successful of them learn to adapt."

"Like the Dantassi?"

He nodded. "Yes, every species, all groups or organizations have their rituals; some are more barbaric than others. Some are eloquently masked behind silk robes and pretty words. Some are physical in nature demanding feats of strength or endurance. The Dantassi rituals are, to my mind, very elegant. Not the brutal hazing that serves little real purpose. They have rites of passage for many other things, the first hunt, coming of age, bonding of mates or adopting new clan members and so on. Just as every single other culture has. But within these societies there are smaller, more elite groups that also have their own rituals, such as the Canted Circle. One inside the other and so on, much like a Mandalorian kyshe doll puzzle."

"So once you pass these trials, they what, pin you down and burn their mark into you like a prized eopie?"

"It is a little more subtle than your analogy but you are more or less right. Once the trials are done, the candidate is asked three questions, to which the answers are *faith, hidden in the dark and above all, loyalty*. You may *not* know the questions, so don't ask. Once the correct answers are given the High elder of the Circle asks one final question to which there is only one answer and then the initiate holds out his arm and is branded." He said. "At this point the rest of the circle remove their hoods and welcome the inductee into the brotherhood. After this, there is some manly bonding over fine brandy and conversation then everyone goes home until the next meeting is called. Much of the work the Circle does is not accomplished in its meetings but quietly, day to day and very few ever know or see what is being done. "

"Sounds utterly delightful." I told him snarkily.

"Why does it bother you so much?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

I drew a deep breath. "They brand you if you work at Jabba's Palace, if you are a slave."

"You bear no such mark, at least none that I have seen... have I missed a spot?" He made to lift up my robe but I smacked his hand away.

I shook my head. "No, I wasn't there long enough for one thing and secondly I am not now, nor was I ever, a slave but I had to watch a few times as a new girl was dragged screaming to be branded. It wasn't pleasant. Being branded is a sign to everyone that one is not free."

He sighed, stroking my face with the backs of his fingers. "I am not a slave and I was not dragged against my will. This is not Jabba's palace and those memories are old, leave them behind you."

"Easier said than done." I muttered.

He just nodded. I sipped my wine and the silence between us was weighty until I broke it.

"Is the Emperor a member?"

He arched an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"You won't tell me the answer will you?"

"No, and do not ask me this again. It is forbidden to specify who is a member and who is not, but the members are marked, you might want to bear that in mind." he said. "So, S'jiu' Tekari, now that I have satisfied your curiosity are you ready to satisfy mine?"

"What do you have to be curious about? I thought you knew the answers to everything!" I asked.

He smiled turned predatory. "Well... I am quite curious as to how what I started earlier will end." He took my wine glass and set it on the table.

"Oh." I said and was saved from making any further comments as he pulled me to him, lifting me with a practiced ease to bestride his lap. Any complaint or comment I might have wanted to make was silenced by his mouth on mine and as he kissed me, making up for time lost. His passion and arousal were both evident and infectious. It was easy to give in to his touch as he mapped my body with his fingertips the way he had mapped the uncharted region of space, with delicate care and infinite patience. I reciprocated, learning from his examples, deriving a sense of deep satisfaction as he shuddered and gasped under my touch. This, too, was a sort of ritual and every time he drew me into the circle of his arms, joined his body with mine; I discovered new answers to new questions. This exclusive club of two was riddled with its own secrets and rites. Each time we engaged in this dance I fell a little deeper into a pit I wasn't certain I could or even wanted to ever climb back out of. My heart and my body had long since surrendered but my mind kept whispering of all the tragic endings this little game of ours could have. I was quite adept at ignoring that little whisper.

What usually began in the living room more often than not ended in the bedroom. Sweet and sensual, he took his time, teaching me the rewards of patience despite my attempts to thwart him. Sometimes when we coupled I wondered, *why me?* There were so many women to choose from at the palace who were, perhaps, far more suitable than I felt I was but I never asked this question out loud. I did not really want to know the answer. This affair was as dangerous as it was delightful but that didn't seem to matter to either of us. I wondered, sometimes, why he, who had so much to lose, would risk so much to be with me. It never occurred to me that perhaps I should be asking myself the same question. I, too, had a lot to lose.

Occasionally, drowsy in the aftermath of the fiery tempest we had stirred up in each other, I caught a fleeting sense from him, despite my silent worries and secret fears, that I was more than just a torrid palace affair or planet side fling. Somewhere deep within himself he also needed something from me that he received from no one else. Utter acceptance of not only who he was but also of what he was as well. These tiny glimpses past the mask he wore daily were rare and precious. Thrawn was not a man to bear his soul or share his deepest needs and vulnerabilities easily. More often than not as quickly as I had sensed these thoughts and emotions so they vanished as he closed back up, shutting me and the world around him back out. Perhaps another woman would have complained or brought this up in conversation but not me. I understood his need to protect himself. I did the same thing.

When my thoughts turned to such melancholy topics I would cuddle into his body, seeking warmth and comfort. I would ask him to talk to me, to tell me stories of his home, his youth, and his travels. The sound of his voice was soothing as well as grounding and I tried to burn it into my memory to keep for those times when he would no longer be there to ward off my own demons and inexplicable night terrors. Time was my enemy and I knew it. The deeper I fell into what ever it was we were creating between us the more I sensed a wormy cold wriggle of fear. My thoughts would sometimes turn to something I had once been told.

*"Tell me what you regard as your greatest strength, so I will know how best to undermine you; tell me of your greatest fear, so I will know which I must force you to face; tell me what you cherish most, so I will know what to take from you; and tell me what you crave, so that I might deny you."*

Late one night before I had been sent to Tatooine by Lord Vader, the Emperor had found me as he sometimes did, in the library reading about the Great Sith Wars. He had smiled to himself as he had taken the book from my hands. When he had handed it back to me he had spoken these words. I had asked him about them and he had told me a legend about Darth Plagueis the Wise. The story had made me shiver and left me feeling cold and alone. I had spoken with Lord Vader about it the next day and he had nodded.

"I have heard this tale before." He had said. The bitterness in his voice was a physical thing.

"What does it mean?" I had asked him.

"Trust no one." He had replied angrily and the conversation had ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Now, as I lay in the dark next to the only man who had seen me stripped bare in every way possible, I wondered about the meaning behind the words of Darth Plagueis. It seemed to me that these words the Emperor had spoken to me, the way a father will sometimes speak to a child to whom he is trying to teach a subtle lesson, were a warning of some sort, a veiled threat hidden behind the mask of avuncular concern. I had remembered then, the terrible sense of sorrow, fear and betrayal I had felt from Lord Vader as I had repeated the Emperor's tale and I realised why it had hit so close to the bone. His emotions echoed mine. I had stared into Lord Vader's face only to have the reflection of my own mirrored back to me. Sometimes I wondered if we were really so different. Lord Vader had become a tool for the Emperor, taken in by the soft spoken advice and kindly manner. The Emperor had beguiled him with kindness and trust when the people he had admired the most had let him down, viewed him with suspicion. Lord Vader had not always been this way; he had not always been angry and dark. I had stared at him for a long time. I did not want to end up the same way.

*Attachments...* the word was beginning to take on new significance and with that came some small measure of understanding why the Jedi had tried to avoid it. But in this place and at this time I was willing to take what comfort I could. I would never be sure on nights such as these if it was just the fact that I was restless, tossing and turning by his side awake or if he just sensed my own inner turmoil but more often than not, Thrawn would entwine himself around me, protective and fierce. He would nuzzle his face in my hair and the warmth of my neck and whisper in my ear.

"Stop thinking so loud, Sj'iu' Tekari and go to sleep. Whatever it is you are conjuring up has not happened yet so stop tempting fate."

Most of the time this worked but every now and then his words failed to lull me to sleep, of course then he had other contingency plans in place for such moments as these and usually they worked just fine.

## **Chapter 4**



"What, no argument from you?" Lord Vader asked, surprised.

"What is there to argue, my lord?" I asked him. "You gave me an order, I obey it."

"You always argue with me." He retorted and this was true, "You have reasons for wanting to remain on Coruscant. I am surprised that you do not wish to do so. I was expecting more resistance." It was not a question but rather a statement. He swung around with full power and I did my best to defend.

"Well, that last little reminder from Jyrki that he's still about and still on the hunt has me convinced that space is safer than ground. Besides, what do you know about what I want?" I asked as we stepped back from each other and re-established ground. It was a good job we were alone in the quiet of the training room with the door closed because I am certain had anyone else heard me speak this way to Lord Vader they would have died of shock right then and there but after over three years of working together I knew how far I could push and so did he.

"So you are telling me that your fear outweighs your desire." He asked.

"No, but it was inevitable that sooner or later one of us would be called to duty off this Sarlacc forsaken hell-hole so it might as well be me." I told him. In fact I was grateful it was me being called off world first. I didn't like being the one left behind.

Lord Vader nodded and moved back into position, swinging his lightsaber at me in a really elegant move. "And have you told him yet?"

The lightsabers thrummed through the air. I shook my head as I spun around to block his blow. "Not yet." I said, sweat trickling down my back as I counter attacked. It was almost like dancing except far more deadly. "He has been away for the past three days so I haven't had the chance. I will tell him when I see him but I am certain he won't be surprised."

Vader nodded. "No, Thrawn rarely ever is." He conceded.

Lightsaber blades crashed together making that awful gritty, crackling sound which always set my teeth on edge. We could stand like that for a few moments but Lord Vader was stronger than I was so in the end it was always me who gave way, backing off.

"You admire him." I said as I caught my breath.

"I admire anyone who does their job so well." He replied. "He has served the Empire with unwavering loyalty. He puts his job, his duty above all other concerns, even his personal ones."

That last remark was directed at my relationship with Thrawn but I didn't mind. It hadn't taken Lord Vader long to figure that things between Admiral Thrawn and I had become *interesting*. It didn't appear to bother him but rather it seemed to amuse him in some strange way. I was well aware of my place in Thrawn's life so Lord Vader's barb didn't bother me.

"He does what he must to get the job done. It is what it is." I said as we began to circle again. I was learning to like this weapon and I enjoyed spending time with the man teaching me how to use it.

"How is it that you are so pragmatic for one so young?" He asked.

I laughed. "Considering my life in the last three or so years it's funny you even ask that. I am lucky to be alive so I say again, it is what it is."

It was Vader's turn to chuckle. "You do seem to have a talent for avoiding death."

"Talent, is that what they call it?" I asked, the blades swung around humming, sending off that weird scent of scorched air. I never could place the smell but it was unmistakable. I often thought that in the days of the Old Republic the training rooms at the Jedi Temple must have reeked with the stink of it.

"If you loosen your death grip on the handle just a little you will find it a lot easier to execute that last move." He said as we stood back from each other.

I nodded, he was right but it was hard not to hold onto the lightsaber as tightly as possible.

"I have told you before, girl, I promise not to sever your limbs so do as you are told, ease up on your hold or you will never get beyond the point where you are now. You are too tense to complete these moves properly. If you do not listen to me then you are wasting my time!"

I sighed and tried to relax but the lightsaber scared me. I had seen the damage it was capable of and I feared it enough that it interfered with my ability to wield it to Lord Vader's satisfaction. We had been at this for nearly three hours now and I was starting to tire.

"Once more, do as I say and complete that sequence." He said. Impatience edged into his voice.

So I did as he bid, swinging the blade as he had shown me. His own crashed down and I blocked the blow. It was, as he had said, easier with a loose wrist and grip. Attack defend, blow block step, step, step. It was a dance with tricky, deadly choreography. I knew the lesson was over when he shut off his lightsaber. Some days he would push me until I almost dropped from exhaustion but others, like today were more subtle lessons about technique rather than endurance.

"Have there been any leads on the bomb?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, as usual your friend escaped all notice. He moves like a Mistryl shadow."

"I've told you he's not my friend so stop calling him that and he uses the force. Plus he has inside help. I just didn't think he'd ever plant a bomb." I said crossly.

"It wasn't a real bomb, it was just a flash-grenade, designed to scare, temporarily disorient and blind." Vader commented.

"I would rather not take my chances. If you hadn't been in front of me when it went off..." I shrugged, shuddering a little at the memory of the incredibly loud bang and the blinding light. I had literally been right behind Lord Vader when the bomb had gone off. Even with his protective armour, the mask and cloak he had still been knocked back and very surprised. I had dropped to the floor instantly and it had taken every ounce of training not to panic. Once the smoke had cleared and the ringing in my ears had calmed down I had stepped into the office foyer to survey the damage. To my surprise it had been minimal. Lord Vader had been correct, it was just a flash bomb designed not to do damage or hurt but to stun one's enemies temporarily in order to distract them. The bomb fragments had littered the expensive carpet, burning holes into it where they had fallen. When I had touched one it had told me all I needed to know. Lord Vader's anger had been palpable when I had passed the information along to him and I was pretty certain that in the security department, someone's head rolled. Jyrki was seemingly invincible and invisible. I did not mind at all that I was being sent off planet to work on board the Executor. I was pretty certain that this latest stunt of Jyrki's had pushed Lord Vader to make that decision. It was bad enough when his stupid tricks were aimed at me but when suddenly Lord Vader found himself in the middle of Jyrki's little war, well that upped the ante somewhat and changed the rules of the game.

"He still scares you with his tactics?" Lord Vader asked.

"No, I am beyond scared, I am just angry." I said and it was almost the truth.

"Good, anger is usable, useful, Fear is not."

"Whatever." I grumbled. I'd heard *that* speech too many times now.

Vader laughed and set up the powerful droids he used to spar against. This too, was part of my training, watching him practice. I enjoyed it and I learned much from just observing. I would stretch out slowly while he really began to move.

Lord Vader had been trained in the Jedi art of lightsaber combat by some of the best Jedi in the galaxy, at least that is what he told me. He would use his own practice to show me the various techniques that one could use, although he had his preferred what he had told was known as Form V, Shien/Djem So or the *Way of the Krayt Dragon*.

I watched in tired delight as Vader effortlessly blocked the attacks from the powerful droids that were specially designed for exactly this purpose. For a man of his stature and size he moved with an elegance that belied the fact his limbs were artificial. On my second lesson he had begun to explain the five main forms of lightsaber technique as had been taught by the Jedi.

Form V was a very powerful form that had combined the defensive style of form II and the more aggressive tactics and manner of Form III. Form V allowed for the ability to not only deflect laser bolts but taught the practitioner how to redirect them back towards the enemy. Lord Vader enjoyed giving me these history lessons, stating that Form V was often frowned upon by many in the Jedi Order because they felt this form of lightsaber use led to aggressive behaviour. This form emphasised offence over defence, strength over diplomacy. Vader excelled at this. I really enjoyed my lightsaber lessons. They were challenging and they were fun, well fun was perhaps not the best word to use to describe training with Lord Vader but they were.

"So when do I fly out?" I asked.

"In three days, you will be alerted to the proper time." He said as he took out the second droid. "You will be onboard my shuttle."

"I'm not taking my ship?" I asked.

"You need practice flying Lambda class shuttles and this will be official Imperial work." He said as another droid crumbled to the floor. "Your ship is for unofficial work and you will not be needing it this time around. If you are worried about leaving it behind you can store it at my castle or perhaps Admiral Thrawn will allow you to store it at his home as you seem to spend a great deal of time there. Either way I am certain the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* will be safe from sabotage." He understood my love for my ship.

"How long will I be off world for?" I asked.

"As long as I need you for." He retorted.

With a sigh, I rolled my eyes. "Ok, let me rephrase the question, how many weeks should I pack clothing for?"

He paused for a moment, stopping the droids with the force. "Several months, but no doubt there will be times when we will be required to return to Coruscant." He paused then added, "You will probably be required to sit at the Captain's table from time to time so pack whatever passes for appropriate dinner dress."

I nodded. "What about the office stuff?"

"It will be dealt with. There is space onboard Executor for you in a secure area." He said as he destroyed the last droid.

"Same place I was before?"

He nodded as he kicked at the destroyed droid with his foot. "But it has been re arranged and set up specifically for you to do your job in the most efficient manner." he said. "Everything you will require to begin your day in a productive way has been arranged."

I glanced up from stretching to look at him and grinned. I had once argued with him about the need to have the ability to make spice 'caf in my office. I had told him that I was unproductive without my 'caf.

"So, I don't need to bring along a camp stove?" I asked with a grin.

"No. You have made your needs quite known." He said tartly but I knew that he took some perverse pleasure in arranging certain things for me, even surprising me as he had when he had given me this beautiful training room. I had learned from my Bunduki master

that Lord Vader had had a hand in designing it. I was reasonably certain that the space made for me on board his floating fortress would be a second home of sorts. I looked forward to it, I liked being in space and perverse as it sounded, even to me, I was happy to be Lord Vader's presence. How could I ever explain this bond? I did not understand it. He was one of the most reviled men in the entire galaxy but there was more to him than the mask and the menace. I had seen him through other eyes. I had seen him as a young man full of love and passion. I had begun to get to know him through the words of my birth mother, a small boy full of wonder and worry touched by a sorrow no one seemed to really understand. He had been called the chosen one, but he was not treated as such. He was a paradox. Almost everyone thought of him as pure evil but to me he was more tragic than anything else.

"Making my needs known and you actually listening to me and knowing them are two different things." I told him.

He stood with his hands on his hips. "Do you think girl, that after three years I do not know what you require in order to do your job efficiently?"

"I didn't realise you were paying attention." I said, half joking.

"Most people don't. Most people would like to think that I am stupid as well as bad tempered and brutal." he said with a touch of annoyance. "And you can be quite difficult to ignore."

"Well, you are often bad tempered and you can be quite brutal." I said. "And you ignore me just fine when it suits your purpose but I don't understand why anyone would think you are stupid."

"I have no patience for incompetence." He corrected, not bothering to respond to my last barb or answer my question.

"You strangle people with the force!" I countered.

"It's tidy and efficient." He said.

I just looked up at him and shook my head. "It's a waste of man power and it creates unnecessary paperwork."

"It's weeding out the weak and ineffectual!" He replied.

I wasn't going to win this argument but then again, I never did. "You're the boss." I said with a shrug, always my way of saying 'you win.'

"Yes, I am." He said with a laugh that sounded more like a bark. "Get someone to clean this mess up, place an order for a hundred more of these droids and two hundred of the upgraded combat training remotes. I want them delivered by the end of this week. Then you may leave for the day."

"Yes, my lord."

He gave me a curt nod and went to leave then paused. "Will you be meeting with Thrawn tonight?" he asked.

He already knew the answer to this so lying to him was out of the question. "He was due back planet side early today, so chances are good I will see him later on this evening."

"Then pass along this message." He said. "Tell him that everything is in place. The equipment he needs has been secured and will be delivered to him at the appropriate time."

I repeated the message and nodded. With that Lord Vader swept out of the training room leaving me to puzzle over his statement, cryptic messages were his specialty. I looked at the clutter of droid bits that littered the room and then went to find a cleanup crew.

I showered and cleaned up in my flat in the palace. I was still using it as a base, and it was convenient. When I was done I took a look around for anything that I would need to take with me when I left for the *Executor* but aside from some clothing and some books almost everything I used on a daily basis was at Thrawn's. I smiled when I realised this because I wasn't sure exactly when that had happened, when I had effectively moved out of

this flat and into his. Still, it was something very few knew about. I had left enough of the trappings of daily life in this place so that most people visiting would think I still lived here. Sometimes I slept here when I worked really late and then, because Lord Vader *never* kept any sort of regular schedule, had an early meeting. I knew that many people suspected but only a very few knew for sure, not even my family and I was hoping to keep it that way. Secrets, my life was full of them. By the time I got home Thrawn was already there. Reunions, I loved them and all their glorious gifts.

It was late when we settled back from the passion of welcome back to chatter of catching up and the interesting things that made our daily routine worth talking about. In the quiet of the night we moved to the living room. It was quiet, the candles I had lit creating a flickering dancing light. Curled against his chest, his arm curled around my shoulder, we sat with each other on the couch drinking wine. When I told him about my orders to ship out with Vader, Thrawn was not surprised.

"Well, it is easier for me this way; at least I will not have to be worried about you doing something crazy." He had joked, but underneath his words was a hint of truth. His concern pleased me. His hand caressed my face.

"Lord Vader feels I shall be of more use in closer proximity than stuck down here on Coruscant." I told him.

Thrawn grinned. "Vader doesn't want you being blown up or anything else while he is away. These attacks by Mr. Andando are an embarrassment to him, you know. It would reflect very badly on Vader if he cannot even keep one young woman from being harassed by one lone rebel."

I nodded. "Yes, well I can't be an embarrassment to the Dark Lord of the Sith, now can I?"

"In his own way, surprisingly enough, he seems to care whether or not you live." Thrawn chided.

I gave him a look as he topped up my glass of wine. "You think I don't know that?"

"I was just reminding you that you appear to have a charmed life when it comes to Lord Vader's good graces."

I laughed. "I doubt good or grace have much to do with it. I am pretty sure he just doesn't wish to go through the hassle of breaking in another person to do this job. He is used to me and I amuse him." I said.

Thrawn raised his chin slightly but didn't comment. He didn't have to.

I made a face and then remembering the last task I had been given for the day repeated Lord Vader's cryptic message.

Thrawn smiled and suddenly had the look of a jax that has just been given a saucer of high end blue milk. "Excellent." He said.

I watched him for a moment. "You are not going to tell me what all this secret stuff is about are you?"

He shook his head. "No."

I scowled and that made him laugh.

"My dear, you are entirely too nosey for your own good. It's quite a wonder that your curiosity hasn't killed you yet." And then he relented slightly. "I dare say you'll discover what we are up to in time." And from his tone of voice I knew that was all I'd get out of him on this particular topic.

I changed the subject then. "So what's this I hear about you and Tigellinus having it out in court?"

Thrawn snorted. "I suppose Siavaan told you this?"

"No actually, I heard it from one of the security guards who is stationed near my old flat. Word is you had a shouting match. It was quite the topic of conversation."

"*He* had a shouting match." Thrawn replied archly. "I do not raise my voice especially in situations such as that and this annoyed Tigellinus even more."

"Why?" I asked. "I thought you two were all buddy-buddy since you were inducted into the Order of the Canted Circle."

Thrawn nodded. "It would appear that way from the outside. Tigellinus is trying new tactics. He figured that if I was to be on fairly equal footing with him politically speaking then it would be better to have me as a friend not an enemy. He has tried to show the Imperial world that we get along and can play nice, however underneath this lovely little façade lies a much nastier version of the game we were previously playing." He paused to sip his wine. "We had an interesting discussion about certain policies currently in place. I politely disagreed with him, which I suppose I should not have done, friends it seems do not disagree on anything. The conversations went from civil to uncivil fairly quickly. I find it very interesting to see how quickly the true self comes out when the right buttons are pushed."

"You should be careful." I told him, poking him gently in the ribs. "The Emperor doesn't always like political bickering and I think that Tigellinus knows about you and me. He'll throw that into the fray if he has to, he's not above using every dirty bit of laundry he can find to get rid of an opponent he feels is in his way. It wouldn't be the first time, you know."

Thrawn smiled. "I am well aware of that my dear, in fact I count on this characteristic behaviour."

"Count on it for what? What game are you really playing, Za'ar?"

"You'll see when and if it happens." He told me lightly. "It is not something you need to concern yourself with right now."

"It does if I get dragged into the forefront of your games because I am sleeping with you." I told him.

He arched his eyebrow at me. "My dear, do not give our affair more importance than it has. While it means something to you and me, it is unimportant to the overall scheme of things, especially in the political arena. You do not have to worry about that." He said thoughtfully. "I am quite certain that if the Emperor had objections to our coupling he would have stepped in by now and done something about it."

I sighed and gave him a look. I wondered if he really knew just how cruel and how devious the Emperor could really be.

"A'myshk'a," he said getting up and regarding me carefully. "You need to place some faith in me. I know what I am doing and I have things well in hand."

"So you keep saying." I retorted.

That earned me his trademark eyebrow look.

I stared up at him, meeting his gaze but unable to read anything in his eyes. "I do have faith in you, but I don't like being kept in the dark." I told him.

He smirked. "Yes, you are as nosey as you are talented and beautiful." He held out his hand for me to take. "Come to bed so that I might take advantage of your talent and pleasure in your beauty."

"And my curiosity?" I asked, getting up.

"Will be satisfied." He purred, his fingers playing on my skin as he stroked my face, his caress igniting fire.

I rolled my eyes at his words but took the hand that was offered. Time for us to be together was running short, spending what remained talking about politics was not my idea of fun.

"Trust me, my dear," He murmured in my ear. "I'll make it worth your while." He smiled when I shivered.

It was hard to argue with a proposition like that but in the back of my mind the little voice that nagged me, that whispered warnings and made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end had woken up and was yelling at me.

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Three days zipped by faster than I could dream of. My last night on planet was not overly restful. I had gotten no sleep and the thoughts that rattled through my head were bittersweet. Leaving was harder than I thought it would be and Thrawn had not made it any easier by pulling me back when I had wanted to get out of bed and check that I had everything I needed. As was the rule when I had to be some place I was always restless and on edge.

"Come back to bed, Sji'u' Tekari," he said. "Do not squander our last two hours together."

"I need to get ready." I had told him, trying to wriggle away. This wasn't exactly true but I couldn't just lie there staring at the ceiling listening to the sound of Thrawn's breathing. I thought he had finally fallen asleep but I was wrong about that.

He tugged me to his body. "You packed last night; you checked three times that you have everything you might need. I'll make sure you are there on time, now stop fighting and remind me why I shall miss you when you are gone." His voice was warm and beguiling in my ear.

It was difficult to argue against his logic especially when he showed me how much better his idea of passing time was than mine. He had become my lover, best friend, and something I didn't have words for. We had been given almost three months to physically be together and in that time I had gotten used to his fairly constant presence. Now time was no longer on my side. That tiny period of quiet and grace we had been granted to really get to know one another had come to an end and my last two hours on Coruscant were filled with a deep passion that bordered on desperate. I wondered if this was how all lovers, soon to be parted felt. I decided it was not a feeling I liked very much.

It was an awful sensation and it made me terribly aware of why the Jedi were so loath to become attached to anyone. Our time with one another had been incredibly intense and yet, oddly enough, while I was certain of my feelings, we had never spoken of love, never uttered those three little words to each other, the way characters in Bel's trashy romance books repeatedly did. It was almost as if to say anything along those lines out loud was to doom ourselves so we never spoke of it. I suppose our actions spoke louder than any flowery speeches ever could anyway. His hands, his lips, his body told me what I needed to know and I hoped that it was the same for him. We were fierce and wild, gentle and tender and everything in between. For the first time in my life I was scared to let go.

True to his word he had gotten me to the shuttle on time. That last reckless, lingering kiss which had said so much and yet so little was as public as it could be but I didn't care, there was no one around to notice anyway. We drew back and just stared at each other for a moment. I felt the words that wavered between us but silence reigned.

"I need to get to the shuttle." I had said when I found my voice. I went to leave but he caught me by the arm.

"Stay alive, my dear, this galaxy is far more interesting with you in it." He said. "I'll write when I can and we will see each other soon enough, I imagine."

I nodded, feeling a lump in my throat and the prickle of tears. I wondered why this particular parting was so difficult. It was not the first time work and duty had separated us, so why was it now so hard? I didn't have any answers for this and shoved my emotions down. I slipped out of the air-speeder with my bags and didn't look back; it was bad luck to look back.

I had arrived at the landing pad before Lord Vader and the two men on guard at the shuttle's ramp had stiffened when they had seen me. I found it odd that they looked so young because they were at least the same age or just a little older than me. I guessed working for Vader was starting to have an effect on how I viewed the world. I gave them a curt nod as I went on board. I dumped my baggage in the back, except for my satchel which held my most precious things, and then went up front to the cockpit of the shuttle and began my pre-flight check. Lord Vader arrived just as I was done with the systems check. I went to get out of the pilot's seat but he waved me back down.

"You may stay there and pilot the shuttle." He said.

His dark presence filled the cockpit. When he gave the okay to get on the go I slipped on the headset and began to talk to Coruscant Air Control. I began take off procedure with a heavy heart but the sadness of leaving was soon replaced by the sheer joy of flying. Once we were out of the atmosphere and well on our way past the planet's gravity well, he gave me the co ordinates of the *Executor* and I set the nav computer to calculate the hyperspace jump.

It was not a long trip to where the *Executor* lay in space like a waiting Krayt dragon. I had forgotten how massive a ship she was and the sight of her as we approached took my breath away.

"Watch the dorsal wing on approach." He admonished.

"You tell me that every time." I said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I have seen firsthand what happens when a pilot forgets about the height of that wing."

"Oh?" there was more to this story.

He sighed, well as near as a sigh that Lord Vader could make. "The Lambda Class shuttle's Dorsal wing is larger than it predecessor. When they were first introduced to the Imperial Fleet it took the pilots some time to get used to the height difference. The cost of repairs was ... annoying."

"Did you...?" I never got to finish my sentence.

"I do not wish to talk about it." He growled, cutting me off but I caught the memory flash of a pair of gloved hands gripping the consol as a shuttle skidded across the landing bay, smacking into several other ships. I don't think it was he who was actually at the helm but it didn't really matter. It was almost comic.

I had to stifle a giggle. "Oh!" I said.

"The shuttles are remarkably touchy, He said knowingly, "when you knock the dorsal wing."

I just nodded. "Then I don't mind you reminding me of this." I said.

"That is wise." He commented dryly.

Like the mouth of a hungry rancor the *Executor's* landing bay was wide and open. The shuttle glided through the force field and we flew into its maw. I styled her portside as we landed and the touchdown was gentle as the side wings folded up and locked into land position. I wondered to myself how much one of these shuttles would cost.

"You have learned to pilot these particular ships better than I had expected." Lord Vader said as he left the cockpit, then because I just glanced up and stared at him, unsure if I had heard right or not, he snapped. "Hurry up girl; I gave you a compliment not permission to sit here all day."

"Yes, my lord." I said grabbing my satchel and hurrying to follow him out of the shuttle. I was surprised by the honour guard that waited. Lord Vader was used to seeing this and breezed down the shuttle's ramp, his long cloak flowing like black water out behind him. I picked up my baggage and trotted after him.



"Lord Vader, welcome back to the *Executor*, it is so good to see you returned to us safe once again." said an older man in a stuffy manner that told me he was anything but glad to see Lord Vader back.

"Yes, yes Ozzel. Is everything arranged as I requested?" Vader asked cutting Ozzel off with an impatient flap of his hand.

"Yes, my lord, we have done everything you requested but it was short notice and..."

Lord Vader stopped mid stride and turned on Ozzel. "Admiral, I do not wish excuses and nor should you utter them in my presence."

The Admiral stuttered. "Yes...my lord."

"See that you remember this." Vader said. "Merlyn, keep up!" he barked.

"Yes, my lord." I said with a cheerful smile aimed more at Admiral Ozzel who had given me a filthy look when he realised that I was standing behind Lord Vader. The walking resumed with me in tow watching the ongoing exchange. Admiral Ozzel did not like having me onboard; the few glances at me as I followed behind Lord Vader told me all I needed to know.

"Have my assistant's quarters been made ready?" Lord Vader asked as he swept into the turbo life and me scurrying behind trying not to trip on his cloak.

"As you requested, Lord Vader, and how long will your... ah...uhm...office girl be on board?" Admiral Ozzel asked.

"For as long as I need her." Vader replied sharply.

Admiral Ozzel gave me another scowl. I just wiggled my fingers at him. I could tell we were going to get along just fine, the way Jabba and dancers got along just fine. The Empire was full of men like him, pompous, self important and puffed up. I had to really fight the urge to stick my tongue out at him. This wasn't very lady like and certainly not very Imperial like but it was very me like. Instead I just kept my mouth shut and was grateful when we finally arrived at our destination. The *Executor* was huge so getting anywhere at all took time and effort.

I dropped my bags on the floor of my new home. I had enough time to glance around at my quarters before Lord Vader turned on his heel, growling at me to follow him to the space set aside for my office.

He handed me a data pad. "You will sort this out quickly with your usual annoying efficiency."

"Yes, my lord." I said, glancing at the contents, raising my eyebrows at what I read.

He stared at me for a moment, as though waiting for some comment, then turned and left. I looked around the new office space and was grateful to see that at least I have a view to the outside. My droid was already there sorting out stuff and I was glad for the company. I tossed the data pad onto my desk then sat down.

"Oh Mistress Merlyn, I am so glad to see you have arrived safely. I took the liberty of making you some tea when I heard you had come aboard. I do hope we will be staying in one place for a while, all this moving about is playing havoc with my memory circuits." P2B4 said bringing a tray of tea things to my desk.

"Thanks, P-two. I am sure we will be here for a while. Lord Vader mentioned the word Months when I asked for a time frame." I poured myself a cup of tea and held it in both hands.

"Months!? Oh my heavens! Well, I hope they have a decent droid center on board this ship, I am in desperate need of a tune up." He grumbled.

I laughed. "I'm sure they do, but I can ask Lord Vader if you like."

The droid shuddered and walked back over to the task of sorting out the office stuff shaking his head. "Dreadful man!" he muttered. "He keeps threatening to reprogram me!"

I just laughed. My office protocol droid annoyed Lord Vader to no end but I was never sure why exactly. It might have had something to do with the fact that P2B4 kept calling him, 'Your Darthness.'

I picked up the data pad once again and looked at the tasks Lord Vader had given me. There was enough work to keep me occupied for many hours. I was grateful really; it kept my mind off other things.

I switched on my computer and sighed skimming down to the last addition of the list. *Bounty Hunters*, I thought, *what the heck does he want info on them for?*

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I thought I would be bored and lonely on board the *Executor*, but that was not the case. Lord Vader kept me very busy and much to my delight Jorae was now stationed on the ship. He had come to find me the second day after I had arrived. He had kept in touch over the past few years via infrequent letters and the occasional hologram but I had not heard of his transfer to the *Executor* so it was a complete surprise to me that he was there. I was glad to see a familiar face. So when I wasn't working or practicing my Bunduki or lightsaber arts or sleeping, and our schedules actually coincided we would get together for food and hang out, often in the main hanger bay watching the ships come and go.

He had been working on a project that had got him noticed enough to be transferred and for the last two months he had been happily learning under the senior comm officer the fine art of listening. It did not take us long before we got caught up on each other's lives.

Lord Vader had insisted that I continue with my lightsaber training and had brought on board a substantial supply of the nastiest little training remotes I had ever come across. He had sent the droid engineers a new design and I was the one suffering because of it. The mean little remotes were built with a module that allowed them to learn. It amused him to no end when I got zapped repeatedly but I learned quickly.

When I wasn't being demoralized by a training remote, I was working on my Bunduki skills. It was harder without my master or sparring partners but it kept me limber to go through the exercises and Kata forms. It was during one of my midnight sessions, about a week or so after coming on board, I discovered I wasn't alone. In the entrance, leaning against the door frame with his arms folded across his chest was a man some years older than me. He was dressed ready to work out.

"You must be Merlyn Gabriel?"

I nodded.

"Lord Vader said that you were a Teräs Käsi artist, level seven?"

I nodded. "Yes." Wondering how he knew this.

"You were the one who survived the Right of Tet' recently, weren't you?"

I nodded, making a face. That was a memory I didn't wish to relive.

"I was wondering if you wouldn't mind sparring with me."

I looked at him. Physically he was in perfect shape and there was an aura of power around him that only came from people in touch with the Force. I was going to ask what level he was but then decided it didn't matter. I missed having someone to practice with and I was pretty certain killing me wasn't on his mind.

"Sure. I was just warming up." I said.

He grinned. "Great." And he joined in my warm up, mirroring my actions as though he had spent his whole life practicing with me. It was a little eerie.

"You have me at a disadvantage. You know who I am but I don't know your name." I said as we moved through the kata forms.

He grinned. "Sorry, everyone calls me CJ." He stuck out his hand and I shook it, his grip damned near crushed my fingers.

"You an officer?"

He shook his head. "Nope, a Royal guard on trooper rotation."

I nodded. That explained a lot. The royal guards were a breed apart. They went through incredible training regimes and tests of endurance. They were ruthless, unquestioning in their loyalty and, more often than not, force sensitive though how much so remained a mystery. Only the absolute cream of the crop was ever accepted into this elite group of warriors. Part of their ongoing training was to be reinserted into regular Storm trooper battalions, it kept them fresh apparently. All Royal Guardsmen no matter what had an air of incredible self confidence about them that bordered on arrogance.

Once we had warmed up we started to spar. He was very, very good. After two hours of one of the most gruelling work outs I had had in a while we called it quits.

"You're pretty good." He said as we started a series of cool down stretching. "Lord Vader wasn't kidding when he said I would get a decent work out."

I gave CJ a look. "Lord Vader rarely kids about anything."

He grinned. It was hard not to like him. "Would you mind if we could train together when possible? It is hard to find someone who knows more than basic hand to hand combat and someone trained in TK is rare these days."

"Sure, if you promise to teach me some of those moves you pulled. They aren't Bunduki."

His grin widened. "No, they are Echani."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh nice."

"You've heard of this form?"

I nodded. "My master spoke of it briefly."

CJ gave me a steady look. "I can teach you if you teach me how you do those fancy leg moves. I don't recognise that fight form."

I laughed. "That's probably because they stem from classical dance moves but I can teach you, sure."

CJ smiled. "You are not exactly what you seem, Merlyn Gabriel."

I nodded. "Yeah, I get that a lot. Send me a comm when you are free, if I can get away I'll be here."

He nodded and we called it a night. I was grateful for the fact that my quarters had a bath tub because that had been a tough work out and I would be sore from it but I wasn't complaining. It was great to have someone to spar with again, especially someone who was well above my own level and was constantly challenging me.

Working on board the *Executor* meant an irregular schedule, because while the ship ran on a watch system based, as all Imperial ships were, on Coruscant standard time, Lord Vader did not. With no day and night it was impossible for me to keep any sort of schedule what so ever, still I tried but Lord Vader seemed to take great delight at waking me up in the middle of my night. It didn't do much for my disposition.

I suppose that working on board the flag ship for the Death Squadron should have been exciting but the truth of the matter is, it wasn't. The *Executor* was like a huge floating city in space. It was approximately 19,000 meters long so it took a while to get around the ship even with turbo lifts. Aside from the naval crew and TIE fighter pilots there were a substantial number of ground assault troops, add to the mix the support staff of doctors, cooks, cleaners and so on it meant a lot of people. I was surprised to learn that there were many civilians amongst the support staff. One could live onboard this ship for months and still not see it all. The first time I had been on board I had not really been in any fit shape to do any serious exploring, but now was quite a different story and I was determined to see as much of this technical wonder as possible.

I wasn't the only female on board but we were rare even on a ship this size. Men dominated the Imperial navy and army. Mostly I didn't mind, I had grown up in a predominantly male environment so I was used to it. It was more noticeable when I would head into the small officer's mess hall, where heads would turn and conversations stopped only to begin again in hushed whispers. At first this was unnerving but as people got used to seeing me this behaviour slowly subsided.

I had been given fairly high clearance and since there had been no actually verbal restrictions placed on me by Lord Vader I could go almost anywhere I liked. I loved the ship from top to bottom but my favourite places to be were the docking bays, the cartography room and very, very occasionally the bridge.

The docking bays held all the ships, fighters and shuttles and I loved hanging out to watch the combat drills and the mechanics at work. The smell of hyperdrive fuel, burnt metal from the repairs and the scent that permeated docking bay the galaxy over was like home to me. I also loved seeing the new ATATs. I don't think in my life I had ever seen anything, in terms of ground transport, that was so large or so foreboding. The all terrain armoured transports stood ready to be transported to ground in rows like a stable of very fine Rontos. At twenty six meters long and twenty two and half meters height they were very impressive to look at. They had one pilot, one gunner and one commander. They were armed with two heavy laser cannons and two medium blasters and also held forty troopers. Their sheer size made them difficult to attack and a fearsome thing to see upon the battlefield. I would often come down to the holding area where they all stood, sit on the gantry and just stare at them. I was never alone in that.

Making friends had never come easily for me and being Lord Vader's assistant wasn't helping me along in this area very much. Most of the officers who were even remotely close to my age avoided me like the plague and the older men knew better than to be seen chatting up 'Vader's girl.' The only people who seemed immune to this were the junior officers who would sometimes ask me to deliver unpleasant news and messages to Lord Vader, Jorae, CJ and Captain Piett.

The captain and I had met once some years previously at a small function and we had been pleasantly surprised to discover in each other a sort of quiet connection that I suspected came from us both growing up on fairly rough Outer Rim planets. He had dropped by the office the third day after I had come on board to welcome me and apologise for not doing that sooner and what was, I suspect, supposed to be a short visit after his duty shift turned into an hour long conversation over my very good spiced 'caf. I was glad to discover that he had not changed very much and I got the distinct impression he was grateful to have a non military person to talk with. When we were able to we would meet for meals or 'caf breaks. If we had privacy he would speak freely and I had been surprised at his concerns.

He had come to me after a particularly frustrating day and after much prompting on my part had told me some of the things that had been going on under Admiral Ozzel's command. Ozzel was not a popular Admiral and he was known amongst the lower officers as the '*badmiral*' because of his refusal to listen to any advice from anyone other than the few yes men that followed him around.

"It can be quite frustrating." Firmus Piett told me one day as we sat in the quiet sitting area of my office, drinking spiced 'caf.

"Lord Vader mentioned to me that he was surprised at the lack of communication between the bridge officers and himself." I said. That was putting it mildly. Lord Vader was more than annoyed at the seeming lack of coherent communications going on.

"Ozzel filters the information before it ever gets to Vader. What he deems unimportant is never delivered." Firmus said. "I personally disagree with this but one does not go against the wishes of the Admiral."

"Why not go to Lord Vader directly?" I asked.

Firmus laughed. "That would be a very bad thing to do. One does not go over one's superior officer's head and expect to have a career."

I nodded. Imperial hierarchy was at its best annoying and at its worst, deadly. "Well, you know... if you think there is something important that Lord Vader should know you could always tell me, in passing conversation as it were."

He looked at me quizzically.

"Look, I'm not your superior; I am not even in the navy. I know how to pass along information without betraying the source. Lord Vader knows I hear things, he sort of expects me to keep him up to date on the less formal side of things." I said.

He grinned at me then and shook his head. "So the rumours are true then..." he said.

"What rumours?"

"That you are very dangerous and far more than just an office girl."

I shook my head and smiled. "Really, I am just his office girl, but adaptability is what keeps me alive. Lord Vader, for all his armour and trappings is still just a man, and after three years I know how to approach him." I said then added, "Most of the time."

"A valuable trait." He said quietly.

I laughed. "Perhaps." I said. "But I can tell you this, occasionally he listens to me so if you feel there is something that is vital that he needs to know and the Admiral dismisses, you might want to mention it in passing. I'll make sure the information gets shared. If there is one thing Lord Vader hates it is when he doesn't know stuff he thinks he should."

He looked at me for a moment and then gave me a slow nod that he got the message. We were bordering very close on things that could get us both in a great deal of trouble so I was glad when the subject was dropped and the conversation drifted to other things.

I was not allowed on the bridge. Admiral Ozzel had made that perfectly clear the very first time I had tried to step into this area with a vital message for Lord Vader. His rule was no civilians on the bridge, especially me but as with all things when it came to working for Lord Vader there were exceptions to every rule. I had cited this *no Merlyn on the bridge* rule smugly when he had thrown a complete temper tantrum about not being notified about a shipment of probe droids that would be late. Lord Vader's comm had been turned off and for reasons I still could not fathom none of the bridge crew were accepting my messages or passing them on. So after that delightful incident I was permitted onto the bridge to deliver messages. I took advantage of this because the bridge of the super star destroyer was an astonishing place to be.

To say it was large was an understatement. It was set up so that most of the bridge crew operated their systems and stations from the pit, and the officers of the watch would walk the deck above taking care that everything was running smoothly. It was a long room with a central walkway that over looked the pits on either side. It was a wide and open area with view windows forward, port and starboard side. These windows were large giving the sensation of really being out in space and not just on a ship. More often than not Lord Vader could be found at the very front of the bridge walk, his hands clasped behind his back, staring out in to the inky void of space. When he walked the bridge every officer no matter how low or high in rank tended to give him a wide berth or stare, terrified, until he had passed by. There was always an audible sigh of relief when he left. Everyone was so terrified of him that the air was rank with the scent of their fear. It rippled about the entire bridge like a dancer's skirts when she moved. When I had pointed this out in a conversation with Lord Vader one time he had merely nodded and replied.

"Yes, fear keeps them in line."

I wasn't about to disagree with him but I thought it made for a terrible work environment. Sometimes the younger, junior officers were so scared they couldn't even

think straight. How could that be productive I wondered, but I never voiced these thoughts out loud.

For the most part the day to day workings on board the ship were dull. They consisted of battle drills, TIE drills, the sending out of probe droids and then the assimilation of the information they sent back, the system and surveillance sweeps and of course the information and code slicing that went on. Most of the people on board the *Executor* never saw Lord Vader, never got near the bridge or knew a tenth of what was going on. They had their assigned jobs and that was that. There was a certain air of obliviousness, almost as if they knew that ignorance was a sort of safe bliss. There was a saying about the *Executor*, 'Quick promotions lead to short lives'. The flagship of the Death Squadron was a fast track to promotion but those promoted generally didn't live long enough to enjoy the health benefit package. The rumours flew fast and furious around that whenever someone, especially on the bridge crew jumped in rank, they immediately saw the ship's legal advisor and updated a copy of their will.

Still the advantages of quick advancement seemed to outweigh the costs and the dangers and the waiting list of those who wished to sign up on board the *Executor* was extensive! I wasn't sure I understood the attraction but I also never understood why moths flew into flames either.

All in all I enjoyed being onboard her. She was a floating, mobile, armed to the teeth city and, unlike the Imperial Court and all that went with it, most people on board *Executor* could care less about mindless gossip or who I was. For the most part, I was known as Vader's girl, which amused me greatly because at court I was snidely known as Lord Vader's Little Hand Maiden. I didn't much mind the derogatory insinuations that came with these names, but sometimes it was annoying. I did my job and I did it well. I once told Lord Vader about the unofficial titles. It had been a good mood day and we were having a decent conversation about the Imperial court. He had actually laughed and said he could think of worse things to be called. I supposed he would know about that so I let the subject drop.

For three weeks I knew a sort of peace. There was a rhythm even in the lack of routine. I did my work, I trained and I made some friends. When I had quiet moments I read and answered my mail and explored the ship. It was only when Thrawn's latest letter, accompanied with a small package from Shiv that the nagging tick of things about to change began to wriggle in my gut.

The messenger dropped off the regular mail just as I was almost done for the day and Jarack showed up shortly afterwards. I slipped back to my quarters delighting in a letter from Thrawn, his second since I had left Coruscant and surprised at the small package which had come from Shiv. I opened Thrawn's letter first and my delight quickly turned to concern. It was short and perplexing, unlike his previous letter which had been chatty and almost like having him whisper in my ear. I was grateful we only ever communicated in his native language because I wouldn't have known what to say should anyone else have been able to read it.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*The political climate on Coruscant is changing and not necessarily for the better. I am quite certain that soon disturbing news and gossip will reach you, but do not be alarmed and do not worry. As I have said before, I know exactly what I am doing and I need for you to trust me in this, no matter what.*

*Politics is a delicate dance, my dear, and sometimes to play it out correctly there must be certain side steps made. You must know that no matter what you hear, I do what is necessary to protect those under my care; this includes you far more than I suspect you believe. My relationship with you has nothing to do with political gain or anything else*

*that might be implied. All you need to know for now is that there is a long term plan in place and the wheels have now been set in motion for me to attain this goal. You are a part of the future. Do not lose your faith.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I sat with trembling hands and re read his letter twice. He spoke in riddles and I had no answers. With a sigh I opened Shiv's mail and what I found there didn't improve my mood any.

*Hey Rim-Girl!!!*

*Thanks for the brilliant letter, it really made my day. I had no idea being on board a star destroyer could actually be interesting, but you make it sound like fun. It is just as well you are not here at the moment because all hell is starting to break loose. Tigellinus has finally had enough of playing nice it seems and both he and Thrawn have begun some sort of grand political bickering, the likes of which I have never seen at court before. Some of the worst bits have even made the holonet and other news nets. I am sending you a disk with some of the reports on copy. I don't think you're going to like what you see. Your boss's timing for hauling you off planet could not have been better.*

*We miss you but you should stay put. I think things are only going to get worse. Thrawn and Tigellinus have really stirred the ugly pot. And you know how the Emperor doesn't like ugly when it comes to his court...*

*Love and hugs,  
Shiv*

I sat and watched the news net clips and when I was finished I commed CJ to see if he felt like sparring because I had this burning need to kill someone and sparring with him was the next best thing. Shiv had been right; all political hell was starting to break loose with Thrawn and Tigellinus at the center of it. What gave me that cold knot in my stomach was watching how well the news casters were able to insinuate things were happening when in fact they were not. When my face showed up on a couple of very brief and very nasty stories I knew anger. While, nothing untrue had been stated the allusion to me along with a couple of other young women, having several affairs with several men in high places, being used to traffic information and accused of taking sides in what amounted to a political war was all too obvious. The tabloid news nets, it seemed, could never get enough stories of palace dalliances, rampant promiscuity and dirty politics. I was astounded at how cut together footage from various big palace functions could appear and things looked very bad. While, I was not the only female to be showcased, I was the one whose face they showed the most. As Vader's office girl, it seemed, I was a prime target. I wasn't certain what was hoped to be gained from the innuendos but my reputation was seemingly shot to hell. It was a good job I was so far away because if I were close at hand not only would I be called out for going against palace regulations concerning relationships with members of the Imperial navy but I would probably also be up on murder charges.

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In the long weeks that passed, the rumours and the gossip had begun to circulate on the ship. I knew that by the surreptitious looks I was given when I walked into the mess hall or when I walked the more populated corridors. I heard the whispers and pretended that I hadn't. I had been called worse things than a palace doxy but I bridled at the suggestions which said I slept with every Imperial officer who knocked on my door. I was

many things in my life but unfaithful and promiscuous were not among them. I trusted Thrawn implicitly but I hated not knowing what his game was and I really hated that somehow I was wound up in it, without knowing why.

Oddly enough the rumours about me didn't bother Lord Vader and his only comment when I brought it all up one day was; '*Since when have you ever cared what others think about you?*' I guessed that when you were as reviled as Lord Vader was there was a point when malicious gossip became meaningless in your life. So I did what I thought he would do and I ignored it all, or at least tried to. Only CJ brought the subject up during one of our sparring sessions. We had become good friends, at least as good a friend to each other as our respective jobs allowed. Perhaps it would be better to describe our relationship as combative companions. We talked a lot while we sparred.

"I hear you are the hot topic for gossip at the moment on board this ship." He grinned as we warmed up.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't tell me you believe all the trash you hear."

"Not at all, I just find it amusing that one little girl is the subject of so much conversation."

"I'm hardly a little girl and it isn't my fault people have nothing better to do than talk about things based on malicious rumours spread by credit hungry tabloid HoloNet journalists with no scruples what so ever!" I snapped.

"Is it true then? Are you having a mad affair with the Emperor's pet alien and half a dozen of his other high ranking officers?"

I stopped what I was doing and looked him in the eye. "If I was do you think I would tell you, or anyone else for that matter? Besides when in the name of the Almighty Sarlacc would I ever have time to do everything and everyone they say I am doing and still get all the work I need to do for Lord Vader done in time?"

"A point to you... so it's just the one in particular then?" he asked with a teasing grin.

"Good grief, you don't give up do you? You really think I'd talk that openly about my private life?" I shot back. CJ liked to tease and in the time we had spent together sparring he had figured out pretty quickly how to get to me. Most of the time I didn't mind, it was friendly and even with the hint of something more underneath he kept himself decently distanced.

He smirked. "No. I don't suppose you would kiss and tell, you're not the type."

"What about you? No romance in your life?" I asked.

"Sweetheart, romance and Imperial Service are two things that never go well together. I don't have time for that nonsense. A leg over is about all I ever get around to."

I just shook my head. "You Imperial men are all the same. Crude, quick and dirty!"

He laughed. "I do find it interesting all the women now claiming to be Thrawn's lover, like it's a fashion accessory to have slept with the Emperor's pet alien. One even claims to have had his baby. It is as if going to bed with the man is akin to winning a prize!"

"Really." I said flatly, and then added sarcastically. "That should please the Emperor to no end." Not to mention Thrawn, I thought.

He laughed and tossed me a combat staff, today we had decided on hand to hand weapons training. "I doubt it, though it turns out her baby was actually a normal human child dyed blue with red contacts inserted on his eyes. Admiral Thrawn, it seems plays his romance cards very close to his chest. That the thing that attracts the nut jobs. He's a complete mystery. "

I shook my head. "I am quite sure, like the rest of us; he doesn't have time for that sort of crap. I don't understand this fascination with sex and the Imperial court that everyone has. If it were me, I'd be far more concerned about the political pot that's set to over boil. Now that is a mess worthy of the news net"



CJ swung at me and I ducked down into a crouching panthac stance to block and then attack. "The HoloNet gossip shows aren't interested in that, sex scandals sell, politics puts people to sleep." He said.

"People are a bunch of dopey Eopies then." I said as I swung my staff around, he very nearly didn't block in time and that made me smirk.

"Why do you think this is happening now? If I understand the news nets right it is almost as if there is some sort of coup going on in the higher ranks with Tigellinus and his cronies on one side and Thrawn and his supporters on the other." He spun away and landed in riding bantha stance.

I shook my head. "I have no idea. The whole mess makes no sense. Both of these men are supposed to be on the same side, fighting for the same ideals, I don't know why either of them would pursue this course of action. What is even stranger is that I get the impression that it is Admiral Thrawn doing the instigating. He's too smart for that. Surely, he of all people would know this can only lead to a messy end. The Emperor does not tolerate this sort of dissent between his men."

CJ shrugged. He motioned for me to stop and we paused for a moment. "If you hold the staff like this," he said showing me what he meant, "you'll find you get even more power in the swing."

I tested it out and he was right. "Funny, Lord Vader never showed me that move."

CJ grinned. "Vader has physical strength and height on his side; you are smaller, lighter. You need to use physics to get the same power behind the blows. He probably doesn't think about that. He's too busy trying to kill you or something!"

I grinned and we went back to sparring.

CJ got back on topic. "I don't have an answer for that question, Merlyn. I was always under the Impression that Thrawn was brilliant as a tactician. That for reasons unbeknownst to us mere mortal humans he can almost predict the future in his planning of events. I've been privy to some of his conversations with the Emperor while on duty and I can tell you, the man astounds me. From a military, tactical and strategic stand point he is the sort of man most of us desire to be so why he would risk it all on a stunt like this, I don't know." He stepped back as I swung and blocked easily. "If I didn't know better I would almost venture to say he wants to be expelled, because that's what will happen if he's not careful, or worse he'll be executed."

Even though I knew this was not a possibility the words made my blood freeze and I lost concentration so that the blow CJ made caught me on the thigh with a painfully resounding smack.

"You let your feelings get in the way of your concentration, they betray you, you know." He said. He had figured out I was force sensitive but not what my exact talents were. We had spoken of it the third time we had met to spar and agreed to try and not use the force while we fought but sometimes stronger emotions and feelings leaked out around us anyway.

I gave him a slight smile and ignored his comment. "I can't see the Emperor wanting to execute Admiral Thrawn." I said. "There's something else going on here, something they don't want the rest of the court or navy or galaxy for that matter to know about."

"And Thrawn doesn't whisper his secrets to you?" CJ teased.

I blocked his next swing and caught the tip of his staff in a way that sent him on his ass. "I accompany him to official events, I am not privy to his inner most secrets." I said and to some sort of extent this was true.

CJ got up and grinned. He swung at me in a faked roundhouse move that caught me completely by surprise and sent me backwards to the floor. What surprised me even more was he followed me down to lie on top of me, pinning my arms down so I could not move.

His face only inches from mine he grinned. "So if I were to kiss you now, he would have no reason to mind and you would enjoy it?"

"Try me." I said in a beguiling whisper and just as he brought his face close enough I cracked my forehead against his as hard as I could and pushed him away, to get to my feet.

He sat back and rubbed his forehead. "Ow! Nice move, where did you learn that?"

"Jabba's palace. Boba Fett taught it to me."

CJ just grinned. "You are so besotted you don't even see it. When I use the force to look at you it's so obvious."

"Besotted?" I rolled my eyes; I was not going to go down that road of conversation. Especially not with a man, that had Thrawn not been in the picture, I might actually have considered letting him kiss me. I was beginning to think I was attracted to the wrong sort of men and CJ was most definitely the wrong sort of man. "I thought we'd agreed not to use the force?"

He winked. "You leak power all over the place whenever *his* name is mentioned, sweetheart. Maybe the head blind can't tell what you think or feel but I sure can. Why is it that people having an affair always think no one notices?"

I gave him a speculative look and shrugged. "Now that is a good question." I said wearily. "Sarlacc's teeth, am I really that obvious?"

He frowned and looked at me. "Honestly, all kidding aside, I don't think so, but you forget I am trained to observe and use every means in my power to get answers; it's so inbred I can't help it." Then he grinned at me. "So, there is something more serious going on between you two then?"

I just smiled and I suppose that was answer enough.

He shook his head. "So what's he like?"

"What is who like?" I asked being evasive.

His answer surprised me. "Fett? I hear he's the best bounty hunter in the galaxy, how does an Imperial office girl know such a man?" he picked up his staff and circled me.

"That's a long story." I said avoiding his swing.

"Shorten it for me." He said, "I'll promise I'll behave."

"I've heard that before." I told him ducking his blow and twisting around to bring my staff between his legs and flip him backwards so he landed on the mat again. It had never occurred to me until that moment that CJ's teasing was really flirting and I egged him on. I suddenly felt a little guilty.

"Seriously, what's he like?" he pressed.

I stopped and leaned on the combat staff. CJ just sat on the floor looking up at me, waiting.

"He's very quiet, very smart and very deadly." I said.

CJ patted the mat beside him and I sat down.

"How do you know him then?"

I sighed. "When I was in my late teens I danced at Jabba's Palace. Call it my rebellious phase. Fett was often there, he does a lot of work for Jabba."

"You really worked for a Hutt?" he asked in surprise.

"You even know what a Hutt is?" I asked with a grin.

CJ nodded. "Part of the Royal Guard training is to be familiar with just about every crime syndicate in the galaxy. Knowing who runs the underworlds is good for knowing who to lean on for information. It's not something the Royal Guard does but we are trained in the arts of interrogation and espionage anyway. The Emperor's theory is that it takes a spy to know a spy. So yeah, I know who Jabba the Hutt is and I am surprised that you would work for him, you don't seem the type."

I laughed. "On Tatooine there isn't much choice available to a would be dancer."

He nodded. "So go on with the story, how did you learn that move from Fett?"

"Well, I'd only been at the Palace a week or so and I was still considered fresh meat, as they say. I had just finished dancing a set and was on my way back to the dressing room when I got cornered. I don't know who he was, just some guy who wanted much more than a dance. I knew some self defence but he had caught me by surprise and I couldn't get out of his grip." I shuddered at the memory. "Anyway he had one hand over my mouth and the other all over me. I couldn't get out away from his hold which seems strange to me now because now I could kill him without thinking about it..." I paused.

CJ said nothing and did not move so I drew a deep breath and continued. "He was about to remove my dance costume when suddenly he was just sort of yanked back and then sort of lying dead on the ground. When I looked up I found myself staring into Fett's face mask. He said nothing but he dragged me by the arm into a small room off the hallway somewhere and not only closed the door but locked it. I was pretty sure he wanted the same thing the other guy wanted but instead he took off his helmet and folded his arms. What surprised me was the look on his face. He was furious. He was absolutely furious with me." I smiled at this memory. "He looked me over in that making sure you are in one piece way and then he said. '*You're Kit Gabriel's little girl, Merlyn aren't you?*' It hadn't occurred to me he would recognise me from my father's docking bay or even that I had worked from time to time on his ship when he had brought it in for repairs. Of course it's always hard to tell what a person sees when their face is hidden behind a mask. I had nodded and he had asked me not so politely what I was doing in the scum hole of Jabba's palace."

"'*Working.*' had been my answer to him. '*This is no place for a sweet kid like you, go home.*' He had said. I told him that my home life wasn't so good and I had needed to get away. I guess maybe he understood that because he had just nodded. He'd asked if I was serious about dancing in the palace and when I told him yes he said; '*Then you need to learn a few tricks.*' And with that he showed me how to defend myself." I said.

"Head butting your opponent?" CJ asked rubbing his forehead.

"Yeah, among other things. He came at me the same way the guy in the hallway had and when he had backed me against the wall holding my hands above my head he had asked how I thought I could get out of this situation. I was pretty clueless and had no idea really. When he had gotten within a hair's breadth of my lips he whispered. '*Now hit my forehead with yours as hard as you can.*' So I did. He went on to show me a few other interesting manoeuvres such as a knee in the groin, all of them effective. I suppose we were in that small changing room for about an hour. Before he left he said to me, '*Merlyn get out of here while you still can. They eat little girls like you for breakfast in this place. You're a damned good mechanic go back and be a damned good mechanic. I don't trust my ship to just anyone, you know.*' And with that he slipped his helmet back on and left the room with me following. After that, most of the time, I was left alone. I am pretty certain that the rumour got around I was either his girl or under his protection. When he was at the palace he was almost always around where I could see him, I never knew if it was deliberate or not but I felt a lot safer with him there than when he was off on a hunt." I sighed. All of this seemed so very long ago.

"Sometimes he would request my presence in a private room. I know what people thought but it was never ever like that. He would order food and drink and then he would share the meal with me and we would talk, well mostly I would talk, telling him stuff about daily Tatooine life, the docking bay and stuff and he would listen. Fett isn't much of a conversationalist, although when he does talk, he's really interesting. I always got the impression he did this to reinforce the message that I was off limits, but now I wonder if maybe he also just liked the company. I mean, it's not like the galaxy's most revered and feared bounty hunter has any real friends is it? I didn't care one way or the other to be honest. I suppose a part of me kinda looked up to him, you know maybe even idolized him

a bit, after all I'd known him most of my life. He scared me a little but he fascinated me as well. Every chance he could he would tell me to get out of the palace and find a new job. I guess his message sunk in because when I got the chance to get out, I did. I haven't seen him since I left the palace but I always wanted to thank him for his help."

"Jeeze kid, you lead a charmed life." He said in admiration.

I shrugged. "I don't know about that."

He grinned at me. "Hardly anyone knows what Fett looks like for real. He keeps his face hidden from the world and the rumour is that if he does show you his face you don't live long to remember what he looks like."

"Why would he do that?"

"Well the story is that Fett wasn't born he was made. That the original clone from the clone wars was a man named Jango Fett and he requested a clone of himself to raise as a son in payment. Boba Fett is that son."

My face must have turned a ghastly white. "Boba Fett is a clone?" I asked.

"That's that story." He said. "Hey, are you feeling okay?"

I nodded. "So, if you see his face that's what the clones, all of them, looked like?"

"Yeah, I guess, why?"

"I just always wondered what a clone soldier looked like, is all." I told him, lying.

CJ nodded. "They were amazing soldiers. We often speculate about what it would have been like to fight with them, especially the ARC commanders, the independent thinkers that Jango had a personal hand in designing."

I was about to comment on this when the door opened and Lord Vader strode in. CJ was faster in getting to his feet than I was. Lord Vader dismissed him with a wave of his hand. CJ nodded and left the room. Once he was gone Lord Vader spoke.

"Get yourself ready to leave. We have been recalled to Coruscant immediately." Lord Vader said to me. "You will dress in an appropriate manner for a public assembly before the Emperor."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I do not know but the Emperor specifically commanded I bring you along." He said. "Get moving, girl, we have no time to waste! In half an hour I shall be in the shuttle, do not be late!" and he swept out of the room. Before I had a chance to take in the situation CJ slipped back through the door.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"I don't know." I told him, that wriggle of fear began to knot my stomach.

"Is everything alright?"

I looked at him and shook my head. "I don't think so." I said. "I think all nine Corellian hells are about to break loose."

The shuttle gave a little shudder as it slipped out of hyperspace. The stars elongated and then spun as we made the transition into to normal space. The trip had taken nearly five hours and since I wasn't piloting it had been a very long and tedious flight. Lord Vader had not been very conversational and the stormtroopers who were accompanying us were mute. I was beginning to wonder if the act of perfect silence was not a huge part of stormtrooper training. I envied the pilot and the co pilot; at least they had a good view and something to do, and they were shut up alone in the cockpit. When Coruscant loomed, all twinkly and pretty, on the port wing I was filled with a sense of relief mixed with a hint of worry.

I was knocked out of my reverie by the brush of Lord Vader's thoughts in my head. "*You will have some time to refresh yourself and dress appropriately. I will come for you at oh-nineteen hundred hours at your palace residence. Be ready.*" He said.

"Yes, my lord." I said. It worried at me even more than he was actually picking me up. Usually he sent some young officer to escort me to where ever he was waiting. He had not lied to me when he had said he didn't know what this was all about, at least I couldn't tell if he was or not. Lord Vader was powerful enough in his ability to manipulate the force that I was almost certain now; even if he did lie to me I would not always be able to tell, unless he allowed it.

"How formal is the dress code?" I asked. "Is this a happy occasion or something that needs more sedate attire?"

He thought about it for a moment and then answered. "Dress for a state funeral."

My heart skipped a beat. "What? Did someone die?"

"No, but someone might." He said and I realised he was being funny, well he thought he was being funny. "For Sarlacc's sakes, girl, what do I know about palace fashion? Dress appropriately for a state function, you've done it a thousand times before, why should this be any different?"

"Because I have no idea what sort of a function it is?"

He seemed to pause and then said. "It is a serious assembly, but I do not know more than that. My Master was not specific. He requested my presence and told me to bring you. Wear something pleasant to look at, not your usual Tusken attire! People will think you are not paid enough!"

I nodded and watched as the shuttle landed on the North side landing pad. It was not the gentlest of touchdowns. The air huffed as the door opened and the ramp distended. The stormtroopers filed out and lined up so dutifully I almost laughed. Lord Vader yanked me from my seat and I exited the ship in front of him.

"Do not be late." He told me, waving his forefinger at me and then he swirled dramatically around and with the troopers in tow he headed off in the opposite direction from where I had to go to reach my flat.

My old apartment smelled dusty and seemed smaller than I remembered it. I hadn't brought much with me and despite the conversation with Lord Vader about clothes I already knew what I would be wearing. I raided the kitchen cupboards and found the half full bottle of brandy; I poured a small glass and then ran a bath. I had enough time to try and relax.

I wore a demure dress that Cati had made me for a small function that I had ended up not going to. The dress was tailored and elegant, made from an indigo coloured linen fabric. It had a square neck and wide shoulder straps. It would have been almost prudish had it not been for the open kick pleat at the back that ran up to just past my knees. I had matching high heels that, like the dress's neck line, were decorated with tiny dark beads that twinkled. I swept my hair up and held the high twist in place with my favourite Zenji sticks, Thrawn's first gift to me. The makeup was just enough to let people know I was wearing some. I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I never recognised myself when I was all done up for a palace event. Toying with the pendant at my throat, I fought the urge to nibble my pinkie nail. When Lord Vader arrived I was ready. As we walked through the corridors to the Grand Hall where this assembly was being held I sensed that he now knew more about what was going to occur. I hesitated whether or not to ask but before I could he beat me to it. I guessed he was concerned about palace security because our conversation was telepathic.

"You will behave yourself at this assembly." He said.

"I always behave myself." I retorted.

"Just do as you are told." He tried again.

I stopped and looked up at him, hating the fact that his face was hidden behind that unreadable mask. I reached out a little with the force to try and dig beyond the wall of his words but he mentally slapped me away.

*"Do not try that again tonight!"*

Now he was just confusing me. *"I'm not going to like this event much, am I?"* I asked.

*"What you will or will not like is immaterial. Remember your training and remember who you represent."* He admonished.

*"Yes, my lord."* I said as we reached the entrance to the Grand hall. We walked up the carpeted stairs and the doors opened. I fought the urge to gasp. The hall was full but instead of it being a primarily civilian affair most of the people were internal palace employees, military and navy. The Emperor was not yet present but his coven of grim faced advisors were, as were the Council of Twelve. All eyes looked upward at the two of us as we descended down into the main hall. My heart began to pound and as surreptitiously as I could I began to scan the crowd for Thrawn but I couldn't find him.

*"Keep your eyes front, girl!"* He hissed.

*"Yes, my lord."* I replied demurely but I failed to keep the annoyance out of my thoughts.

Vader led the way up to the front of the room, to the edge of the Dais. His long black cape swept out behind him and I had to work not to step on it. I had seen what had happened to the person who had once done that and had absolutely no desire to follow, so to say, in his unfortunate footsteps. Lord Vader positioned himself to stand a little behind me to my right so that I was closer to the crowd. I knew when the Emperor entered because the atmosphere in the hall sparked intensely with his power and everyone in the room dropped to genuflect before him as he walked to his throne.

"You may rise." Palpatine's voice cut through the expectant silence like a jagged blade.

En masse we did his bidding and stood waiting for whatever it was he had to announce.

The Emperor sat, slouched back in his throne, his arms draped on the arms of the chair in a languid almost lazy manner, reminding me of dead animals. Despite his relaxed posture power radiated about him like the corona of a sun. With the cowl of his cloak draped low over his face, it was difficult to see his expression or gauge his mood but the air of anger that had begun to creep through the hall was unmistakable. The crowd shuffled nervously. This assembly was not going to be a pleasant lauding of military heroes. There was a moment of absolute silence and it was then that the Emperor began to speak.

"For over twenty years this Empire has stood for order out of chaos." Palpatine said. He did not raise his voice to be heard, he did not have to. "During this time we have worked hard to maintain this order and peace. Rules have been set in place to hold this Empire together, rules that have stood the test of time and are in place for a good reason." He paused to let the words sink in. "I am a fair and just leader and while I feel that competition between my loyal citizens should be encouraged when it gets out of hand and the lines of decorum are crossed, then steps must be taken to ensure discipline is maintained." He stopped speaking for a moment and the only sound to break the heavy silence in the hall was the sound of someone trying not to cough.

Palpatine slowly sat forward and drew a deep breath while he scanned the crowd before him. "Everyone here in this hall and all those who are working hard to keep this Empire a smooth running machine shall now witness what happens when these rules are broken. You shall now see what happens when the play for power and political self gain threatens to cause unrest in my Empire." He spoke each word slowly, precisely and with a deep viciousness that sent a shudder down my spine, emphasising his exact meaning. He stood up slowly, leaning heavily on his gnarled wooden staff. "Guards, bring them in." He said.

All eyes, including mine turned to the far wall, where the ornate doors opened up. There, flanked by Royal Guards, stood Thrawn. My gut twisted and I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest. I would have made a sound had Lord Vader not placed his hand upon my left shoulder and subtly squeezed enough that I knew pain.

"*Be still!*" He commanded in my head.

I drew a deep steadying breath and calmed myself but the hand stayed where it was and the grip did not lessen. Behind Thrawn and the guards who flanked him came several lower ranking Imperial officers, most of whom I did not know. They walked down through the center of the room and stopped, with Thrawn at the front, to stand before the Emperor.

Thrawn did not kneel as the others did but instead clasped his hands behind his back and stood with his legs apart, military at ease. He did not look to one side or the other but I was certain he was aware that I was there. I longed to stretch out with the force and brush his spirit, his presence with mine but Lord Vader made certain I did not. It was difficult to concentrate, difficult to resist the urge to look around and scan the crowd. I fought the desire I had to touch Lord Vader's hand with my own, to tell him he could release his death grip on my shoulder. Some small part of me was certain I would be glad of the reminder he was painfully delivering to remain calm. I understood now that he had placed us where we could see everything, and where we would also be very hard to miss. Whatever was coming next would not be good at all. The air in the grand hall crackled with tension and the hand upon my shoulder gripped into my flesh.

"*Will he be executed?*" I asked turning to look at Lord Vader trying to quell my panic. I had never seen an Imperial execution but I had heard of them. I fought the swell of fear and horror that churned in my gut.

His grip on my shoulder increased slightly. "*I do not know the will of my Master. You must watch and see, but no matter what happens you must maintain calm, is this understood?*"

I didn't understand but I told him that I did and like the rest of the populace, I held my breath waiting for the hammer to fall. The stillness and the tension in the great hall were so thick I found it difficult not to fidget. As far as I knew, at least in the time I had been working for the Empire, there had never been such a large assembly gathered to watch the fall from grace of a favoured Imperial officer. As I scanned through the gamut of emotions that rippled about the room I sensed a great division amongst the people there. Some, like me were shocked and deeply on the side of Thrawn no matter what it was he had supposedly done, but most were against him and their snide delight that he was finally getting what he, in their eyes, deserved was strong enough to make me feel ill.

I looked at the men behind Thrawn; they had risen from their knees and echoed his at ease stance although they were anything but at ease. Some of their faces I recognized from previous functions but their names, with one exception, escaped me.

I watched the man called Voss Parck carefully; unlike the others he was far more calm and serene. He kept his eyes forward, firmly planted on Thrawn's back and waited in much the same quiet manner as his superior officer did. I knew that Captain Parck and Thrawn were close, closer than most people realised or suspected. It had been Parck who had found Thrawn on some Sarlacc forsaken planet some seventeen or so years prior. Thrawn had run circles around the Imperial troops sent down to the planet to find a couple of smugglers in order that he might obtain a ship and get off the planet upon which he had been exiled.

Thrawn rarely spoke of that episode in his life. All he had ever told me was that his people had chosen to use the gravest form of punishment for crimes he had committed against the Chiss rules of engagement.

I remembered the conversation clearly. It had taken place very late in the evening and we had been sitting on the balcony. Even for Coruscant the night had been exceptionally muggy, too sticky and humid to stay in bed.

How we had actually come to the subject of his exile escaped me but I remember that it had started about the humid weather. I was unused to it but he had just smiled and said there were worst places, more humid places than Coruscant. I suppose I had asked him how he knew that and he had told me about the planet he had been marooned on.

"Why would your own people do that to you?" I had asked.

"Because they are short sighted and stuck in their ways." He had replied. "The Chiss, and I have told you this before, do not believe in pre-emptive strikes against a would-be enemy, even if it has been proven they will be a threat to the Ascendancy. They are a defensive rather than an offensive people. I over stepped my bounds and they decided I should be punished."

I had swirled the drink in my glass around trying to add up the facts that didn't want to add up. "I don't buy that." I had said at last. "You are far too smart to allow that to happen."

He had merely smirked and arched an eyebrow. Our eyes locked and after a few moments I got the message.

"You wanted to be exiled."

He had smiled then. "Clever girl."

"Why? What would being abandoned on an uninhabited world give you?"

He had drawn a very deep breath and for a long time said nothing. "When I first met humans I was curious about them, so full of contradictions and deceit and yet so full of courage and curiosity. It was Corellian smugglers that first crossed my path and I used them, one in particular, to familiarise myself with human culture and the language, Basic. In doing so, it so happened that we became entangled in some sort of political mess which the Emperor, who at that point was still only Chancellor and going by a disguise as a Sith Lord named Sidious was engineering."

"The Outbound Flight thing." I said softly.

He had nodded. "Getting rid of troublesome Jedi I think, but I will never know for sure. I came into contact with this Darth Sidious and realised that he was not only manipulating everyone and everything around him for power but also for protection. We all have a common enemy; one that I fear will be the destruction of the galaxy if we are not careful. I saw in him a chance to better protect my people. I could not, however, simply walk away without a certain amount of disgrace or questions being raised as to my leaving my home world and pledge allegiance to another race of beings. My people are unfortunately xenophobic enough this would have been unacceptable behaviour, so... I did what was necessary."

"You arranged the whole thing?" I had asked, astounded at the planning and the forethought.

He had shrugged. "Let us just say, certain wheels were put into motion and a certain amount of luck prevailed."

"Luck." I had snorted. "I wasn't aware you believed in luck."

He had just smiled then and caressed my face in that oh so beguiling manner that always made me shiver. "There is so very much we still do not know about each other, Sji'u' Tekari."

I had made a face and had ignored the comment along with the underlying innuendo. "So the man who found you, did he know he was supposed to find you?"

"No. Sometimes it is better to allow others to think the ideas which were really someone else's are theirs alone. In the end it was a good thing for us both and Parck, you remember him I pointed him out to you at the reception last week, has benefited greatly



from his association with me. He is a good man, intelligent as well as innovative. I enjoy his company and perhaps he is one of the closest people I have to an actual friend, present company excluded." He had paused. "Most people think him a dull man, riding the wave of success of another but I can tell you that this is not the case and if push ever came to shove I would have him at my back any day of the week."

I had nodded and the conversation, as it so often did, had moved on to other things.

Now, in the great hall I realised that CJ had been right in his summation that something else was going on, other than a simple dog fight between power hungry rivals and whatever it was Parck was in on the game. I was certain I would not like where this assembly would go but suddenly I felt a whole lot better about it than I had a few moments before. Lord Vader must have sensed my lessening tension because the grip he had on my shoulder eased up a little, but the hand stayed put.

A shiver snaked through the crowd as the Emperor, after staring hard at the men standing before him, shifted slightly to sit back down on his throne. When he spoke, his voice was cold and hard.

"Admiral Thrawn, you have been brought before me in this manner because it has come to my attention that you are the instigator in what amounts to a political coup. You have been given much grace and liberty in my court yet you have chosen to flaunt it and abuse it to gather supporters for your own agenda in favour of serving the Empire. You have been elevated to a rank of high stature in my navy and given privileges well beyond that which you deserve. It is not the first time I have felt the need to bring disciplinary measures against your insubordination but I assure you, it will be the last."

This brought a collective gasp and the flutter of whispers from the audience but a subtle motion of the Emperor's fingers shut it up almost before it began.

"I will not have dissent amongst members of my fleet, my court or anywhere else in my Empire. That you, who have been given so much liberty, have chosen to undermine the political stability is a blatant disregard for the rules I have set in place. I am personally grieved by your behaviour not only in the political arena but also in a most personal one as well."

Again there was a small ripple of shock that ran through the crowd and again the Emperor silenced it with the barest of movements. Even Thrawn was caught a little off guard as he raised his chin a fraction in question.

The Emperor leaned forward in his chair, the cowl of his cloak pulling back just enough so that all who dared to look upon his disfigured face could see the sparkle of vicious delight he took from being able to surprise his most prized and brilliant tactician.

"Yes, I see you thought you could hide your indiscretions from me. I assure you Admiral Thrawn nothing escapes my notice. It has come to my attention that not only have you stirred up a political mess within the High Command, dividing the attentions of my men who should be focusing on protection of the Empire but that you have also been, against the strict rules of this court, engaged in a carnal relationship with one of my female employees! This I will not have! You as a high ranking officer are supposed to be setting a good example yet instead I find you blatantly disregarding regulations set into place for the protection of the gullible young women who work for me and my Empire. You have not only shamed yourself but you have shamed this young woman as well and she will forever carry the stigma of your tainted touch. "

This time the Emperor did not stop the crowd from expressing their feelings and whispers filled the air as people digested this bit of news. Slowly it dawned on most of them who the Emperor might have been referring to and all eyes turned to stare at me. Now I understood Lord Vader's insistence I remain calm. To give even the slightest hint of emotion was to confirm the suspicions set in place and that would not reflect well on him. Palace affairs, while not allowed were mostly ignored, so to have one laid out in the open

for all to see meant that the Emperor was well and truly angry and that was never a good thing. I kept my expression neutral and focused on the Emperor's face. My hatred of him was something I could not control and I did not miss the small smug smile that played slightly on his lips as he looked my way and caught my stare for a split second. Lord Vader's grip increased as my body tensed and I knew by the end of this I would bear bruises from his fingertips. I didn't mind, the pain he was inflicting helped me to try and control not only the blind anger and also the strange sense of shame I suddenly felt.

"*How dare he....!*" I began but Lord Vader did not let me finish, pain flared in my shoulder.

"*Be silent you stupid child!*"

So I gritted my teeth and concentrated on remembering to breathe. I could see Thrawn clench his jaw and knew that while perhaps being called out over this political power play had been expected, the Emperor's use of the affair between us was not and it had angered him.

"Admiral Thrawn, you and those who have sided with your political wrangling will be punished to the fullest extent of the law, but to prove that I am a merciful ruler I shall spare you all from execution. From here on in you and those who have followed your leadership in this particular political struggle are banished from this court. You are henceforth to be sent to the Unknown Regions of space where you will spend your time mapping out the area until I see fit to allow you to return to my grace. I will not tolerate such behaviour as I have witnessed from you. Let this be a lesson to any who feel they can try this sort of nonsense for themselves. Next time I shall not be so lenient and the consequences will be dire!"

There was a moment's pause and with a flick of his hand the Emperor said. "In twenty four hours you will be gone from Coruscant or your lives will be forfeit. Now leave."

Thrawn gave the Emperor a curt military nod and turned on his heel with a practiced elegance. The men who were standing behind him parted to let him pass and then with their heads held high despite the shame they too felt, they marched out in perfect military step. The Royal Guardsmen who had accompanied them in now shadowed them out and only after they had all vanished through the great doors did the tension in the room ease, just a little.

The Emperor stood and everyone dropped to one knee while he walked slowly out of the Great hall, chuckling slightly as he did so. His advisors and the Council of Twelve followed him like ghosts. Then and only then, when the great doors silently closed did everyone still in the great hall allow themselves to express their shock at what had just happened. The room exploded in a sudden flurry of motion and babble. It felt to me as though a sandstorm had just erupted and was furiously circling around the entire room. The noise level was almost deafening. I just felt ill. Lord Vader brought me out of my inner turmoil as he brushed my thoughts with his.

"*You have until oh-nine hundred hours tomorrow to sort out your affairs, girl. I suggest you make the most of this time. You will meet me at the shuttle then and not a moment later, do I make myself clear?*"

"*Crystal.*"

He let go of my shoulder then.

"*Did you know? Did you know he was going to do this?*" I asked, turning to look up into the reflective blackness of his face mask.

"*I was debriefed just before I came to collect you but even I am not privy to all my Master's thoughts.*" He replied. His way of saying no, even he had not known everything that was going to be done or said, and that he was annoyed at being left out of the loop.

I sighed but before I had time to consider my next move he grabbed my arm and pulled at me.

"Come along, wretched girl!" he snarled out loud and the pitying looks that were shot my way suggested that people figured my comeuppance was about to hit me hard and furious. He all but dragged me from the Great hall and only when we were a suitable enough distance away did he let go of my arm.

"You are wasting time." He told me pointedly and then before I could answer he spun around and stalked back down the corridor leaving me alone. I made my way through the lesser used hallways, afraid of what might happen should I run into a holo net news team or worse. By the time I reached my palace flat I was boiling with a fury I could hardly control. I wanted to smash everything in my sight but in the end I didn't, because it would not change a thing and it would not make me feel any better. The only thing succumbing to my anger would do, would be to please the Emperor, I was certain of that, so I used everything I had ever been taught and I calmed down. The Emperor had gotten enough pleasure at my expense today; I would not give him any more.

I changed out of the finery and dressed, as Lord Vader had so aptly put it, in my Tusken attire, grateful that the long coat had a deep hood. I grabbed my bag and slipped out of my flat to where the little air speeder was parked. There was only one place I could go now where I would find some answers as well as some peace and the Imperial palace was not it.

Thrawn's flat was silent. He had not returned, yet. I was strangely grateful for this and did not turn on any lights as I made my way to the bedroom and changed into a pretty but casual dress that was easy to move in. As I wandered about the flat I realised that he had packed some things away, some of his art work and books. He had known what was coming and he had prepared himself accordingly. I didn't know whether to be angry or relieved. I grabbed a shawl from the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers that had become mine by default and made my way to the kitchen.

On the counter was a very expensive bottle of red wine and two glasses. Propped up against the bottle was a note. I picked it up, his handwriting, as always was flawless and elegant.

*"Do not forget to let it breathe, Tekari."*

He had known I would come here. He was always ready for everything, it wouldn't surprise me, I thought tartly, that he had even planned how to avoid his own death. I opened the bottle and let the wine breathe as per his instructions. I gave it five minutes then poured myself a glass, I would have waited for him but I had no idea how long he would be and I needed a drink now.

I took my wine and went to sit out on the balcony. I sipped at it slowly and let the rich flavour invade my tongue. This was a very good wine, but then Thrawn had exquisite taste in damned near everything so it wasn't such a big surprise that the last bottle of wine we would share on this planet for goodness knew how long would be the best credits could buy.

The city twinkled and danced as it always did. Some things never changed. It seemed to me, as I sat in the unquiet dark, that this planet would forever churn its light jewelled self around the unremarkable sun regardless of what politics ruled the day. I was glad I would be leaving in the morning to return to the Executor. I had the distinct impression that after the assembly I had just attended my life on Coruscant would not be particularly pleasant. I really had to wonder what the Emperor hoped to gain by doing what he did. I just did not understand his games at all but I was beginning to understand just why Lord Vader both revered and feared the man so much. One had to admire the Emperor's ability to play people. If manipulation were a sport, Palpatine would be the galactic champion.

I heard Thrawn come home but I didn't get up. I listened to him move about the flat; go into the bedroom and then the 'fresher to shower. It was his normal routine, almost

as if the act of showering directly upon coming home washed the taint of the Imperial political scene from his body. He joined me on the balcony; the bottle and the other wine glass in hand, his hair still wet and the scent of soap in the air. He filled his glass, topped up mine and then leaning back against the balcony wall, we drank a silent toast. The quiet between us was heavy and I didn't know how to break it so I was grateful when he took that job on.

"Do you like the wine?" He asked, his eyes never leaving my face.

I nodded. "It has enough kick to take the sting out of the evening." I tried but I couldn't keep the anger out of my voice.

He regarded me for a moment. "Yes, that was unexpected." He admitted.

I glanced up at him in disbelief. "You mean to tell me you really did not know he was going to use our affair against you and consequently me as well?" I shook my head. "You can't really expect me to believe that you, who plan for everything, did not see this coming. In fact on the way here I had to ask myself if that was why you got involved with me in the first place. If all I am is just another part of your grand scheme of things!"

He gave me an icy stare. "Is that what you really think?"

I had to fight the urge to throw something at him. "I don't know what to think! I just got dragged light-years across the damn galaxy to witness your disgrace and banishment from the court and much to my surprise, my complete mortification as well!" I snapped. "What am I supposed to think? You keep telling me you have it all well in hand and that you are prepared for every eventuality and you honestly expect me to believe you did not know this was coming, that you did not plan for this?"

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "No, Sj'iu' Tekari, I did not. It may surprise you to learn that even I cannot predict every single occurrence in the galaxy." He was cross and it leaked into his words. "The arrangement that Palpatine and I had for my supposed downfall was over a political issue, a power struggle, unwittingly helped along by Tigellinus and his supporters, driven along by his overwhelming need for power." He shrugged slightly, "Perhaps, considering the amount of attention Palpatine paid to our relationship I should have seen this coming, but I did not consider it an option because I saw no benefit in it as a tool against me." He looked at me and added. "It did not occur to me that he would wish to publicly humiliate you in such a manner. In fact, until I got word from Vader that you were on planet, I did not think you would even be here." He was telling me the truth.

"The Emperor insisted Lord Vader bring me along and now we know why." I retorted.

"If I apologised would that lessen your humiliation or your anger?"

I glanced up at him. "You are not the one who needs to apologise! We did nothing wrong. The Emperor and his games are the issue, not us sleeping together." I snapped.

"And I was not only humiliated but also furious, which is exactly what the Emperor wanted from me."

"He has his reasons for doing this, I am sure." He said in a voice telling me that even he could not quite figure out exactly what those reasons were.

I nodded. "Yes," I said softly, bitterly. "I'm quite sure he does."

He went to say something further but I waved my hand to shut him up. "What's done is done." I said but the anger that I had been keeping at bay slowly crept forward.

"This was messier than I had thought it would be, but it was necessary." He told me as if that explained everything. "Now, while the rest of the Imperial navy and court think I am off in disgrace mapping uncharted territory I can actually get to work without worrying about the likes of Tigellinus trying to destroy it all because of petty jealousies and power struggles."

"So, now your grand plan starts in earnest." I said. "I hope it was worth it." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my words. He ignored this which stirred my anger further.

He nodded. "We will continue to establish a serious Imperial presence beyond the Outer Rim regions, well into the Unknown Regions and hopefully strengthen the galactic defences. As you know we have already started but I can concentrate solely on the task at hand."

I played with my wine glass, swirling the drink around. "Most of the men, except for Parck, who were punished along with you have no idea that this was all planned do they?"

His slow smile reminded me of a teacher I had once had and loathed. "Clever girl, there isn't much that can be hidden from you when you open your eyes." He said smugly.

"I wouldn't be too sure. I didn't exactly see any of this coming!" I told him crossly. "You could have warned me!"

"I did."

"You call that cryptic letter of yours a warning?" I asked. "You need lessons on clarity!"

His eyebrow arched. "And you feel you have something about that to teach me? You have more secrets than the Jedi temple and are twice as difficult to decode, my dear, so be very careful about the stones you care to throw."

He spoke more tartly than I suspect he had meant to. My nerves were not the only ones to be frayed by the events of the evening. I respected that it could not have been an easy thing for him to go through but it did not lessen my anger any. I got up, suddenly furious and unable to contain it any longer. I hurled my glass at him. He side stepped it and it smashed against the balcony wall with a satisfying crash, spraying red wine like a blood splatter against the wall. I swore at him viciously, loving the way his language sounded to my ears even in anger, and left to go back inside, but I had no idea where I would actually go or even why. I just knew I was angrier than a provoked rancor and there was no outlet for the emotions that boiled away in my belly. I wanted to scream or destroy something or both.

He moved with a swift, easy grace that completely belied his strength which he used as he caught me by the arm and spun me around to face him. "I can think of a much better use for your excess energy than breaking my expensive wine glasses." He said coolly as he pulled me tightly to his body and wrapped his other arm around my waist. I pushed back from him but I could not break free. His eyes glowed fiercely and I knew by the set of his jaw he was just as angry as I was. The flash of heat that flared between us made me gasp.

"How can you think of *that* at a time like this?" I asked, not wanting to admit he might actually have a valid point.

His expression turned from hard to feral, he brought his mouth to my ear and whispered. "It is the only thing to consider at a time such as this and don't tell me you are unwilling. Your body language says everything but." His breath was warm upon my skin. "Have a care my dear, I too, can tell when someone is lying."

I shuddered involuntarily at the threat behind his words and he seized the moment, bringing his mouth down on mine hard. His kiss was brutal, dominant. He pulled away and hissed in my ear, "A'mal'yn."

*Mine*, he had said in its most possessive and absolute form. I looked up at him for an explanation but he didn't offer me words and he shut me up before I could speak with his mouth once again, just in case I hadn't gotten the message the first time around. I returned his kiss, matching his mood and discovered that he was right; passion was exactly what was needed at this particular moment, because killing someone, anyone was out of the question and very impractical. I did not protest when he picked me up without breaking stride or kiss to carry me into the bedroom and toss me on the bed. We were not

exactly gentle about getting undressed and even less cautious about the way in which our furious needs and moods unleashed themselves. There was nothing careful or kind in anything we did to each other. We crashed together like a bad speeder accident and by the time we reached that ultimate crescendo, the fury had passed into something completely different.

He whispered my name as his body shuddered and I gave into him utterly. I did not want to let go, ever. *'...tell me what you cherish most, so I will know what to take from you...'* I squeezed my eyes shut as tightly as I could to block out these words that simply would not go away. I refused to let the Emperor intrude in my thoughts; intrude in my most intimate moments. I fought the tears that suddenly filled my eyes and threatened to creep their way down my cheeks. I did not want to cry, I did not want to show that weakness. I hid these emotions behind the remnants of the powerful ardour that had gripped us both. It was only when he complained that I realised I was biting his shoulder far too hard.

"I am already bound to you; you do not *need* to mark me as yours." He spoke gently.

I just looked at him. There were no words. He brushed the stray tear from my face with his thumb. He kissed my forehead and pulled me with him as he lay back down. We were silent for a long time, cuddled together, a tangle of limbs. The anger and adrenaline rush now replaced by a weary calm. He brushed damp hair from my face and smiled when I moved closer into his body.

"You never cease to amaze me, you know." He said after what seemed an age. His fingertips traced the four bruises that decorated my left shoulder. Lord Vader's grip during the assembly had left marks. Thrawn frowned at them but said nothing. We had had the argument about Lord Vader's brutality many times and it always ended in a stalemate. Eventually he had given up, but his disapproval was easy to read on his face.

"Why is that?" I asked taking his hand in mine.

"You don't ask the questions I expect a woman in your position to ask."

"In my position... interesting choice of words." I laughed slightly then said. "You mean the *will I ever see you again, or was any of this ever real or all a wicked plot to get you expelled by the Emperor, or did you ever really care anything for me*, kind of questions?"

He nodded. "Mmm pretty much."

I shifted so that I could look directly into his eyes. "Why would I ask you such stupid questions when I already know the answers?" I asked. "You would never have even considered having anything to do with me if were I remotely like that. Possessiveness and insecurities are not traits men like you value." He remained silent, his strange red eyes never moving from my face, so I continued. "Do you think I do not know how much you desire to be back in space doing what it is you were born to do? Did you think you hide that part of your being so well I could not notice the longing in your face when you look up at the invisible stars from this wretched planet?" I shook my head and slid out of bed, found a robe and put it on. "Maybe you hide that from everyone else but you've allowed me to get close enough to you that I see beyond that cold façade you love to wear. You miss space, star ship command and being in charge so much you ache for it as much as you make me ache for you. It was only a matter of time, I knew that. Nothing lasts forever and you needed to find a way to get back out there. Did you think I would claim you as my own, tie you down and demand you stay here at my side?" I shook my head and took a deep breath. "I have been waiting for this moment for some time now... but while the result was inevitable but the execution of it all was a bit messy." I told him with a sigh, and then headed for the kitchen to get a new glass so that I could help finish the bottle of wine we had started earlier.

A moment later he joined me in the kitchen, after retrieving his glass from outside. The little mouse-bot I had named Mo had already taken care of the broken glass and spilt wine on the balcony floor. I glanced at the chrono on the wall and sighed. Time seemed to take a huge delight in speeding itself up whenever I wanted a moment to last forever. He must have sensed something about my thoughts, because he pulled me to him gently and held me close. There we stood barely dressed, wine glass in hand, holding on to something that was never really there to hold on to, to begin with.

"For someone so young, you really do surprise me with your insights, you know." He told me.

I shrugged. "I was never young. Even as a child I knew things I never should have."

He sighed and caressed me gently. "That nasty little talent of yours?"

I gave a slight nod then added, "Among other things, it made it hard to be a kid sometimes. I always knew secrets I wasn't supposed to. It grew into a talent for reading people. That and I almost always knew when someone was lying. Everyone always said that I seemed so grown up beyond my years, just no one really knew why or understood except Zte'sa Vahlek and maybe Jyrki."

He cupped my face with his free hand and drew it upwards close enough so that he could kiss me. Bringing up Jyrki's name had made him suddenly protective and possessive and as much as he tried to contain and control these emotions they leaked out anyway. I found them strangely gratifying.

In that singular moment I wanted to tell him how I truly felt, that despite my grand speech, I was scared to let him go. That sometimes I ached for him so much when we were apart it was like a physical illness, that I wanted to open my heart and give him my soul but I told him nothing of these thoughts instead I kept quiet and just kissed him back, trying to forget that anything else in the galaxy existed. It occurred to me then, that despite our different worlds, our different physiologies and ages, perhaps we were not so far apart. Neither of us had been children in the truest sense of the word, he because of his race and culture and me because of my unwanted force talents.

"It isn't the end of things, you know, it is just the beginning." He said breaking the silence. "I meant what I wrote."

I sipped my wine, listening to the sound of his heart beat in his chest. When I didn't look up at him he put his glass on the counter and lifted my chin with the crook of his forefinger. I could see he wanted to ask what I was thinking but he didn't. What was there to say? In another few hours we would once again be divided by light years of space and fields of twinkling stars, quite literally worlds apart. I believed him when he said I was a part of the future, whatever that was, but it didn't make the fast looming parting any easier to take. I sighed. Had we not played out this exact same scenario a month or so prior? It was like a bad holo-film glitch replaying the same bad scene over and over again, except this time we were both flying off in different directions with no plans to return to the core. I finished my drink and tugged at his hand.

"Let's go back to bed, Za'ar, we don't have so much time left I want to waste it on mindless talk about things we already know and can do nothing to change. Remind me why everyone calls you a tactile genius. "

"You mean tactical." He corrected.

I just arched an eyebrow and smirked. "Whatever."

He got the joke and smiled. He finished the wine in his glass and then much to my delight; he did exactly as I had asked. Our parting in the morning was wordless and painful. Neither of us looked back.

The flight back to the *Executor* was anything but restful. I was tired and cranky; Lord Vader was moody and snarky. He had insisted I fly, much to the annoyance of Colonel Jendon who was officially Lord Vader's shuttle pilot. I personally thought Lord Vader took

a perverse sense of pleasure in making me pilot when he knew I was tired and had not gotten much sleep. Still, I didn't complain. I loved flying the Lambda class shuttles and being alone in the cockpit with Lord Vader meant we either got to talk about things or I was left in peace to do the job of flying while he meditated or slept.

Depending on his mood he was either generous with his knowledge of the ship and his own flying skills or the trip was essentially silent. This time the trip was a terse teaching session with lots of sarcasm and yelling. The shuttle had been equipped with a new defence system and he wanted to make sure I was up on those latest developments, plus I think he liked giving the men riding in the passenger area something to worry about.

Today's lesson was on how far one could ultimately push an L-class shuttle before all the warning bells and lights screamed blue murder. Twice Colonel Jendon came up to ask if everything was okay. I suspect he would have done so a third time if Lord Vader had not growled at him for interfering in my flying lesson. The Colonel shot me a dirty look which I returned and then dutifully went back to his seat muttering something about female pilots. Inwardly I smiled but outwardly I was trying to make sure I didn't burn our hyperdrive out. While I was pretty sure I could have fixed it if it broke, I really, really didn't want to. I think there were a lot of frayed nerves by the time the shuttle safely landed in the hanger of the *Executor*.

I gathered my bags and with Lord Vader's permission was allowed to return to my quarters. It had taken us nearly nine hours to reach the SSD, five hours and three hyperspace jumps longer than it should have thanks to Lord Vader's insane instructional methods. I was exhausted through and through. I tossed my bags on the bed and went to shower. It had been a really trying trip all around and all I wanted to do was sleep.

## **Chapter 5**

I had thought that the fallout from the mess stirred up on Coruscant would have been greater but instead the buzz and gossip surrounding Thrawn's public disgrace and consequent punishment died down relatively quickly, replaced by newer gossip as was always the case, infamous today, forgotten tomorrow. I was grateful for the fickle nature of those who cared anything for the steamier nature of news. Only Shiv and my father had anything more to say about the entire thing.

Shiv's holo-mail had arrived three days after I was back on board *Executor* and had that wonderful touch of cheer that Shiv always did so well.

*Hey Rim-Girl,*

*I saw you in the Grand Hall for Thrawn's spectacular going away party but I didn't get a chance to talk to you after the show, your boss dragged you out of there so*



*fast I thought he had reached light-speed. That was some even, though. Who would have thought that Thrawn would actually end up in the Emperor's bad books?*

*I hope that you are okay and nothing bad happened because of the Emperor's innuendos. I guess you'd be happy to know that most people here don't really know exactly who he was talking about and the speculation is over three girls, including you. I keep my mouth shut and when pressed I just ask people if they really think that Lord Vader would allow you to get involved with the Emperor's pet alien in such a way that it would dirty his own reputation. That usually shuts people up. I hope you are not too sad though, I guess you won't see each other for a while now and I hope that Lord Vader wasn't too mad at you.*

*Mostly people have forgotten already and moved onto the next big thing, namely Prince Xizor and his big bust up with the reporter girl he was seeing. Apparently she wasn't too happy at being told to get lost and did some huge splashy story about him, which really ticked him off. She claims that her story about him actually being not only involved with the Black Sun Corporation but that he is also the leader for it all is the truth. He, of course is suing her for defamation of character and denying everything. It's all the news nets can talk about. The latest is that she has been receiving death threats in Black Sun's name. It's very messy, makes your little tryst with the Admiral seem pale in comparison. No one even cares that Thrawn and a bunch of loyal officers got shipped out to the arse end of the galaxy, except Tygs who sort of flipped out, but wouldn't explain why. He's very bitter at the moment but he never seems to want to really talk about it. His uncle, Admiral Harkov doesn't help much.*

*Anyway, kiddo, just wanted to let you know that you are no longer hot topic of the moment so when you come back you won't need to hide your face!*

*Miss you, love you too*

*Hugs,*

*Shiv*

I smiled as I watched his expressions and listened to his voice. Shiv's holograms were always full of warmth and I missed him greatly, he was the big brother I never had. I answered his mail right away and sent it as soon as I was done. Unlike Thrawn, Shiv did not mind using holo technology to correspond with, it was faster and easier. I had had lengthy discussions about this with him, because I was rather fond of real letters written on paper and I wasn't all that fond of making holo-letters much.

My father's mail arrived a few days later and was less cheerful. Unlike Shiv, my father sent his letters via data chip. He was old fashioned enough to dislike holograms and he never used them.

*Dearest Merly,*

*I hope this reaches you as we are not at all sure where you are at the moment. We had an unexpected visitor yesterday to the dock, namely Boba Fett, some minor ship repairs which needed parts he didn't have on hand. I was a bit surprised when he asked if I had seen the latest holonet news to come out of Coruscant because your name had been mentioned.*

*I told him we didn't subscribe to Core feeds and rarely had time to watch the news let alone the gossip nonsense. So you can image my surprise when he filled me in on what had happened. I was a bit shocked to learn that my little girl is part of such a scandal and I hope it is not true at all. I do recall the man at the center of it all, then Captain Thrawn. I did wonder if there was something going on between you too when you were both here, but he is considerably older than you are so I dismissed it. I see now I should have sat down and had a long chat with you about the dangers of older men. I hope that you know what you are doing; I would hate to see you get hurt, again.*

*Fett said he had been surprised to see your face on the news and asked how long you'd been on Coruscant for. I filled him in about your job and how that all came about and he'd laughed. He asked me to tell you that when he had said to get out of the job at Jabba's had not meant to swap one palace of iniquity for another. I assume this some sort of joke between you two. I told him about your work as Lord Vader's PA and he seemed impressed that you had lasted so long in the job. He told me he does quite a bit of work for the Empire; particularly for Vader. I was a bit surprised he hasn't bumped into you yet, but he said you work in different circles and despite the gossip, the Empire is quite large. I had no idea that you and Fett knew each other so well.*

*Not much else going here, in other news, Bel started seeing a Rodian named Kall, works at the Cantina but it didn't last very long so of course she has been impossible to live with the last few weeks. Bedi has been great with her, but I am sure you know how it is, right now all men are scum of the desert when it comes to Bel. She had some very uncomplimentary things to say about your Captain when she heard the news from Coruscant. I think that is the very first time I have ever heard Boba Fett laugh.*

*Business is good and Tatooine hasn't changed. The Hutts still rule and Mos Eisley is still the biggest magnet for the worst the galaxy has to offer. I was out at Tosche's the other day and both he and his mechanic, Fixer, said to pass along their hellos. Fixer got married to that nice girl he was seeing, Camie, I think her name is. It isn't easy for a young couple starting out on this Sarlacc forsaken rock, so I wished them luck.*

*Anyway pet, I need to get back to work. Send news when you can, we are all on pins and needles to hear the truth behind that terrible holonet gossip. Take care of yourself and for goodness sakes stay out of trouble.*

*Love,  
Dad*

*Ps. Your uncle Vahlek might be in your neck of the desert some time soon. He said he was doing a couple of jobs for your boss so don't be too surprised if he shows up unannounced.*

I sighed and answered his letter as truthfully as I could without giving everything away. I didn't see the point in lying about my relationship with Thrawn to my father but I down played it, as well as the scandal that had been making its way slowly to the Outer Rim news nets. I hoped that would placate him enough. I was pretty certain, that while he did not dislike Thrawn he would not have a high opinion of him sleeping with his daughter. Fathers were funny that way.

I had not expected to hear from Thrawn for some time and I tried not to think about him because those thoughts made me melancholy and achy from the inside out, so I was very surprised when Jarack showed up at my office with a courier package for me just less than two weeks after my last night with Thrawn.

He had made me jump when he had knocked on the doorframe to signal his presence. I often programmed the door to stay open because I hated the closed in sensation I got when it was shut.

I looked up and saw him grin. "Nice office." He said as he sauntered in. He handed me the surprisingly bulky envelope and waited while I signed for it.

"It does the job." I told him. "You have time for spiced 'caf?"

"You get to make that here?" he seemed surprised.

I grinned as I poured him a cup and told him about how Lord Vader liked to make sure I was efficient at my job and my ability to make spiced 'caf was a part of that.

He shook his head as he sat and sipped the sweet, spiced drink. "You lead a charmed life, you know."

"So I keep hearing." I replied. "So, how have you been?"

He shrugged. "Good, keeping busy. Here and there, you know." He was being vague and I didn't press, we all had our secrets to keep. "How are you doing?" he asked in such a way that I knew what it was he really wanted to know.

"I'm good. Keeping busy, keeping a low profile, if you know what I mean." I told him. "I don't enjoy the spot light despite what the Admiral might think."

Jarack grinned knowingly. "He said to send you his best regards. I'm sure he'll tell you all about the latest adventures from the *Admonitor* in his letter there so I won't spoil the story for you. I guess you have nothing to go back with me yet?"

"I do actually. Just because I wasn't expecting him to write doesn't mean I didn't. Hang on a sec I'll fetch it." And before he could say anything I slipped quickly to my quarters to get the letter I had finished writing the night before. I stuck it in an envelope and sealed it then handed it to Jarack when I got back to the office.

"He'll be surprised, you know, he isn't expecting me to bring back anything." Jarack said as he readied a secure courier envelope and I signed for it.

"He thinks he knows me as well as he knows himself." I said tartly. "You can tell him I am not just a pretty piece of over studied art for his collection and I still have a few surprises left in me yet."

Jarack laughed. "I'll be sure to pass that along!" He said, handing me the empty 'caf glass. "See you next time I'm in the neighbourhood."

"Take care of yourself it's a rough galaxy out there!" I said.

"Always, Miss Gabriel, always!" he said with a wink as he slipped out of the office to go back to where ever it was he had come from.

I looked at the bulky package and smiled, something to look forward to after I had finished my work. The to-do list from Lord Vader was fairly extensive and I needed to get that done first of all.

Things had not been quiet on board. Lord Vader had recently taken the *Executor* earlier on to Corulag to rendezvous with the *Devastator* and as he had so eloquently put it, "*Deal with another idiot who thinks he is smarter than I am.*"

When I pressed for an explanation, Vader told me that Imperial Security Bureau officer Sollaine had tried to wrangle a way to take over command of the *Executor*. I had nearly choked on the sip of spiced 'caf I was drinking when he told me this.

"Is he completely stupid?" I asked when I got my coughing fit under control.

Lord Vader's reply was terse and to the point. "Yes!"

"So what happened to him?" I asked.

"He met his maker." Lord Vader replied with a definite air of satisfaction.

"And Rivoche Tarkin?" I asked wondering what had become of Grand Moff Tarkin's niece who had turned out to be a rebel sympathiser and a spy.

I knew her peripherally, as I did many of the Imperial Palace courtesans. She had not so long ago become engaged to Vastin Caglio, the son of Moff James Caglio who was in charge of the Bormea Sector. Then all hell broke loose when the Emperor realised that there was a deep undercover agent amongst his courtesans. He had wanted Lord Vader to deal with it but Vader had his hands full with other problems and had given the job to Sollaine. I was never sure when Lord Vader became aware that Sollaine wanted to usurp him as commander of the *Executor* but at the moment when that happened Sollaine was already dead she just didn't know it at the time. When the *Executor* had jumped into the same sector as the *Devastator* to rendezvous with Sollaine for reasons I still wasn't clear on, this had inadvertently allowed Rivoche to escape. That was all the excuse Lord Vader needed to remove Sollaine. The lesson to be learned was that one could never fool the Dark Lord and trying it was deadly.

Lord Vader shrugged. "She is of little concern." He said letting me know that he had been more annoyed with Sollaine's ambitiousness than with chasing a single informant.

Now we were currently underway to Talay, where Lord Vader was to meet General Rom Mohc and be given a demonstration of the Dark Trooper Droids.

The Dark Trooper Project was interesting. The Dark Troopers were not flesh and blood like the stormtroopers were but rather very advanced battle droids. They had armour made from a dark grey metal called phrik which was practically indestructible. They were equipped with better weapons and jet packs and were usually deployed alongside regular stormtroopers. They had the advantage of adding chaos to the fights and usually scared the sandjiggers out of the enemy. The whole project was the brainchild of General Mohc and Lord Vader was quite impressed with the whole thing thus far.

I had gotten to see the project as it progressed because Lord Vader liked to talk about the droids and I enjoyed it when he talked to me about anything that didn't involve force choke or shouting.

When I had completed my to-do list for the day I went back to the quiet of my quarters and after I had showered and eaten, I settled down to open Thrawn's mail. I wondered, as I opened the envelope, if he missed me as much as I missed him.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*Here we are, once again, engaging in the delightful art of written correspondence and I ask myself, how shall I begin this letter? With elegant prose proclaiming how much your presence fails or maybe with witty banter to cheer you up? Perhaps, because I can picture you rolling your eyes and telling me to get to the point, I should just imagine you sitting curled up next to me, wine glass in hand, the scent of whatever bubble-bath you soaked in permeating the air and write as though there were no light years of space lying between us, as though you were here listening as you always do.*

*Just like you, I departed from Coruscant at 0900 hrs CST and rendezvoused with ISD Admonitor in orbit above the planet. I can assure you my welcome was anything but warm. As you so correctly surmised only Voss Parck was actually aware of the real reason behind my so called exile so consequently the men under my new command believe me to blame for their downfall.*

*Captain Dagon Niriz was cordial but did not hide his disdain of the fact that I am not human very well and I had been briefed by Voss that it would take some doing to win this man over. I told Voss that it wasn't my job to win anyone over it was their jobs to learn to trust not only their new commander but also themselves. I wished you could have seen Voss's face; he reminded me very much of you at that moment and it required a lot of my self control not to smile.*

*Niriz is an old school Imperial Naval Officer who comes from four generations of Imperial service. He was a bit stiff and at first, very angry with the situation he and his fellow officers and men had been thrown into. Like everyone else they all believed they were being punished for crimes they had not committed.*

*We arrived at the edge of the Unknown Regions after a long series of hyperspace jumps, mostly designed for me to see just what this ship is capable of. The Admonitor is a bit of an old beast of burden but there have been some modifications done and I wanted to make certain she was running at peak performance. By the time we arrived where I wanted us to be, let me say that nerves were a little frayed, exactly how I wished the situation on board to be. It is always very interesting to see how the men under my command will perform when they are already running on high tension. Needless to say our first encounter with an alien species was cause for some alarm, primarily caused by how I dealt with the situation at hand. Of course you know how I tend to teach and having seen and felt your reactions to my methods on more than one occasion, I was prepared for the disbelief and disdain that permeated the bridge.*

*Captain Niriz was infuriated by the fact that I continually countermanded his orders. I find it almost laughable at how quickly such intelligent men fall back on pre prescribed methods of warfare and first contact without stopping to consider all the possibilities. It was fascinating to watch him struggle with himself. He wanted to trust me but all his training and his own set pattern of beliefs made that very difficult. He along with several others truly believed that I would betray them and considered mutiny. For a few moments it was certainly interesting on the bridge. I am always amused by the fact that so many smart men do not see beyond their own noses. There is a great presumption that neither the Emperor nor I actually know what we are doing. It would be laughable if it did not get in the way of the work.*

*The aliens we encountered call themselves the Ebruchi and we are well on the way to discovering more about them. I shall not bore you with all the details but thanks to the work of Voss and several very good men under my command we were able to secure the information we needed without a single casualty, unless one would call pride a casualty. I imagine it will take a little while before Niriz and some of his men come to terms with the fact that I am not quite as stupid as they thought in the first place and that our so called exile might actually be a blessing in disguise. At least now I am fully aware of the loyalties on board and where they lie.*

*Niriz tendered his resignation and was convinced that I would have him court-martialled for conspiring to mutiny. I almost wished I could have seen his face when Voss explained the situation to him and told him I would not accept his resignation and would not be shipping him back to Coruscant with General Haverel. Trust, as I have said before, my dear, is a delicate matter.*

*So now as it stands we are underway searching for the leaders of the Ebruchi who had charged Creysis, the alien "commander" we encountered, to hold the planet we discovered. Between the upgrades made to the ship and the ship wide drills we have been running I am confident we are in top form. Niriz does a very good job at training the pilots and I am pleased with his skill in this area. In the months to come, we will be sent reinforcements in the form of more ISDs, with both fighter pilot and ground crews. As you already know I have established a base on the planet Nirauan and it is my hope that we will expand the Imperial presence greatly by the end of the year.*

*I have included two books I thought you might enjoy as well as a data chip which I would like you to deliver to Lord Vader. I hope that you do not mind playing messenger for me in this manner but at the moment when it comes to getting information to Lord Vader you and Jarack are the safest routes. Please see he gets it and should he wish to answer I have asked him to utilise the fact that we correspond. Jarack is on call for just this reason. The small communications pad is yours and contains all the codes you will need, everything is in Cheunh, as a small security precaution, but do try to keep it safe. Due to the distance between us, holonet transmissions will be virtually impossible so believe it or not, courier is the fastest way of delivering information also the least noticed. On the comm-pad there are protocols in place for getting in touch with me in an emergency but only if it is truly a dire situation should they be used.*

*So, Sj'iu' Tekari, I am afraid I must end this missive and return to the bridge. I hope that you are well and taking care of yourself. Know that you are on my mind in quiet moments and I miss your presence at my side. So stay alive and out of trouble, I am quite sure we shall some very interesting stories to swap the next time we meet up.*  
*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia,*  
*Mith'raw'nuruodo*

I sat and looked at the two books, the data chip and the small comm-pad. The books were both in Cheunh and, like so many books that came from Csilla, had been written by

hand. I wondered how he could ever part with such wonderful things but was grateful that he did. I folded his letter to me carefully and held it to my nose, catching the scent of whatever soap or cologne he had been wearing when he had written it. My entire body ached for him so suddenly that I had to consciously catch my breath. If someone had told me three years ago that he would come to mean so much to me I would have laughed at them and told them right where to go. I slipped the letter into the box I kept all of his letters in, tucked away in my satchel, and put the books on my bedside table to read later. I centered and touched the force just a little to find Lord Vader's presence, awake and on the bridge. He became aware of me searching for him and acknowledged it. I made sure I was dressed appropriately, meaning that I was wearing shoes, and made my way to meet him.

It was late according to standard time and we were well into the midnight watch. I liked this time, the quiet shifts, even though in reality it should not make a hill of ants bit of difference when the watches fell.

The bridge was peaceful. Admiral Ozzel was nowhere to be seen and despite the fact that Lord Vader stood gazing out into space from his usual spot on the walk way the atmosphere was relatively calm. Captain Piett, who was on duty nodded at me with a slight worried grin as I passed him. I just smiled back. What I had in my hand did not concern him at all.

Lord Vader did not turn to look at me as I approached him; he had sensed me the moment I stepped onto the bridge and was merely waiting for me to come and stand by his side. I followed his gaze and wondered what he was looking at.

He glanced at me for a second and then said. "We came out of hyperspace two minutes ago. We are now in the Arkanis Sector."

"Outer Rim." I said. "Isn't this under Moff Julsten's jurisdiction?"

He nodded.

"How far away are we from Tatooine then?"

He pointed to two tiny spots of light in the upper left quadrant of the viewing window. "That's Tatoo one and two there. About seventeen light years. A short enough jump." He said.

"And Talay?"

"Another two hours in normal space, too short for a hyper jump. The Executor isn't well equipped to make micro jumps." He said. "You have something for me?"

I handed him the data chip.

"I take it he is enjoying his new playground?" Lord Vader said after a few moments of studying the chip in his hand.

"I think so." I said.

"No trouble onboard then?"

I glanced up at him. "No more than was expected." I told him.

He nodded. "He has given you instruction for return messages?"

"Yes, my lord."

He was silent for a moment and I allowed myself to enjoy the view. It was rare to see space from the bridge of a super star destroyer and even I didn't get so many opportunities that I would take it for granted.

"How was your lightsaber practice today?" he asked suddenly.

"Erm...nonexistent." I told him truthfully.

"Then we shall have to rectify that." He told me tartly. I groaned inwardly I had wanted to go to bed.

Lord Vader turned around and motioned for me to accompany him. He stopped by Captain Piett who paled a little.

"Alert me the moment we reach our rendezvous point, captain." Lord Vader said.

"Yes, my lord." Piett replied. I shot him a small grin as Vader turned away.

"Keep up girl!" snapped Vader as I tarried slightly. I ran to keep up with him as he strode out of the bridge and through the halls to the turbo lift. "Get ready and meet me in the training room. I assure you, you will think twice before you forget to practice again." He told me as we stood side by side in the too small turbo lift.

I sighed. "Yes, my lord."

He glanced at me. "It would not be prudent for you to push your luck with being insolent this evening. I teach you this skill so that the next time your friend drops by to harass you, you are better able to defend yourself."

"I keep telling you he is not my friend." I told him crossly.

Vader made a noise that sounded a lot like a snort. "Not any more he isn't."

The sudden wave of sadness that swept through me at his words was both unexpected and puzzling. He had felt it.

"You must let go of your attachments to the past, girl, they will be your undoing." He admonished as the lift came to a stop.

I nodded. As ironic as that statement was coming from him, he was right. I walked away from him towards my quarters to get ready for what I was pretty sure would be a gruelling and painful lesson. Lord Vader didn't tolerate slacking off for any reason, especially not from me.

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I stood as calmly as I could and watched as the storm that was called Lord Vader unleashed itself with a fury that was as astonishing as it was vicious. I had seen him angry before but it never ceased to amaze me just how destructive his anger truly was. I looked around the room he had destroyed and at the body of the man who had displeased him with the news he had delivered and sighed.

"I absolutely will not tolerate such incompetence!" he snarled. The air crackled as he used the force to hurl the last surviving bit of furniture against the bulk head.

I wanted to yell at him about killing the young officer who had reported the destruction of the Gromas Mines but thought the better of it. He had summoned me to give me work but he also wanted to show me his anger. I was never quite sure why this was but I suspected he just liked having an audience. I looked around the chaos that was once a nice looking debriefing room and had to bite my tongue. It looked now the way building did when a category ten sand storm busted its way through it. Nothing and no one survived intact.

It had been almost two weeks since Lord Vader had gone to Talay to meet Rom Mohc and be given a demonstration of how the new Dark Forces droids worked. They had chosen a Rebel base on the planet called the Tak Base as a target and everything had seemingly gone well. The base was effectively obliterated but one ship managed to escape.

The Rebellion had sent someone to investigate this project and whoever it was had managed to figure out who had manufactured the droids, a man named Moff Rebus. After Lord Vader discovered that Rebus had been interrogated by a rebel fighter named Kyle Katarn, Rebus didn't last terribly long and Lord Vader had been in a foul temper when he returned because, and he was correct in his summation, Rebus knew where the new alloys for the Dark Trooper droids were being tested and had given up the location to his interrogator.

The young man, whose body now littered the floor along with everything else that had been in the room, was the messenger sent by Mohc. It angered me that Mohc had not come himself and now this young man was dead all because he had delivered the news to Lord Vader. There should be rules about not killing the messenger. The Gromas Mines, where the metal called Phrik, a vital part of the Dark Troopers' indestructible armour, was

found had been destroyed. This was a terrible blow to the project because Phrik wasn't easy to find and the Gromas mines were a bountiful supply until the facility had been obliterated by the rebels.

So I stood as still and as quietly as I could by the open door and waited for this latest storm to pass. He had woken me up to get me here and I was standing in bare feet, my nightdress and a robe, one of Thrawn's that I had 'borrowed.' I actually had quite a few articles of the Admiral's clothing, some he knew about and some I was pretty sure he didn't, like his favourite black long sleeved, crew necked shirt, the one made from the really soft, stretch fabric, and there was his black silk sweater. He'd be mad when he found out I had absconded with that one as well, but I liked how it felt and his scent lingered in its fabric.

"Get this mess cleaned up, deal with that body and get me General Mohc on the comm at once!" Vader growled, his fury spent. He stood amidst the mess and looked about then he stormed passed me. "I'll be in my chambers, patch Mohc through the instant you have him."

"Yes, my lord." I nodded and stepped back to let him sweep by me, grateful he hadn't decided to take his temper out on me as well, as he was often wont to do. When I was sure he had gone I made my way through the mess and knelt down at the young man's lifeless body, put my fingers to his neck and sighed. He was dead, no pulse at all. A wave of sorrow for the dead young man washed through me and rippled about.

"*Stop dawdling about girl, unless you wish to end up next to that boy!*" Vader's angry thoughts intruded on my sadness.

I didn't dignify him with an answer and ran down through the hall to my own office to start the process of getting a cleanup crew in the wrecked room and alerting the med center that they'd better send a team down for the body.

Getting a hold of General Mohc proved to be slightly more difficult and after almost forty minutes of bad links and fuzzy holos I had him on the line. He wasn't too happy about my interrupting his supper but the mention of Darth Vader's name soon smartened him up. I patched the comm through to Vader's chambers and then went to make some very strong tea. I had the distinct impression this was going to be a long night. Hours later a knock on my door made me jump. I looked up from the work I was in the middle of doing to see Jorae.

"Hey." I said.

"Not disturbing you am I?" He asked looking nervously around him.

"He's not here, you're safe." I said. The look of relief on his face was so funny I had to smile. "You're on duty late."

He nodded plunking himself down in the chair nearest my desk. "Who was it this time?"

"He was just a kid, one of General Mohc's boys; I didn't even know his name." I said, trying to swallow down the sadness I felt. At least I hadn't been there at the time Lord Vader was actually killing the poor young man. That had happened only twice and I still sometimes had nightmares about that. Having been on the end of Lord Vader's temper numerous times and felt the icy touch of Force Choke, it wasn't something I wanted to watch. I was always saddened by his abuse of this power but I came to realise a long time ago that if I was going to cry every time he killed someone I would be forever in tears. It wasn't so much that I got used to it, more like I learned to distance myself from it. "I guess he drew the short stick."

Jorae pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Do you know what the rest of the navy and the entire army call this ship instead of the *Executor*?"

I shook my head. "No."

"The *Executioner*." He told me.



"Figures. We probably have the highest non combat mortality rate around." I said. He shrugged. "Yeah, probably, but no one wants to count. Anyway, I'd heard there was a casualty and wanted to make sure you were still here."

I gave him a wan smile. "I'm still here."

He nodded at my clothes. "New dress code?"

"When he gets me out of bed with the words '*this instant*' he doesn't mean *you have time to dress and look decent*." I said.

"If Badmiral Ozzel ever catches you running around barefoot he'll blow a valve."

I rolled my eyes. I could care less what Ozzel thought of me. "Oh bring on that happy day!" I often ran around barefoot, but the long skirts and dresses I wore usually hid that fact.

He gave me a knowing look and stifled a yawn. "Guess Vader doesn't care what you wear as long as you get the job done."

"Dress code isn't high on his list of priorities." I gave him a slight smile. "You look tired, hard shift?"

He nodded "There's been another defection and he was leaking information about the Dark Forces Project. We've been trying to sort some of it all out and see if we can't flush him out or find out where the transmissions are coming from."

"Oh fun, that will really make Lord Vader's day or does he know already?"

Jorae nodded. "Yeah, he knows, thankfully." He said. "Some guy named Madine."

"Crix Madine, the man responsible for heading up the Storm Commandos?" I asked with surprise.

"Yeah that's the one. I wouldn't think you'd have heard of him."

I made a face. "I am required to know the oddest things about the Empire. Lord Vader insists on it. So I get to read all sorts of tasty titbits on all sorts of personnel. I am certain that news didn't make him happy at all." I sighed.

"Not really, but then again does *anything* make him happy?" He said stifling another yawn. "Anyway glad you are still alive. Maybe see you for lunch some time if *Old Meanie* lets you have a moment's peace."

"Sure." I grinned and waved as he left.

Another defection. This was getting to be a regular occurrence and I was starting to wonder if the saying about wamprats and sinking sail barges was not a bit true. If that was the case I had to wonder where this was all leading to because it sure did not feel good.

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"You're not concentrating!" CJ said as he hit me again with a superb kick that brought me to the mat for a second time. "You're so much better than this, get up!"

"I'd like to see you do as well on almost a week of no sleep and two days of nonstop Vader induced adrenaline!" I snapped at him.

He laughed. "That's a piece of spice cake next to the training we Royal Guards undergo so shut up and put up!"

We had been sparring for the better part of an hour and I was just too tired to think straight. CJ had said that this was as good a time as any and that pushing my limits was a good thing since one never knew what sort of situations one might get one's self into. That had made me laugh and I told him he didn't know the half of it. When he sent me backwards again for the third time I just lay there and sighed. He stood over me, shaking his head and then decided I was a lost cause and sat down beside me.

"What's he in a tizzy for anyway?" CJ asked.

"I take you know about the Madine defection?" I asked as he handed me the bottle of water.

He nodded, "Yeah, stupid bastard stole a shuttle full of vital information and took off for the rebels. That alone will earn him instant execution if they catch him."

"Well they did catch him, I mean Lord Vader and General Mohc did and he was sent to the Orinackra Detention Center."

"Pleasant!" CJ said sarcastically. Orinackra, a prison planet notorious for its high mortality rate, was probably one of the most infamous and detested places in the galaxy next to the spice mines on Kessel. If you went in there, chances were you never came out.

"No it's not, it's actually horrible." I told him with a sigh.

"Hey wait a sec, you make it sound like you were there."

"I was." I told him unhappily.

"Why would you go there?"

"Well, as Lord Vader's personal Assistant it is my duty to accompany him everywhere he wants me to." This was my stock answer.

"And he needed you in a prison? Why, did he need a special order of spiced 'caf or something?"

"Ha very ha." I said swatting his thigh with my hand. It had become a running joke between us that my role in Vader's life was really that of a pretty stim'caf maker. "If you wish to continue to enjoy the privilege of my amazing spiced 'caf then you need to show a tad more respect for its maker!"

"Okay, okay!" He said sitting up to start his cool down stretches. "So why would he drag you all the way down there? I mean really that's not part of your job description, is it?"

"There is no job description for what I do."

"That's not what I hear from the holo-news!" he teased.

I just looked at CJ with my *you are so not funny* face and shrugged. "One of my better force talents is being able to discern truth from lie, sometimes Lord Vader finds me useful in this respect. He often has me with him during an interrogation."

"Oh that must be pleasant." CJ said sarcastically.

"Yeah, like bathing naked in the pit of Carkoon is pleasant." I nodded.

"So what happened?"

"He had me fly out to this Corellian hell of a planet to listen in on the interrogation, as if the drugs and the droids were not enough, except just as I get there the Rebellion launches a bloody strike on the prison and manages, and you'll love this, to haul Madine out of there right under Vader's nose."

CJ's mouth opened and then closed then opened again.

I nodded. "Yeah, it was messy."

"Are you serious?"

"Deadly." I told him. "I thought Vader was going to blow up from the inside out, to be honest, he was apoplectic. I'm pretty sure if there were vents in his mask I would have seen steam. I don't remember when I have seen him just so angry and that's saying something. So now General Mohc has hired a bounty hunter to go after the rebel who was responsible for this mess."

"Do they know who it is, the reb? Do they have a name?"

I nodded. "Some young guy named Kyle Katarn."

"Katarn?" He asked in surprise. "I know that name."

"You do?"

"Yeah, now there's a story and a half." He said.

"You gonna tell me or will I have to read your mind?"

He shot me a look. "You're good sweetheart but not that good!"

I just raised my eyebrows in a *like you would know* manner.

He gave me one of those grins that I was sure made other girls' knees weak. "You had your chance..." He told me.

"So you keep reminding me." I retorted.

Shortly after I had come back from Thrawn's exile assembly CJ had found me alone in the room where we worked out sitting on the floor crying. I had thought he was on duty so I was not expecting anyone to come in when I had gone to work out. Despite the fact that I was exhausted, I had not been able to sleep, so I had thought working out might help. Instead of finding release in the movements I had been taught I had ended up on the floor. I could no more stop the flood of tears than I could Lord Vader's temper. That room was code activated and only a few people had the code. It was probably the first and maybe the only time he had dropped the cute bad boy act and been genuinely kind. Because I needed to talk about it, I had told him what had happened and confirmed what he had already guessed anyway. It told us both two things, one: I was not about to have a fling with him no matter how much he flirted and teased and Two: I was not quite as tough as I had hoped. It had been a moment of weakness neither of us ever spoke of again, but he teased me mercilessly about everything else afterwards.

"Tell you what, I want to shower and grab a bite to eat, meet you in your office in twenty minutes, if you make some of that famous spiced addiction of yours I'll spill the beans!" He said getting up.

"Okay, but bring food for us both then!" I told him realising I was hungry and I couldn't remember the last time I had actually eaten.

"Aye, aye ma'am!" he said with a grin as he left. He knew I hated being called ma'am.

As I made my way back to my quarters I wondered if it was just my imagination or were there more and more people going over to this Rebel Alliance. Maybe it was just I was more aware of them now than I had been before, but it seemed to me it happened with more frequency than it should. By the time I had showered, dressed and made my way to my office, CJ was already waiting with what looked to be amazingly delicious sandwiches. He watched as I put the ingredients in my 'caf and set the pot to slow cook. My office had a small lounge corner set up with comfortable seats and a small table, and we often used that as a place to eat after we worked out. It was private and easier to talk more openly in my office than in the mess hall.

"I've watched you make that stuff a billion times now and you never do it the same way. How am I supposed to steal the recipe if you don't keep it consistent?" he complained handing me a sandwich.

"You're not." I told him. "I swore a blood oath to my uncle I'd keep it a secret!"

"What will he do if you tell, hunt me down and slice me into tarn food?"

"Does the word *Tze'yusha'Jin* mean anything to you?" I asked remembering the title that Rikka Blane had given my uncle. I was grinning as I said it but the sudden look on his face chilled me.

"Yes it does." He said quietly, almost fearfully. "Forget I ever asked. I don't need that sort of trouble on my neck, not now, not ever."

"Oh."

He regarded me carefully for a moment. "You don't even know what that really means do you?"

I shook my head.

"Probably a good thing if this guy is your uncle." He said quietly, thoughtfully, "And if he hasn't told you, I sure as hell am not going to!"

"I can see that Zte'sa Vahlek and I are going to have to have a serious heart to heart the next time we meet." I muttered.

CJ just looked at me and took a bite out of his sandwich. "Your spiced 'caf is going boil over." He said effectively changing the subject. When we had finished eating and I had dutifully poured the spiced 'caf he began to tell me about Kyle Katarn.

"He's from Sulon, the moon colony in the Sullust system out on the Outer Rim. He joined the Imperial Academy on Carida and graduated with honours. He was given the medal of Valour from none other than Jerec, one of the Emperor's Agents, for his part in neutralizing a rebel held asteroid AX-456. It was a messy mission and Katarn held it together well enough that he got noticed. The Empire doesn't hand out that medal to just anyone for just anything." CJ said. "He was touted as one of the hottest new graduates to come out of Carida in a long time."

"So what happened to make him switch sides?" I asked.

"Yeah well, as I heard it, just after his graduation he got news that his father had been murdered by rebels. His mother was killed years ago. He was on his way to his first posting when someone from the rebels got through to him and told him the truth, that his father had actually been murdered by the Empire. He was beheaded by Jerec or something. Morgan Katarn was supposedly a part of the rebel cell on Sulon. Knowing Jerec there was probably more to it than that but I couldn't tell you what. Seems that sort of made Katarn rethink his allegiances and he walked. He's been a bit of a pain in the rear ever since." He said stopping to take a drink. "If my information is right, it was Katarn who got a hold of the technical readouts for the Battle station everyone called the Death Star for the Rebellion. You know the rest of that story."

I gave a low whistle. "Ouch." I said.

CJ nodded. "Yeah, he is definitely on the Empire's Most Wanted list." He said. "Do you know who they sent after him? You said that a bounty hunter had been hired."

"Who else but Boba Fett."

CJ grinned. "Now there's a showdown I'd love to see."

"My credits would be on Fett any day of the week." I said.

"I wouldn't be so sure. Katarn has an almost magical way about him. Lucky doesn't even begin to describe it."

"You think he's force sensitive?" I asked.

CJ shrugged. "No idea, but he's got some guardian angel on his shoulder is for sure, to get him in and out of the stuff he's been through."

"How do you know all this stuff anyway?"

"It's my job to know everything about possible threats to the Emperor and the Empire. You forget what I am, sweetheart. Just because I play nice with you doesn't mean I am. Actually if you want the truth I am a real bastard most of the time. You don't get to be a Royal Guard by being the pretty boy next door." he said coolly. "I just have a soft spot for you because you try to beat me up."

I was going to say something else, something rude but I changed my mind. "I'll take your word for it." I said instead.

He grinned and I am sure he was about to make some sarcastic reply when a knock at the door stopped him.

I got up and answered it, surprised to see Jarack. He walked in with his usual cheerful grin but the second he saw CJ that changed and the air crackled.

"Jax." Jarack said coldly with a nod of his head as he walked into the room.

"Behl." CJ answered matching Jarack's icy tone.

"I take it you know one another." I said carefully.

Jarack looked at me and handed me the courier envelope. "You might say that." He replied coldly. "Do you have anything for me, Miss Gabriel?"

I nodded as I signed for the envelope.

"Thanks for the drink and the chat, *sweetheart!*" CJ said with special emphasis on the nickname he had decided, much to my annoyance, to call me. "I'll see you tomorrow for practice." And with a wink, he left.

When the door closed and the air stopped crackling a bit I looked at Jarack for an explanation, instead he gave me one of those looks that men give you when they think you've been up to no good.

"Does the Admiral know you spend time with *him?*" he asked.

"I don't know if I've ever mentioned CJ. I spar with him and sometimes, like today, we eat together. Why?"

Jarack shook his head. "He's not nice people." He said.

I looked Jarack in the eyes. "Maybe so, but he's my sparring partner at the moment and so far he has never done me any wrong."

Jarack nodded slowly. "What do you have for me, Miss Gabriel?" he asked coldly.

I handed him the two envelopes. One held a letter for Thrawn and the other held a data chip from Lord Vader. I was well aware of the look he was giving me and it annoyed me.

"What is your problem?" I finally asked.

"Nothing." He finally mumbled. At least, I thought nastily, he had the good grace to actually appear embarrassed.

"You think something is going on between CJ and me?" I asked, knowing full well that is exactly what Jarack was thinking. Part of me had to stifle a laugh at the ridiculousness of the whole situation and part of me had to wonder at the loyalty Thrawn inspired and a part of me had to refrain from screaming blue murder.

"I don't know you well enough to say, Miss." But his tone of voice held uncertainty in it.

I shook my head. "Well, perhaps you should ask Admiral Thrawn what he thinks."

"I would not presume..."

"Oh but you do!" I said crossly. "You came in here and looked at CJ sitting there and you immediately thought that something weird was going on." I snapped. "He's on stormtrooper rotation and I spar with him because there are no other Bunduki artists on board, as far as I know. Maybe he's not nice people, and maybe you don't trust him but you should trust me!" I said almost shouting.

He sighed and I felt him back down. "I'm sorry. I just don't have a good relationship with that man, few people do."

"He's a Royal Guardsman so that doesn't surprise me." I said tartly.

"The Admiral won't like knowing you spend time alone with him though." Jarack said.

I arched an eyebrow. "How would you know what the Admiral likes and dislikes? I can tell you this for nothing, Admiral Thrawn does not get to dictate to me who I spend time with, or who my friends are and neither do you!"

He looked at me coolly for a moment then nodded. "You are quite right, I apologise."

I shook my head at him. "Why is it men always assume the very worst?"

He managed a short sharp laugh. "Experience." He said sadly.

I looked at him and signed for the outgoing envelope. "Who ever it was I am not that person, you are not Thrawn and CJ is just someone I spar with and talk with. He's a friend and nothing more, but feel free to tell the Admiral whatever you want." I did not manage to keep the frost out of my voice.

"I'm sorry Merlyn, it was a gut reaction. Maybe some time I will tell you about it." He said using my first name which he almost never did.

I nodded. "And maybe someday I'll even ask." I said. Now I was being mean.

"I suppose I deserved that." He said.

"Yes. You did." I told him pointedly and then, relenting, asked, "Do you want something to drink?"

He shook his head. "Can't this time, the Admiral is waiting for this." He said waving the envelope at me.

"Next time then?" I asked lightly, hoping the anger I still felt no longer showed.

He grinned tentatively. "Next time."

I watched as he left and then let out the breath I had been holding. What in the name of Sarlacc was it in the air that made men act like total brainless morons? I sighed and looked at the envelope I held in my hand. I liked CJ and we did flirt from time to time but he was not in my heart. It was not his touch, his body, and his presence I longed for when I lay awake in bed sleepless and restless. It was not CJ I thought of when I wanted comfort and guidance. I enjoyed CJ's company and even his attentions because they took away the sting of missing the one man who knew me better than anyone else, but they did not replace him. No one could do that and suddenly the terrible pang of separation shot through me like a solar flare causing tears to well up in my eyes, making me annoyed with myself. Attachments... they caused nothing but trouble. No kidding! I knew then that it was time to go to my own quarters, pour a generous drink of the bottle of brandy I had smuggled on board and shut off the comm for the next twelve hours at least. Lack of sleep made me very cranky and even worse, maudlin and this was not a good combination. I hoped there was something cheerful in Thrawn's letter to me because I could use some nice news for a change. I was beginning to think I should have stayed put on Coruscant.

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Most of the time I relished any opportunity to be on the bridge of the *Executor*, but not this time. I had come up to deliver Thrawn's latest datachip and had walked in on the middle of a nasty debriefing. My timing was, as always, impeccable. I stood rock still, as did everyone else and held my breath while Lord Vader absorbed the news that the *Arc Hammer* had been destroyed. Somehow Katarn had not only managed to stow away on board the *Executor* but then he had managed to get himself transferred to the *Arc Hammer* by hiding in the cargo shipment. In destroying the *Arc Hammer* he had effectively destroyed the entire Dark Trooper project. General Mohc was dead and Lord Vader was beside himself with fury, it had not been a good couple of weeks. The young officer who had delivered the news was remarkably calm as he waited for what everyone thought was inevitable but much to my and the entire bridge crew's surprise Vader dismissed the young man with a flick of his hand. I couldn't recall the last time I ever saw anyone move so quickly and still appear to walk.

Lord Vader stood staring out of the huge view window for a few moments further and I could feel the storm that brewed within him so it wasn't much of a surprise to me when he swirled around and stalked towards the exit, grabbing me by the arm on the way. The lingering looks of mixed pity and relief from the men in the pits did not escape me.

His grip on my arm hurt but I was used to this and had learned to keep up with him and not squeak in pain. In the turbo lift he let go but his anger had not abated. I stayed still and worked on centering. I was surprised when, instead of heading towards his private training room when the turbo lift stopped, he dragged me to his personal chambers.

"You have something for me?" He growled, sitting at his desk and starting up his personal computer system.

I remembered the datachip gripped my hand and nodded. I handed it to him gingerly. He had not dismissed me so I waited; standing with my arms behind my back while he studied the datachip that had come with Thrawn's most recent letter.

"Tell me, girl, before the cargo was being offloaded to the *Arc hammer*, did you notice anything unusual?" He asked.

I had to think about that for a moment because we had done the cargo drop one and a half standard days ago. I closed my eyes and let my memory work backwards and found the reason he was asking me this question.

"There was a ripple." I said.

I remembered that because it had happened in the middle of a conversation we had been having, that is to say he had been ranting and I had been nodding my head a lot when right in the middle of a sentence he had stopped and stood very still, as though he were listening to something no one else could hear. I had reached out as much as I could with my own small talent to see if I could figure out what had stopped him mid rant. It had felt as though something had stroked my spine from the inside out, though just barely. My senses were not nearly as in tune as Lord Vader's were and I doubt I would have even noticed it had he not been so aware.

"Yes." He spat. "Katarn is force sensitive."

"Is that why he was successful?" I asked, tempting fate by bringing up the reason for his anger again., but thought what the hell you only live once and my nosiness got the better of me.

Lord Vader was thoughtful for a moment. "Perhaps." He said. While his anger had not abated the immediate fury had. "This Rebel Alliance is becoming more than just a thorn in the Emperor's side." He snapped. "The Emperor wiped the Jedi out for exactly this reason."

I didn't know how to answer that. My birth mother had been one of those Jedi. I sighed. "What happens to your Dark Trooper project now?" I asked.

"Nothing, it is finished. The Emperor will only pour so much money into a single project and even I cannot sway him to do otherwise." He told me. "The Rebel Alliance costs the Empire more and more each day."

I nodded. I agreed with him. "Why *do* they want to topple the government?" I asked him after a lengthy silence.

He looked up at me and shrugged. "Why does anyone want to do anything?" he asked me. "They disagree with how the Emperor rules. They wish to return to an outdated method of government that didn't work, but they forget the bad things and see only the romantic view of what was."

I frowned. "Why did the Republic fall?"

"It became mired in corruption and bogged down in bureaucracy. It stopped listening to the needs of its people. The system stopped working." He told me. "The Republic was full of greedy individuals who only wanted to serve their own interests. I can still remember when Padmé called for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum." The sting of pain in his voice as he spoke her name made me shiver but he continued despite the sorrow in the memory. "She was unafraid to fight for her people." He said. "But she was a rare breed of politician and even she did not see what was to come. The Republic was crumbling long before Palpatine began his rise to power, but everyone turned a blind eye to it and looked to the Jedi to solve their problems for them."

"I thought the Jedi were just keepers of the peace?"

Lord Vader snorted. "You should have seen how peaceful they all were during the Clone wars." He said.

I had no idea how to respond to that so I just shrugged. He glanced up from the screen he was looking at to stare at me. I wished I could see beyond the mask and look directly into his eyes. It was always so hard to gauge what he was thinking and what sort of mood he was in.

"Did they not teach you any of this in school?" He asked after a lengthy silence.

I gave him a sheepish look. "I grew up on Tatooine, you know how that is. I didn't think that school was important."

That caught his attention and he regarded me sharply. "I know how it was to grow up as a slave on Tatooine. I was not afforded the luxury of school." He said bitterly and I felt the flush of embarrassment creep into my cheeks. I nodded to let him know that in the area of rotten childhoods he won hands down.

"I was bored in school. I wanted to learn how to fix and fly ships not study history and geography." I told him by way of explanations. "I didn't think I would need to know that stuff, but then again I didn't think I'd be working for the galaxy's second most powerful man living on board a floating city either, so what do I know?"

He just nodded and continued to work at the computer. "The Jedi were arrogant. They believed they were right above all else because they had the Force on their side. They preached the dangers of the dark side but many of them skirted that path as a means to an end. I remember one in particular, a Kiffar named Quinlan Vos. His master sent him deep undercover to play the other side. Voss was never the same afterwards. You could feel the subtle touch of the dark side in his being, but they all ignored the warning signs in favour of getting the job done, telling themselves that the bodies which littered the way were just casualties of war."

"What happened to him, this Quinlan Voss?" I asked. I was curious because my birth mother had spoken about this Jedi.

"No one knows. It was rumoured that he perished on Kashyyyk but I did not sense his death in the force. If he was smart he took that doxy he was in love with and vanished to the unknown regions."

"I thought the Jedi were forbidden to love?"

Lord Vader surprised me by laughing. "Love... platonic compassion was encouraged. Passionate, physical love was forbidden. Of course it was far more rampant amongst the Jedi order than most would admit. You cannot stop that nature from rearing its ugly head. To forbid such basic needs, such basic emotions, was to invite trouble. Idiots, self righteous idiots, the lot of them." He spat. "Preached the moral high ground but did not bat an eye about requesting someone do their dirty work for them when it served their purpose."

I shivered at the sudden coldness in his voice. "They used you?" I asked.

"Everyone gets used, girl, have you not learned this by now?" He asked coldly.

I just made a face.

Lord Vader laughed nastily. "Still young enough to be naïve!" He shook his head and went back to his work. Tired of standing, I sat on the floor and rested my chin on my knees which I had drawn up to my chest.

"May I ask you something?" I asked after a lengthy silence.

"You may."

"Why were there so many Jedi and no Sith?" I asked.

"Did my master not explain the nature of the Sith to you? I was under the impression you had been educated in this area of lore." He asked, leaning back in the chair to stare at me.

"I know a little about the history, the Great Sith Wars. Some of the better known members of the sect like Naga Sadow and Freedon Nadd but I don't understand why the Jedi were so many and the Sith so few?" I said. "I would have thought a balance between the two sects would have made more sense."

Lord Vader shook his head. "Where do you get your ideas from?" He muttered. "Sith lore dictates there are only ever two at a given time."

"Why?" I asked. "That's just dumb."

I felt the flare of anger from Lord Vader and flinched but he did nothing. "The rule of two was enforced to ensure that the order survived despite the power hungry nature of



those who chose to walk the path of the dark side. Darth Bane saw what happened when too many Sith hungry for power clashed. The New Sith War lasted around a thousand years and ended with a battle on Ruusan that saw the near destruction of all Sith. The lure of power was too great for all involved and they destroyed themselves for it, fighting the forces of light. From that time on there has only ever been two Sith. The law states; *two there should be; no more, no less. One to embody power, the other to crave it.* It is not so much, as you so eloquently put it, dumb as it is a matter of survival."

"So what happens if both the master and the apprentice die at the same time?" I asked. I still thought the whole idea of just two was a bit stupid but I held my tongue on that.

For a long moment I wasn't sure he would answer me but when he did his words were icy. "The Dark side waits. Sith teachings are out there to be learned and there will always be those who can manipulate the force who seek power over anything else. Just because the physical beings who embody the teachings no longer exist does not mean the ideals die with them. There are always willing candidates all too eager to let the dark side of the force supply them with strength and power."

"Could I be a Sith Lord, like you?" I asked after digesting this information.

"No." his answer was immediate but without jealousy or anger.

"Why not?"

"Because girl, you do not have enough power lust in your soul to give into the dark side so utterly and you are not nearly strong enough in the force." Then he added, "And you think too much."

I sighed. "Is that a good thing?"

He chuckled. "For you yes, otherwise I would have to kill you as you would be competition for my master's *affections* and my place at his side. There can be only two!" He said.

"But I could still turn to the dark side?" I just wasn't getting this whole lights side dark side thing.

"Of course. Surrender to the darker emotions, let your anger rule you but that doesn't mean you will be more powerful." He said and then he got up, removing the data chip from the system as he did so. He motioned for me to get up and when I was standing he handed me the chip. "When is the next pick up?"

"Not for two standard days but I can arrange for sooner if expedience is needed." I said slipping the chip into my pocket.

"No, two days is adequate time. Now I suggest you go and make yourself ready." He said.

"Ready for what?"

"I wish to find out how well your skills with the combat staves have improved since your new sparring partner has been working with you." He replied with a nasty little edge to his voice that said *you didn't think I was going to let you off the hook that easily, I am still angry and someone has to bear the brunt of it.*

"Ah." I said with a small nod. "Yes, my lord."

"Be ready in the small training room in ten minutes." He said. "Do not be late." And with that he turned his back to me signalling he no longer wanted me in his presence.

It had been a while since we had sparred with each other using combat staves but I wasn't exactly overjoyed at this prospect. While working with lightsabers was a daunting task at least I didn't come away from the session covered in bruises. I was grateful I wouldn't be seeing Thrawn any time soon, he never reacted well to the colourful results of Lord Vader's little combat lessons to me.

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After staring listlessly out of the view port in my office for what felt like hours I came to the conclusion that time was like a rubber band. It stretched out long and slowly, almost agonizingly so, only to suddenly fling itself forward as if in a mad dash to catch up with the time it lost elongating itself in the first place. Right now we were in one of the long stretchy phases.

It wasn't so much that I was actually bored, life as Lord Vader's personal assistant did not allow such luxuries as boredom but there were moments when I wondered if time conspired against me because it seemed unending and, much like hyperspace, void of anything meaningful.

What had felt like forever and was in fact only a month or so that we had been meandering through space with no apparent purpose, or so it appeared. Lord Vader was as much on board as he was away doing things that were, in his words, '*None of your concern girl, so stop asking and do your job or else you might find yourself floating back to Coruscant in an EV suit!*' To say he was a little foul tempered was a kindness.

I suppose that being the Emperor's Iron Fist had its perks but for the most part his job as second in command of the Galactic Empire did not seem to bring him much joy and he delighted in taking his bad moods out on everyone and everything around him, including me. Although I was becoming very adept at circumnavigating his temper tantrums, I still felt the heat of them. There were days when I tried to avoid him like the Bandonian plague unless it was absolutely necessary to be in his presence but this was a tricky thing because through the force I was easy for him to find. Since the very first moment I had ever laid eyes on him, he was not exactly the happiest person in the galaxy but as of late there were enough things to upset him further, including an unusual number of defections to the Rebel Alliance of some fairly knowledgeable people, making him almost unbearable to be around. To be fair it wasn't as if the Emperor was very forgiving of mistakes made or even problems that had no immediate solutions. On more than one occasion I had been present during an Emperor chewing Lord Vader out session and it wasn't pretty. The Emperor was as cruel as he was powerful. He seemed to get great joy out of inflicting pain and uncertainty amongst the people who worked under him, looked up to him and for reasons I would never understand even actually liked him. I put this cruel streak down to boredom, after all when you have everything the galaxy could offer what else is there to do? Meanness was the playground of the powerful, cruel and elite.

My own work had not lessened with distance from Coruscant but rather had seemed to triple. The amount of correspondence, meetings and the general day to day organization of Lord Vader's schedule had increased almost exponentially. The worst of the lot was Prince Xizor, who had astoundingly enough managed to worm his way into the Emperor's inner circle and was now jockeying for power and position number three. I was not entirely sure why the Emperor allowed the Prince such liberties as he did but it was not my place to question anything the Emperor did. I asked Lord Vader about it but even he refused to speak about it out loud, his thoughts were another matter and over all he hated the Falleen Prince with a darkness that scared even me. Most people knew very little about Prince Xizor, but I had a dossier on him larger than the story of my life and I had been expected to learn it off by rote. I suppose Lord Vader's thinking was if I knew his enemy I could help in the playing the dangerous game of dejarik he had engaged in or perhaps it was simply a case of misery loving company. My first experience with Prince Xizor had been at one of the Palace functions, I had stumbled into him by accident and he had been not merely forgiving but downright pleasant. I had felt as though there were bees in my belly and had fallen madly in love. It had been Shiv who had dragged me away, explaining that the Falleen had the ability to use pheromones to basically seduce members of the opposite sex. After that I had either kept my distance from the Prince or played the besotted courtesan

in his presence. Like most powerful men it was the chase he desired not the end result. He went through more girlfriends than Lord Vader went through officers. But his social life was only the veneer on the surface of a man who was as complicated as he was devious.

Xizor came from Falleen, a planet in the Mid Rim in the Falleen system. It was a pleasant world with temperate zones, vast plains, rain forests and Ice covered mountains. It had also been the site of a Bacteriological Research facility under the command of Lord Vader. I had asked him once about this but he had told me it was none of my business. I couldn't find much in the way of information about it and assumed, like most things Imperial, it was considered top secret and in the end I decided I really did not want to know.

Xizor, like most of his species, was tall, reptilian in appearance and vain. Although the Falleen were considered to be among the most beautiful and aesthetically pleasing species in the galaxy I disagreed with this line of thought. I found him repulsive when I was thinking straight. They were long lived, having life spans that rivalled the Hutts, with an average age of two hundred and fifty years. They were also cold blooded and semi aquatic, able to hold their breaths underwater for very long periods of time. They believed themselves to be superior to most other species in the galaxy and were as arrogant as they were self disciplined. It was an annoying mix of traits that only added to my utter dislike of the Prince.

Despite his fine clothes and elegant manners, there was a nastiness to him that, like the rotted core of teega apples, could not be seen from the outside, but you knew it if you bit into the fruit. In true current Falleen fashion he wore his long inky black hair in a single top-knot, the rest of his skull bald and dressed himself in the most expensive fabrics and designer clothes available. Cati had, on occasion, provided him with one or two of her exclusive designs. His skin, which was scaly, was normally a greenish hue but it changed with his moods, and he had the blackest eyes I had ever seen. Like most of the Falleen, Xizor was also one of the most patient beings I had ever met, able to seemingly bide his time with a calmness that bordered on scary. He was one of the wealthiest men in the entire galaxy and he lived an obscenely opulent lifestyle. He owned legitimate multi million credit firms such as Xizor Transport Systems and on the outside seemed every bit the refined, respectable business man. What most people did not know was that he was also the current Vigo of the Black Sun Corporation.

Black Sun was an enormous criminal syndicate which spanned the galaxy. It had been around for a very long time and had a Force like grip on the underworld which it ruled jealously. Dealing everything from black market weapons to illegal spice, Lord Vader considered the syndicate a thorn in his side, but the Emperor turned a blind eye to the wheeling and dealings of the crime organization and held Lord Vader on a tight leash when it came to anything to do with the prince.

None of this made Lord Vader very happy and despite the fact that the Emperor had more than once reigned him back from dealing directly with the problems that arose from the Black Sun Syndicate, as well as making him 'play nice' with the Prince, Lord Vader had other plans. I was never quite sure if it was simply jealousy on Lord Vader's part which made him so averse to Xizor's seemingly important place within the Emperor's chosen few or if he really saw right through the Prince's oily words and obsequiousness for what it actually was, an attempt to usurp him as second in command.

I wondered if that was actually possible for Xizor to do because while perhaps he was devious and powerful he was not force sensitive and would never be able to replace Lord Vader as the Emperor's Sith apprentice. I wasn't sure there was room at the top of that food chain for two second in commands but I never brought this thought up. The mention of Xizor's name made Lord Vader tetchy enough that I knew better than to aggravate his already raw nerves.

I had asked Thrawn about it once, some time ago after a particularly volatile meeting with Lord Vader and Prince Xizor had turned into a furiously vile pissing contest. I had come home with a massive headache, full of spit and venom that was mostly transferred mood from Lord Vader, wanting kill something, anything. Thrawn, in his usual cool manner, had diffused my foul temper with a glass of wine and his practice of a Chiss meditation-relaxation technique called *Tan'le'nwi*, which mostly involved pressure points on the back and the neck. It reminded me a great deal of what Master Kjestyll would do to release the tension I seemed determined to hold on to in the muscles there.

I suppose the names of the techniques differed but tension and the pressure points to release it never really did. As I sat on a foot stool, between his legs while he worked on my back, I had vented my wrath from the day's aggravation. Under the almost painful ministrations of Thrawn's strong, long fingered hands I complained bitterly about the endless hours of ridiculous back and forth discussion which I considered to be a stupid waste of time. I did not understand why the Emperor set these two men up the way he did. It was like adding fuel to a fire. My rant had earned me a fairly lengthy lecture from Thrawn about the Emperor's love of games. It was not the first time he had tried to explain to me how and why the Emperor chose to do what he did, but it did not ease the annoyance I felt about it all.

"Surely this cannot be productive for the running of the Empire?" I had asked as he kneaded a particularly stubborn knot on my back.

I had sensed rather than seen his shrug. "There is a somewhat misguided belief that rivalry promotes productivity." He had replied. "Palpatine feels that by pushing his servant, Vader, in a certain direction of hate and envy he will obtain more use from him as well as make him more pliable to suggestion. By allowing Xizor the position of power and favour that he does, Palpatine sends Vader the message '*you are expendable; do not get too comfortable in your role in my life*', thereby, willing him to work harder to please Palpatine. There is something in Lord Vader's make up that desires the Emperor's approval, despite his utter hatred of the man, Palpatine knows this and exploits it."

"Well I wish they'd go play these childish games elsewhere then, they really bug the sandjiggers out of me!" I had said crossly, almost petulantly.

Thrawn had chuckled, stopping his work for a moment to caress the back of my neck. "The Empire does not revolve around you, my dear." He had chided gently. "And the Emperor loves an audience, a role which you play very well."

"Why must men always prove they that they have the bigger...Ow!" I had started to ask crossly only to finish with a squeak as he had dug extra hard into a particularly painful knot.

"If I had the answer for that, Sji'u' Tekari, I would perhaps be a god." He had said with a laugh.

"You mean you aren't? I thought you knew everything?" The retort had just sort of slipped out and considering the pain he had been inflicting with the *Tan'le'nwi* techniques I should have been more circumspect.

As he applied more pressure than I thought ever possible to a part of my back I hoped would just vanish he said. I exhaled loudly as I was told to do and felt the tension dissipate with my breath. "As much as I enjoy the thought that you believe I am not only all knowing but also infallible this is sadly not the case. I assure you, my dear I am every bit as mortal as you are, the difference between us is that I don't desire to test just *how* mortal I am every time I come into the Emperor or Lord Vader's sphere of existence. I am well aware of my place in this universe and try to work accordingly. It is what it is."

I had sighed and given up then, relaxing back into his hands, letting the topic drop momentarily. If the question was as old as the universe then I reckoned the answer was just as antique and three times as elusive. Still, it played on my mind. Was everything

centered on huge power plays? Was that the ultimate truth of it all that what all beings wanted in the end was simply more power? If this was the case then my question always came back to what happened when you had all the power there was? What then? I had asked Thrawn this and after a very long and thoughtful silence he had told me he didn't think it was possible to attain such a position. He had gone on to explain that the universe, according to Chiss scientists, was expanding, and as such so were the possibilities for power... it was therefore, impossible to have it all.

"Hence," he had added, "the lust and drive to acquire more. It was a never ending circle, the more one has the more one wants."

"Why are we never satisfied?" I had asked.

"You do ask the difficult questions." He had said, his kiss on the back of my neck telling me he was finished de-stressing me and that he wasn't going to answer, so I'd pushed.

"Surely you must have some ideas on this subject."

He had sat back on the couch, beckoning me to come and sit with him. As I curled up into the circle his arm made for me. "Humans are the most astonishing creatures." He had said. "Your capacity for compassion and courage knows no bounds, by the same token neither does your greed or viciousness. I have rarely met such contradictory beings in my life; much less had the amount of time needed to understand all your unique talents and traits. You build great communities and draw many diverse cultures together while at the very same time devising the most appalling methods of destruction and tearing everything you build apart. If I were to sum it up I would say you are voracious in all things both good and bad. You are ruled by your passions and you are very much creatures of appetite. It is as much your strength as it is your weakness and ultimately your undoing."

I had digested this for a moment and then asked. "So what does that make you and your people?"

"Extremely cautious." He had smiled and with that smile had come the end of that particular conversation.

Now I stood gazing out at the inky blackness of space, these thoughts rattling around in my mind. Lord Vader was off ship and I was grateful for the peace and quiet. The moment he stepped off the *Executor* the sense of relief was so enormous it was as if the ship herself had sighed.

A knock on the door broke my thoughts and I turned around to see Jarack enter.

"Credit for them?" He said with a tired smile.

"Nothing worth a credit, I'm afraid, just enjoying the calm." I told him taking the envelope from his hand.

"Ah yes, Vader is away. I noticed the distinctly festive mood when I came aboard." He said.

"So how are things out in the Unknown Regions?" I asked, pouring him a cup of spiced 'caf when he nodded at my offer. I dug into the drawer of my desk to hand him the return correspondence.

"Busy." He replied. "I can't talk about much, but the Admiral is very good at his job and he and his crew have accomplished much in a fairly short period of time. Of course he had laid much of the ground work down before this." He said. "I'm sure he tells you about it, though."

I nodded. Thrawn had spoken often of his work albeit in vague broad terms. "There is a communiqué from Lord Vader in the letters I gave you."

Jarack nodded. "Right, I'll see that it's taken care of. Sorry about the short visit, things are a bit mad right now. See you soon enough I reckon." He drained his cup and gave me a smile as he left.

There was a storm brewing in the galaxy. I could sense it. It buzzed at the edge of my senses making me edgy and restless. As I read the daily reports of the small triumphs the Rebel Alliance made against the Almighty Empire I could not help but wonder at the tenacity of the rebels. They reminded me of tiny rock worts, at first glance they were just a pest but upon closer inspection one realised they did immeasurable damage and could be deadly if not controlled. A shudder ran down the length of my spine. The balance of the galaxy, it seemed to me, was a very precarious thing. I glanced at the chrono and decided that it was time to stop for the day. All I wanted to do now was to return to the quiet of my quarters and read Thrawn's latest letter. This was a welcome respite from my normally hectic schedule. His words were a kindness in an otherwise cruel environment, balancing out the darkness and quiet despair that often threatened to over take me when I actually had time to think about things, which thankfully wasn't often.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*It was good to read that you were not harmed during the attack on the Orinackra Detention Center but I had to question Lord Vader's reasoning for bringing you to such a dangerous place. Even with your gifts there was no real reason for that, the Empire has more than enough means at its disposal to obtain information from prisoners. I hope that the experience was not too overwhelming for you.*

*Your colourful description of your life on board the Executor delighted me. It is a rare thing to be able to bring to life in such a manner what is normally considered dull and tedious work. It speaks volumes about your character that you can find wonder in the most mundane things, such as watching Imperial mechanics fix TIEs. I hope that you never lose this because it is such a lovely part of who you are.*

*Do not worry about Jarack. I found his overreaction to your sparring partner and friend, CJ, more amusing than anything else. It is, I think, flattering that he feels protective about me but I have no concerns about you in this manner. I would like to think that I know you better than Mr. Behl and am reasonably certain that if your feelings for me changed I would be the first to know. Subterfuge of that kind is not your style. I had to work hard to hide my smile as he described how angry you were at his accusation and that now he fears that you will no longer trust him or worse no longer gift him with your special blend of Tatooine spiced 'caf. I told him that holding a grudge in this manner was not your style and that you understood he was simply being a friend. I also told him that if you had really been angry with him you would have thrown something at him.*

*You asked about my work in the Unknown Regions and we are indeed making headway. In the past three weeks we have gone a long way to continuing the set up at Nirauan. Eventually, I hope that Voss will take over a far more active role in the day to day running of the base as he is more capable of this than anyone else I know at the moment, plus there is no one I trust more with this responsibility.*

*I also wish to populate the base with Chiss loyal not only to Csilla and some of the more noble ideals of my people but who are also open to new ideas and not outdated dogma. This will take time as many of those willing to work with me speak only Cheunh and will need to learn basic fluently if they hope to integrate and become a bridge between the Chiss and the Galactic Empire. The same must be said of the Imperials who will eventually populate the base; they should be at least fluent in a basic understanding of Cheunh. As you can well imagine this will take some time, not everyone has your astonishing skill and talent with languages. However, that issue aside, I am hopeful that*

*this project will be a success. Not all my people feel that the Ascendancy is right in how it conducts its affairs and rules but as I have explained before, the Chiss are a slow moving and cautious people who do not like change and who do not welcome strangers easily. It will be a project that will require patience and time, both of which I have. Meanwhile, we continue our surveillance of this region of space.*

*It was interesting to read your snippets of gossip and news from the Core worlds. The perception of my downfall pleases me greatly as it was exactly the desired effect I had hoped to achieve. It is, as you correctly surmised, most difficult to work in an environment where one's race or species calls into question one's abilities and talents. It would be almost impossible for me to accomplish any of my long term goals were I to have stayed on Coruscant and both you and I know this. Even Palpatine, despite his dislike of non humans understood this better than most and with his manipulations and orchestrations of my disgrace the work which I had previously discussed with him as theory can now be made a reality. Oddly enough in the coming year I will probably be working far more close at hand to you than you would think. There are several projects on the go in which I am quietly involved that require my physical presence and I am quite certain that I shall be called to converse with lord Vader in matters of state too secret to allow for holonet transmissions. So, while I read between the lines of your last letter and understand that you miss me; do not fret too much about distance. It is not as wide as one might think.*

*Do not take this to mean that I do not miss your presence. On the contrary, my dear, I had not thought for a single moment before I met you that there would be someone so dear to me in my life. While I do my utmost to maintain my professional manner, there are moments when the distance between us seems as edgy and painful as a dull vibro blade ripping into flesh. I have a lovely holo-capture of you on my desk in my private quarters. It was taken at the last Grand ball we attended together and you were unaware of the image being taken. The only other person who has seen this capture is Voss, who asked about it. He has known me for longer than anyone else in the Empire and is a dear friend. What could I tell him? How could I put into words what you are to me? How I feel when Jarack delivers one of your delightful letters to me and I catch the scent of your perfume in the paper? What it is like to feel incomplete without you by my side? There are no words to describe these things but Voss seemed to understand when I told him that you are the one person who reminds me of that which is bright and good in the universe.*

*I know you will sit there reading this shaking your head. It is unusual for either of us to express so openly these feelings which I know we both have and try our best to hide. But I wanted you to know that despite the distance and the time apart, you are close to my heart. I do not wish you to think this is not the case, merely because I lack the ability to produce lengthy letters full of flowery prose. Chiss are not known for their ability to express affection openly and I am afraid in this I am no exception.*

*I understand your loneliness and your frustration in terms of being in a long distance relationship because I, too, feel these things. There are reasons why such relationships as ours are forbidden, they complicate things and steal away from the utter devotion to one's duty and work. You and I both know this. We are both creatures who desire to complete our appointed tasks to the best of our abilities. Still I believe there can be room for more than just duty and work, a difficult balance to be sure. However, you and I are more than capable of this balancing act. Do not be sad, Sj'iu' Tekari. We are not so far apart as you might think or feel and time passes quickly for those who keep busy.*

*Now, I am afraid, I must end this letter and return to duty. Be well, my dear. Enjoy your time on the Empire's flag ship. There are many who envy your place there greatly and your unique position at Lord Vader's side. Do not waste it by being maudlin*

*and moody over things you cannot change. Instead take the opportunities being given you and learn all you can about how the Empire and the Imperial Navy works. You never know when you will need such information and right now the resources available to you are almost limitless, use them. And for goodness sake do try to stay out of trouble.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia,  
Mith'raw'nuruodo*

It was rare for Thrawn to write so openly about his feelings and I held his letter close to my heart as I absorbed what he had written, biting back the sting of emotion he had provoked. Until I had become so utterly involved with him I had not realised what it was to miss another being so completely. I hated the sensation. He had described it so aptly, a wound, edgy and dull that echoed through my core as though some invisible being had reached in and wrenched out a part of my spirit with ragged claws. He had become a part of me and I was missing that part now so greatly I would have given almost anything to have it back.

What was there to do? Duty came first, no matter what. I allowed for one last moment of feeling sorry for myself then along with his letter, I tucked it away. After all, perhaps it had been fate that had placed us in a situation where we had come together but in the end we had chosen to follow it through. With his words and these thoughts in my head, I went to bed but sleep was a long time in coming. In the bed, which was large enough for two, my arm lay across the space where his warm body would have been had he been with me. Time and distance, honour and duty, I sighed at these words and thoughts. It would have been so much easier to have stayed on Tatooine, fallen in love with a simple mechanic, married and had a parcel of annoying children. As soon as this thought rattled through my brain I shuddered. Perhaps such a life would have been easier but I was certain I would not have been happier. Despite the crazy things that had happened to me, despite the pain and the difficulties I rather liked what I was doing, I enjoyed the challenges of it and I would not swap my relationship with Thrawn for all the simple mechanics in the entire galaxy. It was with that thought on my mind, and his face in my memory that I finally drifted off to sleep. Of course, the next morning when I got up and started my day my feelings on how exciting my life was were re-evaluated.

I stared at the computer screen and sighed. At Lord Vader's insistence I was doing more research on bounty hunters. He had reasoned that because of my previous experience working at Jabba's I was the perfect person to find the best and weed out the worst of the list he had given me. I found it sort of laughable that I was supposed to be the expert on the subject of the galaxy's bounty hunters because I was fairly certain he knew way more on this topic than I ever could but given his present mood I wasn't going to argue. Sometimes he just liked to give me make work projects to keep me busy.

Many of the names I knew, some of the hunters I had actually seen and met but many were a mystery to me, which meant a lot of reading. I was skimming through the list when one name jumped out at me, Jodo Kast. He wasn't a bounty hunter I was familiar with but I remembered the brief conversation with Thrawn one night at the Emperor's Retreat. He had asked me what I knew about Boba Fett and then had brought up Kast's name. Some years prior I had done some preliminary research and had given my research to Thrawn but now I had access to greater resources and a much better clearance.

I made a face at the screen and then began the process of searching. The image of Kast that popped up on the little holo-imager puzzled me because on first glance he looked just like Boba Fett. I found it a little odd that there would be two bounty hunters running around the galaxy in Mandalorian Armour. It wasn't easy or cheap to come by a complete set and what surprised me even more was the fact that his set looked more or less exactly



as Boba Fett wore his. Only the braids of Wookiee hair were missing, and some of the minor detail work on the armour was different.

Details, I thought, it all comes down to details. If Kast wanted to be a Fett look-alike he had sure put a lot of work into getting the image mostly right. Even the tiny things most people would never notice were correct.

My security clearance allowed me a lot of access to classified information, no questions asked, so I decided, just out of personal curiosity to do some digging of my own. Boba Fett had once had a special place in my life so the thought of some impostor running around in the galaxy annoyed me, though I could never have said why. I was so engrossed in my work that when my comm beeped it scared the life out of me making me jump and then cross.

"What!" I asked not bothering to conceal my annoyance.

"Lord Vader wishes you to meet with him on the docking bay, landing slot twelve immediately." A gruff voice barked the abrupt order.

"Thank you." I said and shut the comm off.

I sighed and took one last glance at the holo image and then saved my work and shut the system off. I briefly thought about stopping by my quarters to make myself more presentable, which is to say, put on some shoes but thought the better of it, when Lord Vader said immediately he usually meant yesterday.

The main docking bay on the *Executor* was an enormous space with several ways to access it, depending on what part of the ship one came from. I liked to enter from the upper levels which meant walking along a gantry and down the side steps on the starboard bulkhead. From this entrance one was afforded a view of the entire place and it was always breath taking to see the ships and crews working there.

Everything gleamed. The floor was a beautiful black material, so highly polished that it reflected everything to a mirror image. I suppose it made the hanger seem twice as large but from a practical point of view it was a pain to land on. As I made my way along the gantry I paused for a moment to take in all the hustle and bustle. There was always something going on, the hanger was never a dull place. I was about to continue along when something caught my eye. Standing at the ramp of the shuttle on landing slot twelve was a figure that looked awfully familiar to me. From where I stood it was difficult to get details but when he turned around to address Lord Vader who was already there I had to draw a deep breath to quell my surprise and sudden anger. My father had mentioned that Uncle Vahlek was 'in the neighbourhood' but I hadn't thought much about it. Then I remembered what my Uncle Vahlek had said to me in the little note he had left the last time I had seen him.

*'We will see one another soon enough, don't be surprised and don't give everything away either.'*

I drew a deep breath as I hurried down the steps to meet Lord Vader as requested. It required work not to show recognition on my face when uncle Vahlek turned around to look at me. I had learned well the lessons given to me over the last three years and not only masked my feelings from my face but from Lord Vader as well. Vahlek gave me a curt nod. When our eyes met I understood he was playing the same *I don't know you* game. What I didn't understand was why.

"My Lord, you requested my presence? What can I do for you?" I asked politely. It was good to be polite to him in front of guests.

"There you are!" he snapped ignoring my question. "I see our versions of what *immediately* means are remarkably different!"

I just nodded because that statement didn't really require an answer. He was just pulling rank and being grouchy.

"Akosh, this is my assistant Merlyn Gabriel. She will in charge of seeing you safely to your destination." He explained and I frowned. Destination, what was that supposed to mean? I began to get a slow sinking sensation in my gut.

When Lord Vader turned to look at me I gave him my full attention. "You will be piloting Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh to a rendezvous point which will be given to you at time of departure. You will leave in an hour from now so I suggest you pack and prepare." He said.

"Pack and prepare for what?" I asked him telepathically while I nodded dutifully.

"Prepare to be a guest on board another ISD!"

I sighed. "Yes, my lord."

"The data will be ready for you shortly and delivered as soon as it is compiled. You will be flying the *Sigiri*." Lord Vader continued. "I suggest you make all the necessary preparations. Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh is on a tight schedule, see that you do not disrupt it." And with a wave of his hand he dismissed me and turned back to uncle Vahlek to continue discussing whatever it was they had been talking about before I had arrived. I nodded and with a polite bob of my head I left the hanger wondering just what the heck was going on.

The *Sigiri* was a lambda class cargo shuttle that had been highly modified. The L class shuttles were perhaps the most versatile of all the space-craft that the Empire had. They were standard light utility craft, approximately twenty meters in length, a maximum acceleration of fourteen hundred G's with a tri wing design, based on the Theta class shuttle that had been used during the Clone wars. L-class shuttles could transport up to eighty tons of cargo or twenty soldiers. Usually they had a crew of four to six, which included a pilot, co-pilot and navigator, comm officer and gunner but they could be flown by one person if the need arose. The L-class were all equipped with class one hyperdrives and very well armed with two double laser cannon and three double blaster canons, one of which was rear mounted. They had heavily reinforced hulls that could deflect laser fire and were protected by a powerful deflector shield.

The *Sigiri* was configured for longer hauls and carrying primarily passengers rather than troops. Her cockpit was set up for a possible maximum crew of four not six. So there were four passenger cabins and a small crew room as well as a common seating area and a very small galley with a little dining table. She was mostly used for non military and non essential personnel ferrying and some cargo. Even so, she like most imperial ships had teeth. Despite the reason for my trip I was overjoyed to be back in the pilot's seat of an L-class shuttle.

I arrived fifteen minutes before I was supposed to and after I had dumped my bags in the small crew room, I did my pre flight check much to the annoyance of the officer of the deck.

"Miss, we've already checked her out." He told me as he had seen me do a quick external sweep.

I gave him a sweet smile. "I am sure you were very thorough." I told him without pausing in my check. "It's a pilot's habit, I just like to be sure. This way if poodoo hits the rotary oscillator I know I did all I could."

The man sighed as though he were long suffering and I was only contributing to his pain. "I assure you Miss...er... miss...."

"Gabriel." I helped him.

"I assure you Miss Gabriel we were exact in our exam." He said tartly.

"Oh, so I guess I shouldn't tell you that the port auxiliary thruster warning light was showing?"

"What?"

"Oh don't worry I checked it out, just a glitch, a short in the onboard. But you might want to have it looked at when I get back." I told him and took a great deal of satisfaction

in the look on his face. It had the desired effect and he went away, grumbling something uncomplimentary about female pilots.

I finished my pre flight when Lord Vader swept onto the deck, with my uncle in tow. He had his large satchel slung across his shoulder and in his hands a very large duffle bag. I frowned when I saw it, because it was unlike my uncle to travel with that much stuff.

Lord Vader handed me a datapad. "Here are your instructions and clearance codes." He said and motioned for uncle Vahlek to go one board.

"You're not coming?" I asked a bit surprised.

"No, I will be joining you later." He said looking up at the ship. "What he is carrying is important, do not fail me, girl."

I nodded. "I shall try my best not to."

"Trying does not interest me. Do your job well or suffer the consequences." He growled. I took this as Vader speak for '*Have a good trip; see you in a few days*'.

"Yes, my lord." I nodded. Without further word he swirled around in that *look at me, I am magnificent* sort of manner and stalked away. I scowled at the datapad in my and with a last look around went on board, closing the ship up after me. It felt very odd to be flying a shuttle solo carrying only a single passenger.

I glanced at my uncle who had seated himself in one of the passenger seats. The look on his face said *we still don't know one another*. I just shrugged. I was cross with him enough as it was without all this ridiculous game playing.

"Strap yourself in Mr. Akosh, we will be taking off momentarily." I spoke coldly, two could play this game.

Before he could answer I made my way to the cockpit, shut the door and let go the breath I had been holding. I was angry. I was angry at being placed in this situation. I was furious at my uncle for not telling me that he knew Jyrki from before. I was angry at having to play solo ferry pilot and annoyed at the vagueness of the job at hand. Mostly I was just angry and that anger wasn't going anywhere useful, it was just giving me a headache.

I sat for a second and contemplated the controls then began the pre flight start up procedure. Through the head set I could hear flight control and when I was ready I requested clearance for exit.

"You are all clear, Shuttle *Sigiri*, happy hunting!" said flight control. The voice sounded young and his cheerfulness was startling. Usually the flight controllers were humourless and by the book.

"Copy that, *Executor*. Stay out of trouble till I get back!" I thanked him and took the shuttle out. As we dropped out of the shielded hanger I marvelled at the sheer scope of the ship we were leaving. I never tired of seeing her from this vantage point. Next to the *Executor*, the *Sigiri* looked like a gnat on a Krayt dragon. I watched the read outs and locked the wings down as they unfolded gracefully. A part of me was sad that I could not be on the outside watching the shuttle's dance because of all the vessels in the Imperial Navy these were my absolute favourites.

I piloted away from the Super Star Destroyer and then looked at the datapad. The first thing was a course heading which I punched into the nav computer. We were away from any gravity wells so it was not too long before we slipped into hyperspace. I swept through the rest of the data and shook my head. It was a set of co ordinates for a rendezvous and a couple of clearance codes. No destination name, no information on who we were meeting and worst of all no reason for the trip. I puzzled at the jump points and then unstrapped. This was a mystery that would unfold itself in its own time.

I sighed as the start of what promised to be a nasty headache began to blossom from the back of my neck. I checked over the system readings and set the auto pilot on. I had analgesic patches in my satchel so before the headache that played across my shoulders could get worse I decided to take care of that first.

As I walked back through the ship to the state rooms I saw my Uncle sitting there. He looked up at me, questions in his eyes but all that did was fuel my anger at him and the pounding at the base of my skull increased. I shot him a filthy look and then ignored him as he undid the flight straps to get up to follow me.

He watched, standing just behind me, as I opened my satchel and rummaged around it for the small analgesic patches.

"You seem troubled Lei'lei." He said breaking the heavy silence.

I just glanced at him and peeled the back of the pain patch. When I tried to apply it to the nape of my neck he stepped forward and took it gently from my hands, doing the job for me.

"No. I am not troubled." I replied coolly.

"Then my second guess would be that you are angry." He said stepping a pace back from me, folding his arms across his chest.

I sighed loudly and turned my back on him, digging around in my satchel again. Everything that was precious or important to me was in this satchel and touching these things somehow reassured me, grounded me, well most of the time. My fingers brushed the little container that held the things I had taken from Jyrki's room. Reminding me that my uncle had not been very forthcoming about all the information he had on Jyrki. I touched the handle of my lightsaber.

"What is going on Zte'sa?" I asked through gritted teeth. I stayed with my back to him.

"I can't tell you that." He said quietly.

"Is there *anything* you can tell me?" I hissed trying to control that deep seated burning sensation that boiled away in my gut. This time I glanced over my shoulder to look him in the face. I was clenching my jaw so tightly that I wondered if my teeth would break.

He gave me a puzzled look. "We're not talking about this mission now, are we?"

"Is this a mission?" I asked. "All I was told is that I have to ferry you to a given point in space. You tell me? What are we talking about?"

"What is it, Lei'lei? Why are you so hostile? What have I done to make you so angry, because I know it has nothing to do with this particular meeting?"

My anger spiked and without even thinking about what I was doing, or worse, who I was doing it to, I grabbed the lightsaber from my satchel without turning it on and spun around on my uncle. With a strength that my anger fed me I slammed against him, then with a move Master Kjestyll had taught me I used my leg to buckle his knee and he went to the ground with a thud on both knees but before he could react I shoved him backwards and straddled his chest, bracing his arms to his sides with my legs. I shoved the lightsaber handle up under his jaw hard enough to push his head back. He was surprised but he didn't fight me, instead he stayed very calm, ready but not tense. In the back of my head I knew he did not, for one moment, consider me any sort of a threat but I chose to ignore this in favour of my fury, after all I was the one holding the weapon. His eyes never left mine and he waited, patiently, for me to get to the point. My rage spilled about us like an out of control fire.

"Why did you lie to me?" I growled.

"I have never lied to you. You know this." He said gently. His pale green eyes never looking away from my face.

"You haven't told me the whole truth though either!" I said raising my voice.

"Be specific, Lei'lei." He said with just a hint of annoyance.

"Why did you not tell me you knew Jyrki from before?" I snarled.

The play of emotions on his face startled me. There was a sudden and terrible sadness in his eyes that I did not want to acknowledge. When he sighed it was as if his

heart was breaking but he didn't say anything so I jammed the lightsaber harder into the soft flesh under his chin. I was happy to see him wince.

"If I turn this on, it won't be pretty." I told him.

"No," he said softly, "but it would be quick." His utter calm unnerved me, confused me.

"Damn it Zte'sa, talk to me!" I yelled, feeling my self control slip. "Why didn't you tell me you knew Jyrki? What is he to you? Why are you protecting him?" The knuckles on the hand that gripped the lightsaber had turned white.

A flash of pain that had nothing to do with me flicked in his eyes. He spoke quietly but his words screamed at me.

"Because I think he might be my son."

Time seemed to stop while his words took root in my brain. Somewhere in the great overall scheme of things in the universe a tiny piece of an enormous puzzle slid neatly into its rightful place. I wanted to throw the lightsaber away and bury myself in his arms as I had done as a child. Tell him I was sorry and rewind time so that none of this had ever happened. He had been right; some secrets should never be spoken. This new piece of news had shaken me to the core. I should have backed down, but instead I let my anger step forward and speak for me. I wasn't a little girl anymore and I wasn't sure I knew who this man was that I had called uncle and loved dearly for as long as I could remember.

"Think or know?" I asked, when he didn't answer I pushed the lightsaber even harder.

"Lei'lei, you're hurting me." He said quietly.

I didn't budge and we were at a sort of impasse. My own fury was now mixed with confusion and sorrow. The conflict of needing to trust him and knowing that he had been withholding information made me uncertain. His terrible calm made me sad and the sadness drowned the anger. Tears welled up in my eyes and I blinked them away. This man was my family and suddenly I didn't know what to do, or what I had even been thinking. I had wanted answers and I had let my anger speak through me but now bereft of the fury that had driven my action in the first place I was just bewildered. He watched the play of emotions dance across my face. I had never been good at hiding anything from him and now was no exception. In a move so elegant and swift, I never even saw it coming; he flipped out of my grip, put me flat on my back then not only got to his own feet but had pulled me to mine and had disarmed me with surprising gentleness.

He looked at the lightsaber in his hands for a long, tense moment and then he tossed it on the bed. Then he turned his attention to me. I looked for some sort of anger in his eyes but saw none, only a guarded compassion. The gentle caress of his hand on my face was so unexpected and so tender that it brought another batch tears to my eyes. I had to stifle an unwanted whimper with my hand. He made a small 'hmm' sound, brushed the tears away with the fingertips of the hand that had stroked my cheek and shook his head.

"I think I would like a cup of tea now. How about you, little Lei'lei?" he asked and before I could answer he left the cabin to find the galley.

By the time I had calmed myself down enough that I could join him, he had found the small galley, put the kettle on to boil and dug out some tea. As I watched him it sank in, I had just physically attacked one of the few people in my life who had never done me harm and the flush of shame that shot through me was almost unbearable. I could no more stop the shakes than I could the dreadful sense that I had let him down, disappointed him. I had let my fury rule me. Guilt wracked through me and I felt awful.

"Zte'sa, I'm sorry I..." I began but he abruptly held up his hand to stop me from speaking.

"Sit down." He said gesturing to the small dining table. I did as he asked and watched while he made tea, poured two cups and sat down across from me. I took the cup he offered and waited for him to speak.

"How did you find out?" he asked after what seemed a very long silence.

I told him about finding the locket and the holodisk.

"So you went back." He said. It wasn't a question, but I answered it anyway.

"Yes."

There was a lengthy silence and then he nodded. "The lightsaber?" He asked.

"It was in the same drawer. It was a practice weapon, it has no real memories." I said.

He just stared at his own cup thoughtfully and said nothing for a moment that seemed to last forever. "You let anger move you too much, you know." He chided. "That's not a good path to walk and I think you are better than that."

Once again I felt shame, mingled with anger but I swallowed them both down. "You never answered my question." I fenced back, avoiding the topic he had just brought up. "Do you just think or do you know that Jyrki is your son and why did you never tell me?"

He took a slow sip from his tea and watched my face. "I think." He said, "I don't know for certain." He added. "I didn't tell you because it's none of your business."

I felt annoyance stir in my gut and frowned. "None of my business? Jyrki Andando is trying to kill me. I think it is my business to know that he plays an ever bigger part in my family than I had known about before."

He sighed. "It's complicated."

"Oh for Sarlacc's sake, Zte'sa, everything is complicated!" I exploded, slapping the table with the flat of my hand making the cups rattle. "For once, will you just tell me the truth?"

"I have never lied to you." His eyes were hard as he spoke.

"No you haven't," I conceded slumping back in the chair, "but you omit things and that's just as bad."

He watched me for a very long moment and then nodded slowly. "Long before you were born, while there was still some semblance of peace in the Galaxy, I was often hired as a sort of body guard. While it's not my main profession, I am very good at it. My services do not come cheap so it wasn't a job I did often. Shortly before the Clone wars broke out I was asked to take care of a young woman who came from a very wealthy family and who was under threat of being kidnapped. As far as jobs went it should have been easy but it wasn't. It became very complicated very quickly because of the underground connections her father had with some very shady organizations. What was supposed to be a simple transport from one planet to another turned into a serious chase halfway across the galaxy with me and my charge crash landing on some forsaken planet at the edge of the Outer Rim." He paused to sip his tea. "I was used to roughing it, but she was a bit of a spoiled princess who had never done a day's work in her life so the trek we had to make in order to find a way off the planet was very trying. I don't think I had ever heard anyone complain so much in my life." He smiled slightly at the memory.

"But as the days wore on she began to change, toughen up a bit, and accept the situation at hand. After that we began to get to know one another. She talked about her life and in the end I actually felt sorry for her. Being the daughter of this man I had been hired by could not have been easy. He was not a kind man, you understand and his expectations of her were high. She told me that the reason for this particular journey was not a happy one. She was almost glad we had crashed. She told me that she was on her way to be married, an arranged marriage that would join two of the most powerful syndicate families together. She didn't know the man who was to be her husband and she was afraid. The reason we had been chased and shot at was a third feuding family had not wanted this

marriage to take place, fearing a shift in the power base. Bloody stupid, really." He looked at me and I nodded that I was listening.

"She spoke about this situation with a certain humour. She knew that in her father's eyes she was a bargaining tool nothing more. There was no love in this family. I suppose that given the circumstances what happened next was normal but I still have a hard time forgiving myself for it. I lost my objectivity and let emotion get in the way of the job at hand. She was pretty, intelligent and we had gone through a fairly traumatic experience together. In this situation the only thing I had to offer her was physical comfort. While it would be an honest assessment to say she initiated it, it takes two to continue and I did so willingly." He stopped, realizing he was trying to skirt the subject and then looked at me directly. "To be blunt, Lei'lei, we had sex with each other. It was stupid and completely inappropriate but at the time neither of us was thinking with a clear head. When we were rescued two days later we both decided and swore to never speak of what happened. I think she was embarrassed and I was grateful she didn't want to discuss the indiscretion which could have cost us both our lives. Once we reached the original destination we parted ways. I never saw her again."

"Some years later, I was contacted by her father who said that he had more work for me, a delivery. He was never a man to mince words and he got right to the point. His daughter and her husband had been killed but they had had a child, a boy named Jyrki, who had been taken from them when he was just a baby to be trained as a Jedi. Now he wanted the boy to know who his parents had been. I agreed to deliver the locket and the message but before I left he told me one more thing that made my blood run cold. While no one had questioned Jyrki's parentage at the time of his birth, after the death of his parents it was revealed that the son in law, due to a previously unknown medical problem would have been unable to father a child. I think the hope was that Jyrki would be dismissed as a successor to the families' fortunes. Her father had then come to the conclusion that the child could only have been from one other man, me, but he had no way to prove this absolutely."

I sighed. "So, you don't know for sure?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I had hoped that the information I had taken from the Jedi temple would have given me a DNA sample to test against but it didn't."

"You don't even know if this man was telling you the truth about Jyrki?"

"No, but it is hard to disregard. The timing of his birth, when she and I were together, the fact that she was married almost within the hour of her return to the family and I am guessing, had no chance to be unfaithful after the union, among a myriad of other things...." He shrugged. "The evidence is fairly in favour of me being his biological father."

"Jyrki doesn't look anything like you." I said, picturing his black hair and icy blue eyes in my head.

"No, he doesn't but he does bear a great resemblance to my mother. She had black hair and the same colour eyes. I get my looks from my father's side of the family where the white hair genes are dominant."

"Does he know?"

"No and there is no reason he should. He knows next to nothing about his family, just what was passed along to him. That they were good people and they loved him."

I looked at him. I didn't know what to think. Then another little piece of puzzle fell into place. "You're the reason he came to work at the docking bay, aren't you?"

He nodded. "He contacted me asking for my help. I was the one person he felt he could trust. He said he needed a place to live, a job, somewhere quiet where he could just escape the rest of the galaxy. Vader was still hunting the last of the Jedi and he was running scared. I knew more about him than he realised and I felt that with his mechanic skills your father could use him. I also knew that he was force sensitive and had some

training. It was my hope he would help you come to terms with your gifts. I had no idea how messy it would all get."

I buried my head in my hands. "Papa knew?"

He shook his head. "No. All I told Kit was that he was a decent mechanic; the rest I felt was up to Jyrki to discuss if he chose to." He paused. "The Zabraki have a saying, *what the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve*, and I felt it in this case to be apt. The less Kit and you all knew about him the better it would be if the Empire caught up with him. Your father would have just worried about things that had not happened yet and which he had no control over." He said. "I had no idea how things would turn out, that Jyrki would go off the deep end over you."

"You know he's quite mad, right?" I said angrily.

My uncle didn't answer right away. "He's angry and not thinking terribly clearly but I don't believe he's insane."

"He thinks I betrayed him, Zte'sa, and he's punishing me for it"

"I know."

I shook my head. "This is why you don't want to kill him, isn't it?"

"I would prefer not to be placed in a position where I might have to take the life of a young man who may be my son, but by the same token, Lei'lei; I swore a blood oath to protect you."

I barked a laugh. "That places you in a pretty precarious position then. What will you do if you have to choose?"

"I hope I never have to find out and I am hoping he can be reasoned with if I ever do catch up with him."

"Reasoned with? He kidnapped me and tried to break me with torture and drugs! He broke in and destroyed my home. He snuck into the palace and set incendiary devices to blow up. No one can find him, or catch him. He's stalking me and I don't have a clue why, except he has a real problem with the Empire, which I can understand but I don't understand his problem with me. He has no idea what reason is any more, he hates me."

My uncle frowned and shook his head. "No, hate is not the problem." He said quietly. "That he loves you, Lei'lei, is the problem."

I nearly choked on my tea. "Love? If that's love he has an awfully strange way of showing it."

He nodded. "I know but the line between love and obsession is very fine. Somewhere along the line he crossed it."

"Why did you never tell me you knew him?" I asked.

"Because it is a very personal issue and you didn't need to know. It changes nothing." He said coldly. The tone of his voice was hard. It said *stop pushing*.

I didn't want to argue with him. For a long pause I said nothing but then I asked. "Did you love her?"

He shook his head. "No." he said honestly.

"You slept with her though."

"Sex and love are not the same things, Lei'lei."

He waited, watching me as if he were expecting me to ask further questions about this topic but I just nodded. The look on my face told him I knew a little more about that subject now than the last time we had seen each other. I was certain he would have asked but the jump alarm sounded letting me know we were coming out of hyperspace. We made our way back to the cockpit. I didn't argue when he strapped into the co pilot's chair. The stars began their backwards slide into normal space. I grinned at the sight; I never tired of it even if it meant sliding into the unknown. I hoped whatever was waiting for us was at least friendly.



Neither of us spoke as normal space settled around us, the star-lines shifting in to ordinary, brilliant dots of light. My uncle watched as I worked the controls of the ship and smiled.

"What's so funny?" I asked as his smile turned into a chuckle.

"You never seem happier than when you are flying. For as long as I have known you, it is in the cockpit or the engine room of a ship you seem the most at home. Why did you not take a job as a pilot?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Papa is the pilot, it was his domain. I wanted to be different at the time. We were fighting, a lot. I wanted to get away from home. I needed to get some distance between papa and me. Things were difficult. I got the chance to work at Jabba's and I took it because it was as far away as I could get at the time without going off world." I said, some of the old anger resurfacing. "And it's not as if you were around to referee."

My uncle nodded. "I'm sorry. I had my own problems to sort out and work kept me away for long periods of time." He said with genuine sadness in his voice. "Your father felt as though his world had fallen in on itself, first Bedi left then your mother was killed. You turned into a difficult teenager with problems he did not understand and Jyrki, well he didn't help matters at all. Bel filled me in on most of what happened."

"They were so angry when I took the job as a dancer, but they didn't get it. Dancing was my escape; I didn't care where I danced just so long as I could." I shrugged. "I loved flying but I gave that up in favour of getting away. Flying and ships was papa's domain, so if I had gone into that world he would have always been there, judging me, pestering me. Sometimes I just never felt as though I was good enough." I told him, holding up my hand before he could say what I knew he would say next. "I know better now. And we talked about a lot of this when I was home after ...well you know... I'm not saying that our relationship is perfect now, but I understand my father a whole lot better now than I did six years ago and I think he understands me and some of what I was going through."

"Are you sorry for the choice you made, then?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I made good connections working at Jabba's and I got to know some people who have helped me a lot. I also learned a lot about myself. And while it seemed I also made enemies there who thought that by sending in an application for an Imperial position my life would be over, in the end they did me a favour. When this job with the Empire came up it was almost a blessing in disguise."

He looked at me. "Why did you not refuse it?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Would you have refused if you were me?" I asked. "I was younger, naïve, scared and told there was no choice." I said. "Plus it got me off Tatooine and away from the Hutts."

He nodded, and then asked. "Why did you stay?"

"Because I like my job a lot. I have made some good friends. I stay because I have a place here and... attachments. And," I added, "I get to pilot these gorgeous shuttles, I was given a ship of my own, and I get to do and see things, people and places I would never have even dreamed of. I feel as though I belong here. I have a lot of freedom despite what everyone seems to think." I said with a little shrug. It was so much more than that; it was more than I could ever explain so I looked him in the eyes hoping he would understand.

He nodded, I know he wanted to say more but he didn't and once again we were silent. It was I who broke it.

"Zte'sa what does *Tze'yusha'Jin* mean?" I asked.

He glanced at me with an annoyed sigh. "It's a title that translates into basic, more or less, as *He who hunts*."

I frowned. "For such an innocuous title, why is it that when I say that word, people who know what it means turn white? Even people who kill for a living?"

"Would you wish to be hunted?" he asked carefully. He was skirting the question.

"Who are you really?" I asked.

He was about to say something when we were suddenly hailed by a ship that I couldn't see. I grabbed the headset and slipped it on.

"Unidentified vessel, this is the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor*, Identify yourself and state your business."

"*Admonitor* this is the Imperial Transport shuttle *Sigiri*, we have a rendezvous in this area with ..."

Whoever had the comm interrupted me. "Shuttle *Sigiri* switch to channel one-one-five and transmit appropriate clearance codes."

"Copy that, *Admonitor*," I did as he asked, switching to one of the lesser used Imperial frequencies. "*Sigiri* to *Admonitor*, transmitting now." For a few moments we waited in silence.

"Shuttle *Sigiri*, you will proceed to the co ordinates we are sending."

"Copy that *Admonitor*. Proceeding to rendezvous point now."

I set the computer and let the auto pilot take us to where ever it was the *Admonitor* was hiding. If I read them right the ISD was hiding behind the second moon of the small un-named planet.

"You never answered my question, Zte'sa I said, removing the head set and looking at my uncle.

"What answer do you want Lei'lei?"

"The truth?"

"There are many truths. Ask your father who I am and he will give you a very different story from say, Lord Vader. I am many different things to many different people. Right now I am your Dajdofa guardian and, I hope, your friend."

I just shook my head. I wasn't going to get much of an answer from him on this topic. I knew him well enough to know that he could and would circumnavigate this subject forever and never give me any answer that made sense.

"People are scared of you." I said.

He nodded. "They should be."

I made a "*tch!*" sound and shot him a filthy look.

He was equally adept in the dirty look department. He told me bluntly. "Look, what I do is varied, who I am is complicated and my reputation is well earned."

"Why won't you tell me?" I was bordering on whining.

"Because I am selfish." He said cryptically.

I frowned. "I don't understand. You're a hunter? A body guard? A finder? An assassin? People are terrified of you. And you won't tell me who you really are, what it all means because you are selfish?"

He sighed. "Tze'yusha'Jin is a title achieved by only a very few. People are not so much terrified of me per say as they are the title. I am part of an elite group of men who you might label as special operations but it's so much more than that. It is very complicated to explain and I am sworn to secrecy so will you please stop asking for explanations I cannot and will not give you?" He said with a hint of crossness in his voice. I was starting to try his endless patience.

I scowled at him but nodded. I knew better than to push him too far.

"Oh and there is one more thing," He said, turning to make sure that he had my fullest attention. "Lei'lei, I love you with all my heart, I have known you since you were a baby, watched you blossom into a beautiful, intelligent and talented young lady. I am more than amazed by your ability to survive working for one of the most powerful men in the galaxy and your combat skills impress me greatly." He paused. "I have sworn on a blood oath to keep you from all possible harm but if you ever pull a stunt like you did earlier today with me again I won't hesitate to put you over my knee. Am I making myself clear?"

"Crystal." I mumbled feeling as though I were six again, getting caught doing something I knew I shouldn't be. He'd do it too because that was one thing about my uncle that I knew for certain. He never made an idle threat.

He sat back with a satisfied nod. "It was a nice move you pulled though. You have been well taught." He conceded with a hint of pride.

"You didn't seem too concerned and you disarmed me pretty quickly."

He gave me a knowing smile. "That is why I am Tze'yusha'Jin and you are not yet done with your Bunduki training. You still have much to learn. I'd like to see you live long enough to do so." He said, and then added with a touch of ice in his voice. "You should learn to reign in your temper a little better. I expect that sort of behaviour from Vader not from you."

I just sighed as the *Admonitor* came into view, he was right and I knew it but that didn't mean I liked hearing it. "Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor* this is the shuttle *Sigiri* requesting clearance for docking."

"Shuttle *Sigiri*, docking clearance will be given upon transmission of your verbal clearance codes."

"*Admonitor* this is Shuttle *Sigiri*, twelve, Vader, Aurek, Aurek, Blue, Resh."

There was another long pregnant pause, all the while my uncle watched me intently.

"Shuttle *Sigiri*, you are cleared to commence docking procedure. Admiral Thrawn welcomes you both on board the *Admonitor* and will meet you in the landing bay *Admonitor* out."

I smiled, I couldn't help it, and my heart fluttered, just a little, at the mention of Thrawn's name. "Copy that, *Admonitor*. Please inform the Admiral we look forward to seeing him there." I clicked off the comm and began the procedure to dock although it was more like being swallowed by a huge mouth.

"Do you know this Admiral Thrawn personally?" My uncle asked.

"Why do you ask?" I didn't look at him because I was too busy watching the deck officer guide me in to the landing slot.

"Your smile when his name was mentioned was almost as rosy as the blush on your cheeks." He said. He didn't miss much, but then again I suspect I hadn't hid my reaction all that well either.

"Do you remember the conversation we had about the pendant I wear?" I asked, absently touching the necklace I never took off.

He nodded.

"Well," I said with a slight pause, "the Admiral is the man who gave it to me."

He raised both eyebrows. "The man courting you is an Imperial Admiral?" he asked. I had managed to surprise him and the look that flashed across his face was worth it. When we had talked about my pendant and the person who had given it to me, I had not been very specific. As the thoughts progressed and played across his face I anticipated the next question cutting him off before he could finish asking. "Are you and he ...?"

"Now *that* is none of your business, Zte'sa." I said smugly enough so that he knew the answer to his question was more than likely 'yes'. "And the only reason I am telling you this is because you're not stupid and you know me too well, you'll read it on my face no matter how well I try to hide it. And," I added, "Unlike Lord Vader, he knows who you are to me."

"Well, little Lei'lei, you are just full of surprises." He said quietly. "Does your father know about this ...?" He was searching for the right word and I wasn't going to help him, instead I simply answered the question.

"Yes he does and actually, they have met." I said without further explanation. As I set the ship gently down I added "There's one more thing you might want to know." I shut everything down and unbuckled my harness.

"What?" he asked.

"He's not human."

And before he could say anything at all, I left the cockpit to get my stuff with a grin. This was going to be fun.

We disembarked to be met by a small group of men, Thrawn standing in the middle. The corners of his mouth twitched in a smile when he saw me but it was so brief I could have imagined it.

"Welcome on board the *Admonitor*, Miss Gabriel." He said stepping forward. "It is nice to see you again." He gave me a polite smile but there was an unmistakable twinkle in his eyes. Sandjiggers flittered in my belly and I had to take a deep breath to quell them. He still took my breath away but I didn't want the entire ship to know this. I smiled back just as politely and he then glanced over my shoulder to my uncle.

"Thank you Admiral. Have you met Tze'yusha'Jin Vahlek Akosh." I stepped back and watched as the two of the most important men in my life met each other face to face.

They sized each other up and shook hands. I couldn't read either of their expressions. There was a moment of silence and then Thrawn spoke.

"Welcome aboard, Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh. I trust your journey was a pleasant one?" He asked.

My uncle smiled as he glanced at me. "Well, it was certainly interesting." He said.

Thrawn glanced briefly at me, raised an eyebrow slightly and then asked my uncle. "You have the requested item?"

Uncle Vahlek nodded and indicated the large carry bag he was holding.

"Excellent, if you'll both follow me." He said and turned on his heel and walked out of the hanger bay, the men who had been at his side all saluted as he passed.

The *Admonitor* was an Imperial class Star Destroyer, formerly known as Emperor class. I was familiar with her design and layout but after living on board the *Executor* for so long the *Admonitor* seemed tiny by comparison.

We followed Thrawn to a briefing room where we were met by the man I assumed was Captain Niriz and two young officers who remained nameless and were dismissed once we arrived. After the introductions were done my uncle handed Thrawn the large bag and waited while the Admiral opened it and looked inside without taking anything out.

Thrawn nodded. "Let's see how it fits, shall we?" He said and with the bag in hand he left the room, pausing for a moment to tell us to make ourselves comfortable.

"Please, sit. Help yourselves to refreshments." He said gesturing to the array of beverages that sat on the table.

My uncle nodded and I just sat on the nearest chair. Captain Niriz watched us both with the air of a man deeply suspicious of people he didn't know. The silence in the room was thick. No one wanted to break it and I wasn't about to start making small talk with the Captain who seemed to regard me with a particular distrust or worse, resentment. My uncle ignored this and poured himself a cup of tea as though he were sitting at home and then without asking poured one for me as well.

I took my time to study the Captain that Thrawn had described so carefully to me in his letters. He was a native of Corellia and came from a proud military family that served to the best of their ability. Dagon Niriz, according to the Thrawn, was no exception. He had been sorely tested and in Thrawn's eyes had passed with flying colours. If the Captain actually understood this, though, well that was another thing altogether.

He was a slight man of average height. He had cropped blond hair and dark green eyes. He was almost handsome in a very hard sort of way, with high cheekbones and a long, aristocratic nose. Only his lips which were fuller, lacking the thinness which most gaunt faces tended towards, lent his face a softness that would have been missing

otherwise. Here was a man who worried too much, thought too much and although he had reached the rank of captain, he remained uncertain in the circle that Thrawn cast.

The Admiral had written of Niriz's slow but steady transformation from a man who mistrusted his commanding officer greatly to a man who would give his unwavering loyalty for the same commanding officer. Thrawn, as he did with so many people, had won Niriz over with his quiet brilliance and utter patience. But while Niriz may have trusted Thrawn, he wasn't about to include either my uncle or me in that circle. My uncle he did not know at all and like many less secure men he sensed the hidden danger my uncle represented. Me, well... he knew my face well enough from the Imperial Court, from the very public exile and I was reasonably certain from the HoloNet gossip columns. I was one of *those* young ladies and I was not welcome on board his ship, regardless of who I worked for and what I actually did for the Empire. He didn't know the exact nature of my relationship with his Admiral and more to the point he wasn't sure he wanted to know. I watched him as he watched me but I didn't smile or say anything. There wasn't any point.

We waited for about ten minutes when the door to the second room opened and everyone looked up. My first thought was 'What the heck was Boba Fett doing here?', then I realised the armour was all wrong, and that the man in the Mandalorian armour was taller than Fett. I stood up. Captain Niriz remained in his stiff 'at ease' position, and my uncle chuckled softly.

Thrawn removed the helmet and smiled. "Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh, you are as good as Lord Vader said. The fit is perfect."

My uncle inclined his head and took a sip of his tea.

"Well, Miss Gabriel, what do you think?" He turned to me.

I got up and looked him in the eyes, wondering what game he was playing. I walked around him, looking carefully at him. Mandalorian armour was difficult to find, especially a complete set.

"Who are you trying to be?" I asked after a long silence. "If you want to impersonate Fett, you need to do a bit of work on that armour."

Thrawn gave me that smile which said 'Clever girl'. "Close, Miss Gabriel." He nodded.

"Ah..." I nodded, suddenly making the connection. "You wish to imitate the one who imitates Fett, Jodo Kast."

"Your thoughts?" he asked me again.

Captain Niriz made a snorting sound and I glanced at him but before I could say anything Thrawn stepped in.

"Be at peace Captain, Miss Gabriel is the one person in this room who quite likely knows more about this topic than any of us here, with maybe the exception of Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh." He returned his gaze to me.

I sighed and circled him again, taking in the details and recalling all I had learned about both Kast and Fett. I smiled when I figured out what it was that was bothering me about how Thrawn was wearing this mando armour.

I went to make some adjustments to the armour when Niriz stepped forward, his hand on his side arm.

Thrawn made a placating gesture with his hand and then with a conspirator's glance to me said. "At ease, Captain, if Miss Gabriel wished to do me any bodily harm she has had plenty opportunities before this. I do not think that killing me is on her agenda." He was teasing me more than he was putting his nervous captain at ease.

I gave him a look. "*You should watch what you say, just because your man here has a happy trigger finger doesn't mean I can't still hurt you before he gets off a shot.*" I said in Cheunh. Thrawn grinned and much to my and Thrawn's great surprise my uncle chuckled then quickly stifled it.

I shot him a look. He just shrugged. "*If you two want to be alone I can leave and drag the captain with me.*" He told me in Huttese.

Thrawn glanced at my uncle, then back at me and smiled. "*That will not be necessary at this time, Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh.*" He told my uncle in the same language. Captain Niriz just watched all of this the way spectators at a pega-ball match watch the game. I had to bite my tongue to keep from giggling.

My uncle looked at me, both eyebrows raised. He had not expected Thrawn to understand let alone speak Huttese. I just gave him an '*I'm innocent and know nothing*' look and shrugged.

"Guess we should stick to Basic." I said. I went back to the task at hand. "May I, Admiral?" I asked before touching the armour he wore. I glanced at my uncle again, I had not known he could understand Cheunh and I wondered if he could speak it as well. I would have to ask him about that if I got the chance.

"Be my guest, my dear." He said standing still with his arms raised. He watched what I did with great interest as did my uncle, only captain Niriz remained guarded and watched me rather than my hands. I began to make the appropriate adjustments. When I was done I patted the chest plate and looked up at Thrawn who smiled.

"What did she do exactly?" The Captain asked Thrawn, completely ignoring me.

"*She* changed how the joiner straps lie. Fett doesn't attach them the standard way," I said, "And made some minor adjustments here and there." I wasn't about to give all the secrets away.

"How do you know how he wears his armour, Miss?" Niriz asked. He sounded both sceptical and irritated at the same time.

I gave him one of those smiles that said *none of your damned business* and replied. "Because I undressed him once." As I expected, this remark caused all the male eyebrows in the room to shoot up.

I looked at Thrawn again. "At a glance you pretty much have the basic look down pat. There are a couple of other little details but unless someone really knows Fett well or Jodo Kast for that matter, they won't matter."

"Would you notice them?" Thrawn asked.

I shrugged. "Honestly, not right away, no. Although I suspect they would bug at my subconscious. But since you are not impersonating Fett I don't think that matters much." I told him. "But you should know that Fett wears spats to cover the tops of his boots, stops junk from falling inside the footwear. Kast wears a distinctive chest emblem that is not the same as the one Fett wears."

"Anything else?"

"Kast doesn't wear Wookiee scalp hair braids, Fett does, here." I tapped the left shoulder.

Thrawn nodded. I suspect he knew everything I was telling him already but just wanted to hear if I knew anything else he did not.

"As you are so up on the details Miss Gabriel, you can work on them with me later." He said dismissing me with the tone of his voice.

"If you insist." I gave him a small grin and sat down beside my uncle.

"Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh I am very pleased with the work you have done. I understand that you have requested transport to the nearest planet?"

My uncle nodded.

"We should be in the Corellian sector in a few hours and I would be happy to arrange transportation for you to Corellia if that is acceptable." Thrawn said. "Payment has already been arranged as per your request."

My uncle nodded. "That would be fine, thank you."

"I am afraid the pilot will be different as Lord Vader has requested Miss Gabriel remain on board the *Admonitor* until we can rendezvous with the *Executor*." Thrawn continued. "If you both have nothing else planned we would enjoy your company at the dinner table. We dine in an hour from now. In the mean time, guest quarters have been made ready for you both."

"Dinner sounds delightful." My uncle said.

Thrawn smiled. "Good, Captain if you would be so kind as to show Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh to the quarters provided. There are some details about her work that I must discuss with Miss Gabriel in private."

"Yes sir." The captain said but he didn't seem too pleased with the situation at hand.

My uncle got up, shook hands with Thrawn and with a sly wink to me he left in the captain's wake.

"You have done your homework, my dear." Thrawn said as he began to shuck off the armour he wore. Without thinking about it I got up and assisted him as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

"You knew that already, I sent you information on these bounty hunters ages ago." I was cross. "What are you up to?" I asked, stepping back and handing him the bits of armour that could be removed.

He just smiled. "Hold that thought." He said and he vanished into the other room, only to return a few moments later dressed in his own uniform, the Mandalorian suit of armour tucked back in the bag.

I sat at the table with my head resting on my hand. I was suddenly tired. "So?"

Thrawn sat across from me and poured himself tea from the thermos carafe. "Just a little side trip, call it pest control. Nothing serious." He said.

"You're impersonating a bounty hunter who impersonates one of the galaxy's most renowned bounty hunters and that's *nothing serious*?" I made a face. "And just what am I doing here? You knew everything I told you today."

Thrawn arched an eye brow. "Not everything." He said. "That trick with the armour is curiously clever."

I nodded. "Fett told me it was something his father taught him."

"So how exactly did you come to know this bit of privileged information?"

"I told you. I helped undress him."

"And that's all you will say on this matter?"

I told him coyly. "A girl has to have some secrets. But it was not what you all thought."

Thrawn smiled. "Well, you dropped the information in such a leading way, how was a room full of men supposed to react? Or was it that you wished a certain reaction from me?"

'*Everyone reacted exactly as I wanted them to, especially you.*' I thought. I resisted the urge I had to stick my tongue out at him and gave him a shrug instead. "So why am I here?" I asked him again.

"Because Lord Vader suggested it might be good for you."

"Now why don't I believe that?" I sighed.

He pulled out a data pad from his pocket. "He sent this for you."

I reached out to take it from his hand and shivered at the gentle brush of his pinkie finger against the back of my hand. For a moment our eyes locked. The world paused and I forgot to breathe. The flush of heat that seemed to burn through me, making my cheeks blush was minor compared to the sensations flooding my insides. It would seem we were back to subtle playing games of seduction. I sent just a bit of the sensations that spun through me back to him and smiled sweetly when his eyes widened in surprise. Two could play this game only I didn't even need to touch him to send shivers down his spine. The

colour of his eyes darkened ever so slightly and he arched an eyebrow giving me a slight 'okay you win this round' nod and I withdrew my hand from his with the datapad. He had not forgotten what I had done to him on Myrkr. Neither had I.

I looked at the information and sighed. "This is Lord Vader's way of punishing me, isn't it?" I said coolly. "I have been given orders to remain on board until further notice. Good job I brought extra clothes. I'll need a secure terminal to work from."

Thrawn just nodded then sat back, folding his arms across his chest to watch me carefully.

"I suppose this dinner is a dress up affair?" I asked.

"Yes. Think of it as your chance to convince my ship's captain you are not some mad assassin."

"No," I replied sarcastically, "that would be my uncle."

"Ah yes, the *Tze'yusha'Jin* title does give it away." He said getting up.

"You know exactly what he is, don't you." I said with an air of resignation. Standing and picking up my bags.

"Obviously I understand more than you about the title he bears, perhaps we can trade information later?" he said.

"If your over protective captain doesn't have me shot first. I am surprised he didn't post guards at the door."

"Well, actually he did, one anyway, and the young man will be showing you to your quarters."

I had time to shoot him a dirty look before he had opened the door and nodded to the young man who waited silently.

"I shall have an escort come for you in forty five minutes, Miss Gabriel." He said.

"Very well, Admiral."

"I hope that you will find dinner a pleasant affair. We have an excellent chef on board." He said politely with a nod.

"I'm sure it will be as long as there is no Corellian spiced cake involved." I retorted and turned to leave, the young man having to trot to catch up with me.

## **Chapter 6**

The last time I had officially dined with Thrawn on board of his ship it had very nearly been the death of me. I hoped, as I followed my young escort to the dining room, this time it would not be so dramatic.

It was a small affair, with just me, my uncle, Thrawn, Captain Niriz and Commander Parck. My uncle had changed into less worn looking clothes and I was wearing a classic backless, semi formal, little black dress that had been easy to pack and travel with. After being caught out once I had asked Cati to make me something pretty to wear, easy to pack that required no ironing. As with all my requests she had worked miracles. With my hair done up in a flattering manner, ringlets framing the side of my face and just enough



makeup to take the dark circles away I felt ready for what I was pretty sure would be a stiff and somewhat dull meal. The young man who escorted me to the Admiral's private dining room left me at the door. When I entered the room my uncle was already there speaking with the Admiral. He stopped mid sentence when he saw me.

"Lei'lei, you look stunning." He said and I realised he had never seen me so dressed up before.

I smiled shyly. "Thank you."

Thrawn gave me a warm smile. "Yes, I must second that opinion. You look quite fetching, my dear. I don't believe I have seen you in that particular dress before."

The two men glanced at each other for a moment and I knew in that instant that I had been their topic of conversation before I had walked into the room. I frowned but before I could reply the door opened and the last two members of this dinner party arrived. Thrawn introduced Commander Voss Parck and indicated we take our seats. While appetizers and a light aperitif were served Thrawn began to make small talk and much to my surprised my uncle joined him. We had been seated so that Thrawn took the head of the table, my Uncle sat on his left hand side and I sat next to my uncle. At Thrawn's right sat the captain and across from me was Voss Parck.

I listened quietly while Thrawn and my uncle began to discuss the current rebel situation with Captain Niriz joining in the conversation. It was an unusual move for Thrawn who had often told me that in his culture meal times were places for light conversation not heavy topics. At first I was surprised but then as I listened more carefully I noticed how Thrawn steered the conversation in certain directions, what was more interesting was how my uncle tacked against him, pulling the conversation in a different direction. It was a little like watching two Krayt Dragons of equal size and strength vie for territory, except in this case it was mostly friendly. My uncle was enjoying the chance to verbally fence with someone who was very good at what he did. Captain Niriz joined in the conversation making it a very interesting verbal threesome to listen to.

Over the main meal both Voss Parck and I spent more time listening than talking but when desert came he turned his attention to me.

"The Admiral tells me you are from Tatooine?" He said.

I nodded. "I was born and raised there. What about you?"

He smiled. "I am from Corulag." He said. "On the Perlemian Trade Route. My family has lived there for generations. Have you ever been there?"

I shook my head. "No, I rarely got to any of the core planets before I started working for the Empire and since then I don't get a lot of time to go sightseeing."

"Well, I dearly hope that you can find some time to visit the planet, it's quite extraordinary. Especially the great Bamboo forests." He said with a smile.

"How long have you been in service to the Empire?" I asked.

He shrugged slightly. "I think it would be safe to say, all of my life really. I followed in my father's footsteps as he did with his father before him. The military tradition is strong in my family. I knew more about it than anything else as a child." He said with a smile.

"I heard you were one of the first people to ever meet the Admiral and it was you who introduced him to Imperial service."

Parck glanced to the other end of the table and smiled at the memory. "Yes, I suppose you could say that. Although I am quite certain he knew what he was getting himself into far more than I did."

I grinned. "Yes, he has a nasty habit of doing that." I said.

"He has mentioned that you have a gift with languages." He said. "He said that you have been learning Cheunh."

I raised both eyebrows and nodded.

He chuckled. "Don't worry he only mentioned it to me because I got into a discussion with him about how impossible it is and my own inability to learn it. He used your talents as proof that it was possible for a human to learn and speak it very well."

"You are trying to learn the Chiss language?"

He nodded. "Try is the operative word. It is incredibly difficult for me, but I was never much good with foreign languages even in school. What is your secret?"

I laughed quietly. "You'd never believe me if I told you."

He nodded, not wanting to be impolite or push. "What other languages do you speak?"

I listed them off and Parck gave me that holy banthas look. "Wow. So what are you doing working as Lord Vader's office girl? The Empire has need of humans with such skills, while translation and protocol droids are efficient they sometimes lack the edge that humans can have in negotiations and adaptation."

It was my turn to laugh. "That is the question, isn't it?"

"No, the real question is how you have managed to stay alive for so long." He countered.

I grinned. "That's not a question Commander that is a small miracle."

He laughed loud enough that it stopped the conversation at the other end of the table.

"Something you'd care to share?" Thrawn asked, looking at Parck, then to me. Parck glanced at me and shrugged slightly. He was about to answer but I beat him to it.

"I was just giving the Commander here my job description." This earned me raised eyebrows. "The staying alive bit was what amused him."

My uncle smirked, Thrawn raised an eyebrow and Captain Niriz scowled.

I looked at the Captain. "You disapprove, Captain?"

"I fail to see the humour in making light of your superior officer." He said tartly.

I shook my head. "I am not making light of Lord Vader at all. On the contrary, I have the greatest respect for him, Captain. He allows me much freedom and I have learned a great deal from him, but surely you must admit there is a certain element of danger involved working so closely with his Lordship."

Thrawn had to work to contain the twitch of his lips and my uncle turned what sounded suspiciously like laughter into a cough. I glanced at Voss Parck who merely smiled.

The captain had to work to maintain his scowl. "I have heard he can be, ah... difficult." He said relenting slightly. "So Miss Gabriel, what is your secret?"

"Ah, well if I knew that I could probably sell it for a great deal of credits and retire." I said.

And for the first time since I had come onboard Captain Niriz allowed himself to smile. For the remainder of the meal the conversation was a more relaxed affair.

When the dinner had ended Captain Niriz and Commander Parck excused themselves, citing duty as the reason. With the two men who had been flanking me gone I moved up to sit next to Thrawn, across from my uncle.

"Well," my uncle continued the conversation he and Thrawn were in the middle of, "I have noticed since the Empire's formation that many of the underground criminal organizations have slowly been squeezed out by Black Sun, or perhaps better to say they have been absorbed. I am sometimes surprised at the tolerance shown for Black Sun but I suppose they do serve a purpose."

Thrawn laughed. "Perhaps, but I don't see it that way. Tolerating criminal activities only encourages more. Part of the issue is, of course, that in the more out of the way places it is hard to control not only the criminals but the weak minded people in power who can be bought off by these criminals."

My uncle nodded. "Yes, well we see a great deal of that on Tatooine with the Hutts and now it is becoming a serious issue on Corellia as well."

"Corellia?" Thrawn's eyebrow rose. "Seems surprising given the strong Imperial presence there."

Uncle Vahlek laughed. "The local governing body turns a blind eye for the most part, and CorSec doesn't get much co operation from the local Imperial detachment. It is difficult; I think to fight corruption on all sides. The local Black Sun rep is quite a bastard. Xizor is using the planet to train his brood at the moment." My uncle paused and looked at the Admiral fully, "But then again, you know that already anyway."

Thrawn nodded, "Yes, I am aware of the Black Sun issues on Corellia." Then he asked. "Have you had to deal with him personally?"

"Yes although, I try to stay away from people such as Thyne. While he's fairly intelligent, he's a very nasty piece of work. He hires local thugs to strong arm for him and they are just a real pain in the neck to deal with. Most of the time what I do doesn't concern or touch on their business so our paths don't cross that often." My uncle told him. "Most people with any brains don't want to get in my way. Sometimes it is good to have a dangerous reputation; it means for the most part, I am left alone to conduct my business in peace."

Thrawn smiled. "Yes, that does have its advantages." He glanced at me but I kept my expression neutral. "Black Sun is a blight in the Empire and they are getting quite bold, it seems, flaunting their ability to run around the rules."

"Well, Zekka Thyne is not someone to be trifled with. People are scared of him and his thugs. He's bought off many of the locals and terrified the rest into submission. It's hard to know who is working for him and who isn't." My uncle said.

Thrawn nodded. "Yes, it becomes a bigger issue when the local authorities are ineffectual. Good and loyal people who cannot be bought are hard to find these days."

"Greed is a difficult vice to overcome and the promise of easy credits will always be a strong lure to the weak minded." My uncle said as he sat back in his chair and cradled his cup in his hands. "I have had run ins with Thyne and his thugs on numerous occasions. Mostly irritating, they are too cautious to interfere with my work, they fear bringing the Brotherhood down on them, but they have tried my patience on occasion."

"Why not simply eliminate Thyne?" Thrawn asked.

My uncle allowed a small, almost nasty smile to play across his lips. "The thought had crossed my mind, the problem with that is it would solve nothing, another would spring up in Thyne's place. Besides, I do not 'eliminate' anyone unless it is within my job parameters." Uncle Vahlek said coolly, giving me a quick look which I returned. "I must say you seem well informed about the Tze'yusha'Jin, or is it just me that you are well informed about? I assume that the Empire keeps extensive dossiers on everyone who has done work for them."

"I am aware of the reputation of the Tze'yusha'Jin but I cannot speak for the Empire on that. You are not the first of the Brotherhood that I have met. You will be pleased to know that as far as the Empire is concerned, you personally do not officially exist." Thrawn replied.

I watched the back and forth silently. It was like being between two power couplings. The sparks were flying.

Uncle Vahlek nodded. "Well, I prefer my solitude and privacy as I am sure you do too." He said. "I take it the Empire has its own issues with Black Sun?"

Thrawn nodded. "We do. Black Sun does seem to get their talons into everything."

"I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't be a good thing just to go in and wipe the entire organization out."

"No, a head on confrontation with the organization would be futile." Thrawn said thoughtfully. "It would lead to more hate for the Empire, which is already seen as strong arming the little man."

My uncle nodded. "Perhaps you are right. Besides a full out attack on such a huge organization would take years. It's hard to flush out the under-ground factions and splinter groups. And doing so would cause no end of headaches. Better a little subterfuge than a head on attack, I suppose. I must admit, I am grateful it isn't my problem to deal with." He said. He finished his drink and looked at me with a smile then turned to Thrawn. "I need to be on my way, Admiral. As much as I have enjoyed this evening I am afraid I have appointments to keep."

"Yes, of course. I will arrange transport right away. I am certain that Miss Gabriel would be happy to escort you to the landing bay and have a chance to say goodbye?" He directed a slight smile towards me. "Now, if you will both excuse me, I must attend to some business." He said getting up.

We left the dining room. Thrawn and uncle Vahlek shook hands and parted ways. I walked with my uncle to the quarters he had been given so that he could grab his things. I waited while he changed into travelling clothes and slung his satchel across his shoulder. What had been slowly burning away at me finally came to the surface and before it was too late I blurted out to him.

"Zte'sa, I'm sorry about what happened. I was wrong to do that to you." My guilt was overwhelming. "I love you; I never wanted to hurt you. I don't know what I was thinking."

He regarded me for a moment then beckoned me to come to him. I did as he asked.

"Perhaps we are both to blame, Lei'lei. I wonder now, if keeping such a secret from you was a good thing. You already carry so many secrets and burdens I didn't want to add to it, but that was wrong, I think." He said as he held my face in both of his hands. "I can understand your anger and your frustration but I just hope you learn to control it a little better. I am not your enemy."

I nodded. "I do try, Zte'sa."

He smiled, planted a little kiss on my forehead and let me go. "I suppose considering all you have been through, who you work for and are being trained by, you are doing a very good job at not turning into a spoiled little brat but my threat still stands." He warned.

I made a face. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Come on then, I am quite certain that efficient Admiral of yours has transportation waiting already."

I grinned and we began the walk to the landing bay.

"He is a very interesting, intelligent man." My uncle said after a few moments. "I can see what draws you to him."

"You two were talking about me." I said crossly.

He chuckled. "What did you expect? It is my job to look out for you; this includes grilling your love interests on their intentions with you." I scowled but before I could say anything he added thoughtfully, "He thinks very highly of you and *when* he speaks about you it is with a great deal of respect but he doesn't give much away. You seem to be a part of his life he keeps very private, which tells me a great deal about him. I can't say that the age difference between you two pleases me, although you were always attracted to older men, and choosing an Imperial Navy lifer, well that's your heart ache , Lei'lei, not mine, but if he makes you happy...."

"He does." I said quietly. "And I owe him a lot. He helped me get through the aftermath of what Jyrki did, without his help I would probably still be a real mess." I said with a shrug. "I don't know how to put it into words, Zte'sa, he just gets me, you know?"

My uncle gave me a smile that reached his eyes. "Then I won't have to hurt him." He joked and the topic of conversation changed to chatter about home. As expected a shuttle was already prepped and waiting when we arrived at the landing bay. Not being fond of public displays of affection my uncle stopped with me a little ways from the shuttle, in the shadow of the gantry.

"Take care of yourself Lei'lei. If you need me you know how to reach me." He said giving me a light kiss on my forehead. "Oh, and for goodness sake, try to stay out of trouble; you're driving both me and your father to distraction!"

I nodded wordlessly and watched as he boarded the shuttle with a final wave of his hand. I watched the shuttle leave and then made my way back to my assigned quarters to change and hopefully get some rest.

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I stood staring out of the small window but I wasn't actually looking at anything. I had lain in bed in the pleasant enough guest quarters I had been assigned for nearly three hours tossing and turning. Restless and over tired, I just could not sleep. Finally at sometime around two am I had given up, wrapped a robe around my nightdress and gone for a walk. It never occurred to me that wandering around the *Admonitor* in my night clothes might raise some eyebrows because it was something I was used to doing. Lord Vader often got me out of bed at strange hours with sudden requests for work that urgently needed attending to. Most of the crew of the *Executor* who inhabited the same part of the ship where I lived and worked were more than used to seeing me hurry along to passageways in my night clothes, bare foot rapidly tying my robe. Me being perfectly dressed was not something Lord Vader placed a high priority on.

There is a place in an ISD where most of the time no one ever goes, that's quiet and still. It is a small space near the ship's bow that is rarely used but has a small view port and more importantly silence. I stood staring out of the small window for what seemed an age, breathing in and out as I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. I missed him sorely, his guidance and his presence but he had given me enough tools that I could usually sort this inability to sleep out on my own. Once I felt calm enough I knelt in meditation pose, concentrated on breathing and let my thoughts drift. It was easier to be the stillness when stillness was all around. Unfortunately it didn't last long.

"Miss Gabriel?" A tentative voice asked.

I sighed and opened my eyes to see a young, somewhat nervous officer standing in the open door way.

"Yes." I answered without moving.

"Admiral Thrawn requests your presence immediately." He said.

I looked up at him. "Very well." I said getting up. "I should get dressed, then."

"Ma'am, he stressed immediately." He said.

It was half past two in the morning, standard Coruscant time, I wasn't going to start an argument, so I followed him in silence as he led me through the ship to Thrawn. He sounded the door chime to the Admiral's quarters and we stepped inside. Thrawn stood with his back to the door but turned when we entered.

"Miss Gabriel, please come in, sit down." he spoke politely. "Thank you Mr. Pirri that will be all." The young man gave the Admiral a curt nod, turned beautifully on his heel and left, the door closing silently behind him.

I stood, my arms folded across my chest, and stared at the Thrawn. "Well?"

He smiled. "Please, sit." He gestured to the small living room section of his quarters.

I ignored him. "What is so urgent that it couldn't wait till I at least got some proper clothes on?"

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "As I understand it from your letters, this is proper dress for you much of the time." He said. "I am glad to see that my favourite robe is getting use." He waited a few heartbeats and then said for a third time. "Tekari, will you please sit down?"

I gave him a dirty look but did as he asked. "It's almost three in the morning." I said glancing at the chrono on the wall, then sitting on the small couch. He sat in the chair adjacent to me.

"Yes it is, which is why I was alerted that you were wandering around. I take it you are having trouble sleeping?" he asked pouring a glass of brandy and handing it to me. He sat back and refilled his glass of mineral water.

"Not joining me?" I asked taking a sip of the brandy and relishing its deep smoky flavour.

"I am on duty, my dear." He explained. "So what is keeping you up?"

"Strange ship, different engine noise and a bed I am not used to." I said with a shrug. He arched an eyebrow. I sighed. "And knowing you are here but untouchable doesn't help."

"I understand." He said.

"How did that young man know where to find me?"

"I remembered you telling me about the quietest place on an ISD. If you do not want to be found, Sji'u' Tekari, you should not share your secrets." He teased, just a little.

"You should respect my secrets!" I said.

"I do, but when you don't take your comm with you then I must use all means necessary find you. The last time I let you out of my sight, as I recall, the results were unpleasant. Let us just say I am covering my bases, it would reflect terribly on my record if I lost Lord Vader's personal assistant a second time."

I sighed and curled up on the couch, tucking my feet up under me. I hated when he was right. "So, what is on your mind Za'ar?"

"I thought you might want to tell me about your adventures with the Bounty Hunter." He said lightly.

"At ten to three in the morning?"

"You are awake, and right now nothing else demands my attention." He countered.

I grinned. "You mean I have aroused your curiosity concerning my knowledge about Fett and his armour." I said. "If I didn't know you better I'd say you were jealous."

He made a face. "Chiss do not believe in jealousy." He said a tad more sharply than he meant to and I felt the hint of untruth under his words which made me smile.

"Well, you have nothing to worry about with me." I said.

"I do not worry about you in that respect." He said and then added quietly. "But I do miss you."

I looked up at him in surprise. His last statement had been unexpected. I had no idea how to respond to it without getting sentimental so I just nodded, sighed and sipped my drink; slowly the knots in my shoulders and the tension that had kept me awake began to ease up.

"Your uncle is a most intelligent and interesting man. I was glad to make his acquaintance." He said changing the subject. "I can see why you adore him so much."

I laughed. "He said almost the exact same thing about you."

That earned me a raised eyebrow. "Really, I was under the impression he did not approve of me and my relationship with you."

I smiled slightly and repeated my uncle's words exactly to Thrawn who nodded. "He is right in all he says."

"It's a bit late to go back to just flirting now." I told him tartly.

He came to sit by my side. "I did not mean it that way." He said gently.

I sighed and made a face. "It's late, I'm tired and I can't sleep. It is absolute hell being so close to you and having to be so formal all the time, so if you have a point will you please make it?"

He caressed the side of my face gently and nodded. "Tell me how you knew about that little trick with the Mandalore armour." He coaxed. I was too tired to resist.

I stared at my brandy as I swirled it about in the glass. Its fumes combined with the scent of the man sitting near me made me sad, made me homesick, but I wasn't certain exactly what home it was I was sickening for. I looked up at his face.

"If I add 'please' will you indulge me?" He asked.

I drew a very slow deep breath. I wasn't sure where to even begin. It had happened such a long time ago. I had known who Boba Fett was for most of my life, once my father had taken over the docking bay. The first time he had shown up it had caused great panic. He wasn't known for his happy personality but he and my father had established a good working relationship. He would show up, every now and then, needing some serious work done on his ship, repairs he could not fix himself. He would be polite and to the point. He told the mechanics working with him on his ship exactly what he wanted and often how to do it. At first he was a fascination for me, his face always covered by his helmet and I was as curious as a jax so I would follow him around and ask him all manner of questions which he mostly ignored until my father, apologetic, would haul me away. Fett had fascinated my child mind and imagination. He became one of my father's customers that I adored.

Once I had started working and learning the mechanic's trade I also began to work on his ship when he would occasionally show up, usually trailing after Jyrki because he was the head mechanic at the bay and I was the student. By then I wasn't really interested in Fett any more, it was Jyrki who held me in sway. This did not go unnoticed by the bounty hunter who had found it all very amusing.

I stopped for a moment, lost in these memories, to sip at my brandy. If I closed my eyes I could see him in his armour as clearly as if he were standing next to me. I could smell the engine oils and dusty air of the docking bay and feel the heat and weight of Fett's unseen gaze. I smiled.

Thrawn watched me carefully. "So you have known this bounty hunter almost your whole life?" He asked breaking into my memories.

I nodded. "Odd really I never thought about it that way before, but yes I suppose you are right. Although on Tatooine that isn't so hard to believe, I mean Fett works for Jabba the Hutt a lot and my father's docking bay has a really good reputation, people trust him. A lot of people use his services. Fett has known me since I was a very little girl."

"What happened next?" He asked.

I sighed.

Next had been Jyrki and all that glorious mess, the arguments with my father, the desperate desire for change, for escape from the horrible disaster of a teenaged broken heart. I did not see Fett next until after I had left home and started dancing at Jabba's palace. I told Thrawn about how Fett had come to my rescue and what he had said and done. The description of my lesson in head butting had made Thrawn smile. It was after that incident and shortly before I got out of the palace job when I got the chance to repay Fett's gesture. I had been dancing the late shift. The very late shift so that by the time I was done, the last of the drunks, Jabba's courtiers and the party goers had fallen into a coma on the main audience room floor, meaning that I could go to my room and rest. I had hated dancing the late shift, it was the worst but because I was the newest hire I got stuck with it often.

It was quiet as I made my way through the labyrinth of corridors to the out of the way quarters set aside for people like me. At that hour of the morning nothing in the palace

moved except the B'omarr monks, so the last thing I was expecting was to be grabbed when I walked into my room. One hand had clamped over my mouth and the other grabbed my arm, making sure I didn't struggle.

"I won't harm you, so don't scream. I just need your help." I knew the voice and had nodded.

He let me go and I turned around to see Boba Fett, he had slumped slightly and was holding his side.

"You're hurt?" I had asked.

"Yes and I can't get to the wound. No one here must see me this way." He had growled.

I had nodded and then I had shut and locked the door. "I understand. Tell me what you need me to do."

And that is what he did. I helped him take off his helmet and he instructed me on how to undo the armour and the liner shirt. The twist in the joiner straps frustrated me and he had tried not to laugh as I swore because laughing hurt him. He was patient as he explained their trick and although he made no sound, I know it had hurt to move as I helped strip off the shirt which was actually part of the armour he wore. There was a nasty scorch in the fabric and across his back, under his shoulder blade, was a terrible looking burn. He had brought with him a med kit and he walked me through what needed to be done. I didn't have a lot of experience at playing nurse. While I washed the nasty looking wound he had explained to me why he wore his armour that way.

"My father taught me this trick. There was a time when it was popular, even fashionable to steal Mandalore armour. He found out that by twisting the joiner straps this way it was virtually impossible for someone to undo without serious co-operation from the wearer." He had explained. "Not many know about it."

"I thought this armour made you virtually invincible?" I had said as I finished up cleaning the wound.

He had nodded. "It does, but there are some weapons that can penetrate the liner material and the duraplast doesn't cover everything. It was a lucky shot with a powerful weapon." He had winced slightly as I applied a bacta salve.

"Sorry, I am not a medic and I'm not very good at this." My hands had trembled as I had bandaged his wound.

"You are doing just fine." He had said and had tried to get up but failed. For the first time I had looked carefully at his face. He was very pale and exhausted. I knew enough to understand that he had to rest.

"How long...?"

"Three days." He had said. "Out on the Rishi Maze, I ran into some unexpected trouble. Will be paying a visit to your father tomorrow to get some parts for Slave I"

"You need to lie down, rest a bit or you won't be able to do anything or go anywhere."

He had shaken his head and argued with me, but he was in a great deal of pain and I had sedatives. I had pressed the hypo-spray to his neck before he could stop me and then realised how stupid that was, because he was heavy and dragging him to the bed was a difficult procedure. With a lot of work, I got him on the bed lying face down so that his back had a chance to heal. He was naked from the waist up and I had never seen a body with so many scars on it.

I had watched him for a few moments to be sure he really was sedated and then I had showered and changed out of my dance costume. Once I had cleaned up the mess of bloody rags and bandage material, I had sat by the bed and watched Fett sleep. It wasn't the first time I had seen him without his helmet but it was the first time I had ever seen him utterly relaxed. Without the bitter, hard look he carried with him at all times, he was a



handsome man after a fashion. I had wondered about his past then, where he had been born, who his family had been but I knew that he would never talk about such personal things, even with me, someone he trusted enough to come to when he needed help. I know I dozed a little but never fully slept. It was the first time I had ever seen someone badly injured, let alone had to help them. I didn't want him to up and die on me. In the morning I had slipped out for food, locking the door. When I came back Fett was awake and sitting up.

"How do you feel?" I had asked offering him the food and tea.

"Like hell, but I will live to fight another day." He had said. "You have my gratitude."

"Well, I think we are even." I had said shyly. "But why come to me? I mean a medic would have been better and maybe even closer."

"I knew I could trust you to keep word and keep your mouth shut." He had said simply.

I had just stared at him then. I had adored him since childhood. Hearing that he trusted me was like being given the keys to the galaxy. I had nodded shyly and smiled. I didn't know what to say so I just said 'thank you'.

He had merely inclined his head, finished his food and after a time in the 'fresher, with my help, he got dressed.

He had stopped before putting his helmet on, before leaving to give me a stern look, lifting my chin with two fingers, the way he often did with Rystáll, one of the other dancers he spoke with on and off. "Get out of this place, Merlyn. You don't belong here." There was a hint of threat mingled with sadness in his words and while it had not been the first time he had said them to me, I suspected it would be the last. It had not occurred to me then that he had known me since I was a small child, in some ways, from a distance at least had watched me grow up. He had been a part of my life but I had also, in some strange peripheral way, been a part of his and I had never really noticed or considered that at all. Thinking about it now made me terribly sad but also grateful. Fett had not said anything else but had given me a nod of his head as he left.

I sat back and watched Thrawn's face carefully, while sipping my brandy. "I smartened up and quit working at the palace after that. I suppose part of me felt I owed it to him and I also felt I was pushing my luck. I saw him once more, briefly at the Docking bay. We didn't speak to each other but he had given me that nod which told me everything I needed to know. That '*we share a secret*' sort of nod. I never spoke of this incident to anyone ever and you are the only person who knows about it." I said. "I hope it stays that way."

He nodded. "You have my word it will." He reached over and stroked that annoying lock of hair from my face. "You get yourself into the strangest situations. Most people would have been terrified of even being in the same room with a bounty hunter of his reputation."

I shrugged. "People feel the same way about Lord Vader. I think it is just what you are used to, you know? And maybe I am not so easily scared by some of the rougher side of the Galaxy, growing up in a place like Mos Eisley has to be good for some things. Plus he was known to me. He'd never done me any harm; in fact he had saved my neck. It never occurred to me to be scared." I yawned. "Now it's your turn. You did promise that this was an exchange of information."

"It's just past four in the morning." He spoke gently.

I shook my head. "Uh uh, no deal."

He smiled, caressing my cheek with the backs of his fingers. "You need to sleep; you are fighting it as we speak. If I start to tell you any story you will crash in the middle of it and I shall be forced to repeat myself and you know how much Chiss loath to repeat themselves."

I gave him a cross look. "No. You said an information swap not a one sided no trade affair!"

"I will be asking you for your help in about four or so hours from now, to sort out the details on that Mandalorian armour. I need you awake and aware for that. I promise I'll tell you what you want to know then." He said.

I fought back on another yawn. He was right, as usual, which annoyed me to no end. He knew he had won when I drained the last of the brandy from my glass and got up. No matter how tired I was I knew that falling asleep on his little couch would be neither appropriate nor comfortable. Sharing his bed here was out of the question.

He stood up with me and cupped my face in his hands. "You are not the only one who finds this situation frustrating, my dear." He said softly. His hands were warm and I closed my eyes. His sudden kiss was gentle, at first, but it soon became breathtakingly intense. I ached for him with such a longing I thought I would shatter from it. It was heart breaking. I opened myself up to this and sent the sensation back to him. I felt him respond as he pulled me closer; the kiss which had begun tender and careful became possessive and more aggressive. I thought that if one could die from drowning in the sensations that kissing stirred up, then this was a mighty fine way to go. He was extraordinarily good at kissing me and I didn't want it to end but I pulled away from him anyway, even though he fought to keep me close.

"Please don't." I shook my head, both hands pushing against his chest. "I am barely hanging on to my self control as it is. This won't help. All this does is make me want more, which I can't have, can I?" He shook his head so I continued. "And before you give me the devotion to duty and how would it look to the men under me lecture, just let me say I do understand, I just don't like it very much. I didn't think it would be so difficult to be in this situation."

He looked at me for a moment then nodded. "We are such creatures of appetite." He said softly, his voice had gone husky. "Sometimes even with the best of intentions it still rules us." He was fighting his own battle with the lust and desire he felt. We stepped back from each other, taking a moment to catch our breath, to come back to our senses.

"Whatever." I told him crossly as I headed for the door. "This bites bantha butts, you know that? I have no idea what I am doing here and apparently neither do you." It was easier to be angry with him, with the situation than it was to want him as badly as I did. He made thinking clearly impossible.

"You are here because I requested it. I knew you had knowledge about certain bounty hunters and I thought you might be helpful, and as it turns out I was right." He said retreating to the cool, alien reserve he so often hid behind.

"Is that all? Because I could have told you all this stuff via HoloNet transmission."

He shook his head. "No, even the most secure transmissions can be sliced. This needed to be kept quiet. And I wanted it delivered personally by you."

"More bloody secrets!" I snapped ignoring the backhanded compliment.

"I am helping Lord Vader, it will make him happy."

"Nothing makes him happy! He's never happy!" I was now officially cranky.

Thrawn just chuckled, following me to the door. "Now you are just being difficult. Go to bed. We have serious work to do in a short period of time. I need you rested not argumentative."

"You like me argumentative!" I replied.

He smiled. It made me shiver. "Only when we have time to play, my dear." He said, caressing the side of my face, toying with my hair. Now he was just being mean.

I shook my head, backed away from him and did the smartest thing I could, I opened the door and got out of there as fast as possible. It was beyond me how he could whet my desire and make me cross both at the very same time. I stormed back to my

quarters, burning my fury and frustration out along the way. I was well and truly exhausted by the time I cleaned my teeth and tumbled into the bed. Sleep found me almost before my head hit the pillow unfortunately it didn't last nearly long enough.

The just over four hours of sleep afforded me before I received my wakeup call were full of vague and restless dreams. I showered and dressed, then stumbled along behind my young escort to the ready room to meet Thrawn.

"Good morning, my dear. I trust you slept well?" he said cheerfully as I entered the room.

I looked up at him crossly. "Not really."

He smiled. "I thought you might want to eat breakfast first." He said, his hand on the small of my back leading me to the table set of two.

I wasn't awake enough to argue with him; instead I sat down and watched as he poured me a cup of what smelled like very strong stim'caf. He added cream and sugar and pushed the cup in front of me, then sat down across from me. He didn't try to engage me in any sort of conversation until I had taken a gulp of my drink, he knew me just too well.

I sipped from my cup and stared at him blearily, watching as he buttered the Corellian scones he often enjoyed. It seemed so odd, so out of context to be sitting across from him, as we had so many times before, eating breakfast as though nothing had changed. He handed me a scone and I took it.

"I require your assistance in finishing the Mandalorian armour to pass as Kast. I seem to recall you are fairly skilled at that sort of thing. I have seen you work on your ship so I know what you are capable of. As you so often say, it is all in the details." He said, switching to his native language because we alone.

I nodded. "Okay. Then what?"

"Do you not have work of your own to do?"

"Probably, I still need a terminal and secure access though." I conceded grumpily.

"That is already being arranged, my dear." He said, refilling my empty cup.

"How long will I be here?"

"Until Lord Vader joins us."

"Which will be?"

"When the job at hand is done."

I sighed and looked up at him. "You know," I said. "You really annoy the sandjiggers out of me."

He smiled. "Yes. I do know." He said and then with a sly grin added. "And now you can tell me that in my own language."

We finished breakfast in silence and then in the quiet of the other room we sat down and began the work to make the Mandalorian armour look the way it should. I was surprised at the fact no one else seemed to know about this project and asked about that while I was trying to paint the decal on the left side of the breast plate that Kast wore.

"This project is one which, due to its nature, I wish to be kept quiet. While the outcome will greatly benefit the Empire in general and Vader specifically it is an unconventional project." He said. "Besides, I prefer not to have too much attention turned on my affairs."

I arched my right eyebrow and gave him a look.

"Sorry, bad choice of words." He smiled.

I finished the decal and sat back. "You owe me some information." I said.

"Ah yes, you desire to know about the Tze'yusha'Jin." He said.

I blinked at him and waited for a better answer.

Thrawn sat back and looked at me carefully. "Have you ever given any thought as to why your uncle has not wished you to know the exact nature of who he is, what he does?"

"Of course." I said as I started to chip some paint off the armour with my finger nail.

"Then why do you push?"

"What could be so bad that he doesn't want me to know? I don't understand all this secrecy."

"Is it not enough that he simply does not wish you to know?" He countered.

"What is Tze'yusha'Jin?" I asked ignoring the implications of what he was asking. His expression stayed neutral but there was a brief flash of disappointment in his eyes. He sighed. "Tze'yusha'Jin is a title."

"I know that!"

"Then you know what it means."

I nodded. "But what I don't know is why everyone is scared of it."

"Why are people scared of the Dantassi?" he asked.

I frowned. "Well, they have a pretty fierce reputation." I said.

"But you know more than the average person, what do you think of this now, are you still scared of them as you once were?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Vahlek Akosh is not the only member of the Tze'yusha'Jin that you know." He said slowly.

"Oh?" I said halting what I was doing and giving him my full attention.

"What if I were to tell you that Kirja'navaar'inkjerii also held that title."

I didn't know how to react to that. It was just about the last thing I expected to hear. After a very long silence I asked. "Would he and Zte'sa Vahlek know each other?"

He nodded slowly. "Most likely, although as to how well, that I could not say."

I sighed, remembering the way my uncle had looked at my bone mask, the wistfulness in his voice when he had spoken about the Dantassi. It also perhaps answered how it was he understood Cheunh. Now his reaction made more sense but it also stirred up more questions.

"Sj'iu' Tekari, the Tze'yusha'Jin is a brotherhood that is both secretive and elite. While the title means 'He who hunts' it describes nothing. These men, and it is exclusively men, are handpicked, difficult to get to know and about as dangerous as they come. They are chosen for various reasons, skills and strengths. How and why they are chosen I could not tell you. I am not privy to that information." He said thoughtfully. "I suppose the best way to describe them in a very general way is to liken them to a hybrid of assassins, hunters and trackers, but again none of these things describes what they are and do with any degree of accuracy."

I sighed. "But people fear them, why?"

"Because they are very good at whatever it is they are asked to do. The reputation they have comes from the damage left in their wake, well, the damage that is visible. Make no mistake the Tze'yusha'Jin are deadly, but they also protect and they act as finders." He shook his head. "I lack the words to tell you what you want to know."

"I guess I wanted to know why everyone is so scared of him when I don't think he's scary. What it is about my uncle that terrifies them when his name and that title are mentioned in the same sentence."

"They do not fear the man so much as they fear the reputation." He said.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is also greatly feared and respected but you are not scared of him because you know him, just as you know your uncle."

"I don't get it. Everyone who knows my uncle as Tze'yusha'Jin comments on the attachment he has to me, how is it that Navaari has a family?" I asked. "I got the impression that these Tze'yusha'Jin didn't like attachments."

Thrawn raised an eyebrow. "Some people believe the Dantassi are cannibals. Is this true?"

"No." I snorted.

"The more a fearful myth is perpetuated the larger the fear behind the myth becomes." Thrawn said. "Perhaps to the outside world Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh has led a quiet life of solitude, without attachments and family, but you know that is not true, don't you?" Thrawn asked. "He befriended your father long before you came into the picture, then your family and then you. He is just as much a family man as Kirja'navaar'inkjerii. People believe what they are led to believe and like the Dantassi themselves, the Tze'yusha'Jin like to allow the myth of fear to shroud their truths." He said. "Do not ask me what those truths are, Tekari, I do not know and I do not ask."

"Zte'sa Vahlek told me he didn't want me to know about it because he was selfish."

Thrawn nodded. "You adore him and you look up to him. He doesn't want to lose that and that is what he fears, should you actually find out what he has done. I am quite certain of all the people you know in your life he is amongst the deadliest but he does not wish you to know this side of him. What would you do if you found out some terrible dark secret? Remember how you felt after your vision in the Jedi Council chamber. There are some things that should be left alone, some secrets that should be allowed to remain secret."

"I still don't get it."

He smiled. "No, I know you don't. It is, as he said, a selfish reason on his part but he doesn't want to lose you. He doesn't want to lose your love for him and you do love him. It is so plainly written on your face when you are in his presence that even the most stupid of creatures in this galaxy could see it."

I frowned.

He sighed. "Trust me on this. That despite what men say and how most men act, losing the admiration and love of someone they care for is painful and they don't wish to experience this." He smiled a little wistfully. "Men, in general, both enjoy and need the flattery of young women contrary to what they will tell you. I suppose that one could say it is this adoration of daughters, sisters, wives and so on that keep men from becoming utterly stone hearted and colder than the ice on my home world. You are a part of your uncle that reminds him of what is good in this galaxy. No wonder he balks at losing that." He said.

What he said made a sort of sense to me and somewhere deep down I knew that he was right. I didn't understand it completely but I nodded to show him I accepted his explanation.

"But he's deadly, my uncle?" I asked after a long pause.

Thrawn nodded. "He earned that title, so yes he is. But my dear," he added with a look, "So are you."

"As is Navaari." I continued ignoring his comment about me.

He nodded.

"Is he evil?"

He frowned, steepling his fingers together in thought. "Define evil." The discussion was becoming circular.

"Why is this all so complicated?" I asked ignoring his question because my definition of evil began with the Emperor and that wasn't something I was going to utter, no matter what language I was speaking, out loud on an Imperial war ship.

He smiled. "Life wouldn't be interesting if it was simple." he said reaching over to stroke my face. "And you have a tendency to make it very complicated. You think far too much about the most curious things."

I sat glumly with my head in my hands. "When you said sharing information this isn't what I had in mind."

That made him laugh. "Would you have told me that story about Fett without the fruit of this information being dangled before you?"

"No." I said, although I wasn't so sure about it. While I had never been sworn to secrecy I knew that Boba Fett wanted the incident at Jabba's kept quiet.

"There you go." He said smugly.

"You tricked me." I said crossly.

"Just a little, after all you did learn something new." He reminded me.

"Why?"

He smiled. "Because, as you so aptly put it, you piqued my curiosity and I wanted to know if I had competition from this Bounty Hunter or not. You appear quite enamoured with him when you speak of him."

I just shook my head and rolled my eyes. He was teasing, at least I that's what I thought. Sometimes with Thrawn it was hard to tell.

"How is the armour coming along?" He asked changing the subject.

"I'm done. It's as close to the images I have seen of Kast as possible." I said.

"I am sure it will be more than suitable for what I have in mind." He said.

"I'd ask what that is but you won't tell me will you?"

He smirked and was about to answer when his comm beeped.

"Yes Captain?" Thrawn asked.

"Sir, The *Hopskip* has just left the planet's atmosphere and will be within range in a few moments. You said you wished to be alerted so you could prepare yourself."

"Yes, Captain. Thank you; you know what needs to be done. I will be waiting for your signal." Thrawn replied standing up.

"Aye aye, Admiral. Niriz out."

Thrawn looked at me and smiled. "Let the games begin. Help me get dressed. That little trick with the joiner straps is fiddly."

I chuckled, gathering up the armour as he picked up the helmet and followed him.

"What amuses you?"

"I was wondering when you would get around to asking me to help you undress."

He turned and looked at me, arching his eyebrow. "I am not asking you to undress me."

"Oh, so you are going to wear the armour over that uniform?"

If he had had discernable pupils I am certain he would have rolled his eyes. "I see your point." He said with a slight twitch at the corners of his mouth. "Well, my dear it wouldn't be the first time and I am sure it won't be the last."

I nodded. "One can only hope." I muttered under my breath.

The transition from Admiral Thrawn to Jodo Kast was fun to watch. It was not the first time I had ever seen him do this, assume a role and become someone else. When I told him he had missed his calling as an actor he had just laughed, replying that he preferred to stay out of the public eye. It occurred to me then that both the roles he had taken on, involved the wearing of masks.

I left him to his guise and his games and made my way back to my quarters. He had assured me that I would find full terminal access provided for me and I could do my work from there. I smiled when I saw that not only did I have a computer terminal to work from but he had also provided me with everything I needed to make my spiced 'caf, there were serious advantages to having someone know me really well. I sat and got to work, because there was little else for me to do and Lord Vader would be snarky if I didn't keep up with his schedule.

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Lord Vader strode down the shuttle's ramp, his cloak flowing behind him. I could tell by the way he walked that he was not overly happy. The stormtroopers and officers that

were there to greet him all snapped to attention and saluted as he passed. He ignored them. Captain Niriz began to speak but Lord Vader cut him off with a brusque flap of his hand and turned to look at me.

"Good evening Lord Vader." I said handing him the data pad I had been holding. "I trust your flight was a pleasant one?"

He looked at the datapad and growled something unintelligible about bad pilots as he walked to the turbo lift. I had to trot to keep up, as did captain Niriz.

"Have you more to add to this, girl?" he snapped, sensing my thoughts.

"Prince Xizor was really annoyed with your last request for rescheduling the meeting over the possible new ship designs he wishes to discuss with you. He has demanded to speak with you personally. His office refuses to communicate with me any more until you comply."

"You may inform the Prince that if he wishes to speak to me he must make an appointment through you. If he doesn't like that then he will not get to speak with me. What else?"

I sighed. The battle of wills between Lord Vader and Prince Xizor was getting beyond the pointless and stupid stage. "The latest batch of Probe droids will be ready in two days. I asked them to deliver, as per your request, to the *Executor* but they will need to know where to deliver them to."

He nodded as we stepped out of the turbo lift and headed towards the bridge.

"Next?"

"Admiral Thrawn will be delayed in meeting with you. He has encountered an unexpected difficulty. There is no ETA as of yet." I said.

He paused and turned to look at me then at Captain Niriz who paled visibly, but before he could do or say anything else I added. "And the Emperor wishes to speak with you, at your earliest convenience."

"Why did you not say that right away!" he snarled and turned on Captain Niriz. "I require privacy!"

The Captain nodded and showed Lord Vader to Thrawn's ready room with a secure HoloNet transmitter. Only after the door closed did the captain turn to me and raise his eyebrows.

"That was a clever trick." He said.

I gave him a small smile. "Distraction works best when delivering news that might annoy him. He'll be more cross that I didn't tell him about the Emperor wishing to speak with him than about anything else but by the time he's finished speaking with his master he will have mostly forgotten about being cross over the bad news."

"What happens when that doesn't work?"

I gave him a slight smile. "You don't really want to know."

He nodded.

"What do you suppose the Admiral is doing down there?" I asked as I walked over to the side view port and looked at the planet of Corellia. It seemed small and fragile from the high orbit the *Admonitor* had taken. I wondered where the *Executor* was. I couldn't see her, but I was sure she was not far away.

Niriz shrugged. "Confusing the devil out of whoever he ends up working with I suspect."

That made me laugh because it was most likely true. Niriz smiled but then stiffened as Lord Vader returned to the bridge. He made a come here gesture with his hand and with a little glance at the Captain I did as he asked.

"You have a secure work station?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Show me." He said grabbing for my arm. I dodged him and we left the bridge together. The walk to the quarters I had been assigned was silent and when we entered the room it seemed suddenly smaller with Lord Vader in it.

"It would appear that Prince Xizor is unimpressed by your secretarial skills and has complained to the Emperor about my lack of co operation in the matter of meetings." Lord Vader said as he began to punch a code into the HoloNet transmitter. "Go stand out of the transmission range." He ordered and flapped his hand at me in a *get out of my sight* manner.

I did as he asked and sat down in the chair in the corner of the room away from the HoloNet transmitter to watch.

The small holoprojecter flickered to life and the familiar image of Price Xizor's blond female assistant flickered into place.

"Lord Vader, what an unexpected surprise...."

He cut her off. "Dispense with the false pleasantries Guri, where is he?" He snapped.

"If you are referring to Prince Xizor then I am afraid he is unavailable." She replied coolly.

"He complained to my Master that I was unreachable and now he refuses to speak with me? Is this how he intends to curry my favour?"

Guri drew a deep breath and folded her arms in that all too familiar stance of defiance. "Your female assistant is difficult to deal with." Guri told him after a few moments. "She is insolent, defiant and ..."

Again Lord Vader cut her off. "Miss Gabriel does as she is instructed. If you are displeased with her performance then you should direct your complaints to me. The Emperor has better things to do than to listen to the whining of the spoiled, wealthy, social elite over misunderstandings with a mere office girl. Get Xizor on line immediately or there will be repercussions!"

She paused just a moment to let Lord Vader know she was not happy at how she was being spoken to and then she nodded. "He is indisposed at this very moment. He will be available in ten minutes."

"Use this holonet address!" Lord Vader said and terminated the connection.

I watched as he sat back in the too small chair and folded his arms across his chest. "Indisposed!" he snorted. "Lounging in his bathtub more like!"

"I am not going to ask how you know that." I said.

"Probably for the best that you do not." He nodded and then as the transmitter peeped for the incoming signal. Lord Vader waved his hand at me to sit still and he accepted the transmission.

"Prince Xizor, how good of you to take time out of your busy schedule to meet with me." Lord Vader said, the sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable.

"Think nothing of it Lord Vader, how may I assist you?" The prince oozed charm and I shuddered involuntarily.

"It was my understanding that you wished to speak with me, in fact you were so adamant about it you even went to the Emperor to express dismay at my not being available."

There was a momentary silence and I had to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from giggling. The holo image of the Prince shivered and then realigned. Prince Xizor inclined his head, his topknot pony tail swinging with his movement. "I merely mentioned to his Excellency how busy you must be, because you were nearly impossible to reach and I had valuable information to impart. The young lady who arranges your calendar is most unhelpful in these matters. I prefer to deal with you directly, after all we are supposed to be working closely on this proposed project...."



I could feel Lord Vader working very hard to maintain his cool. "Get to the point." He snapped.

Xizor smiled and began to give Lord Vader detailed information on the latest project they were, in theory, working on. It was interesting and long winded but much to my surprise Lord Vader did not interrupt and when Xizor had finished he was quiet for a moment.

"This is a worthy endeavour. I trust your people are capable of producing these prototypes?"

Xizor nodded. "I guarantee their work." He said.

Lord Vader leaned in close to the holo projector. "For your sake, Xizor, I hope so." He growled. "Go behind my back again to complain to the Emperor and you will feel my wrath, do we have an understanding?"

"I believe we do, Lord Vader." The prince said smoothly.

Vader nodded and terminated the connection, sat back in the chair and tilted his head to one side, looking at me. "What did you sense from him?"

"You mean was he lying?" I asked surprised at his question.

Lord Vader nodded.

"It's difficult for me to tell especially with holograms and the Prince is always hiding something but I didn't get the impression that anything he said to you in this message was a direct lie."

"What do you mean, always hiding something?"

I shrugged. "It is hard to define. You are always angry. When I perceive you using my gifts you come across to me like white noise. The emperor is like smoke. I receive almost nothing from him. With the Prince it is like he is wrapped in mirrors. What you see on the surface is not what is happening underneath. It isn't that he is lying but there's a lot there that I don't think is real, like he hides behind a facade. Does that make sense?"

He stared at me for a moment then nodded. "Yes, it makes perfect sense." He got up and started to pace around the room. "He is up to something, I sense it but so far nothing he has done warrants my suspicion. In the last few years he has curried great favour with the Emperor and garnered a place in the high court. I do not understand why my master allows this. "

"Maybe because he heads Black Sun?" I said tartly. "I am quite sure he is always up to something, perhaps this way the Emperor feels he can keep a closer eye on him."

"He hides his Black Sun activities behind legitimate businesses. He is clever and difficult to catch, however eventually he will slip up and I will have the evidence I need to prove that I am right about his motives for wishing to work so closely within the Royal Court."

I drew a deep breath. "You spy on each other."

"Of course we do, you stupid girl. How else would I know what he is doing?" Lord Vader said.

"So, if he knows what you are doing and vice versa then why did he run to the Emperor and complain about me behind your back like a spoiled little school boy?" I said crossly.

I could sense the smile behind Lord Vader's mask, it was slow and nasty. "That was a power play. In doing so he is telling me that he exerts some small influence over the Emperor and I must bend to his wishes." He said thoughtfully.

"Well that's just a waste of time!"

"Yes, it is but Xizor does not see it this way, he sees these small power plays as little victories, undermining my place at the Emperor's side. He is obsequious and he manages to twist words to his advantage. He wheedles his way around the Emperor in a most displeasing manner." Lord Vader said. "And my Master sees fit to allow it, although to

what end I don't know." He stopped pacing and looked at me. "However, I am sure that together we can find this out."

"Together?" I asked carefully not liking the sound of that at all.

"You are the daughter of a Jedi with an unusual talent for disseminating truth from lie. I believe you will be present more often than you have been during some of my meetings with the Prince. I take it he does not know of your *talents*."

I shrugged. "I don't think he knows anything about me, except that I am your annoying office girl. I don't even think he recalls the incident at the Grand Ball from three years ago."

"Incident? Explain."

I sighed, got up and made myself a cup of tea while I told him about the Prince's little trick using pheromones and how Shiv had saved me at the Grand Ball where I had first been presented to the Emperor. I described the sensation of being enthralled and how added it had made my head feel.

"You should have spoken of this at the time it happened." He said. He was annoyed but there was no real anger in his words.

"I was a bit overwhelmed at the time!" I retorted. "And you were not in the best of moods! Besides since when were you ever interested in my personal life, or the mating rituals of the Falleen?" I asked.

"Your private life does not interest me at all but threats to Imperial security do. You have access to a great deal of personal information about me and my life, as well as sensitive information about Imperial business. I can only imagine what sort of information you would let slip while mating with a creature who possesses the power to addle your brain."

I almost choked on my tea. "Mate!?" I shuddered involuntarily. "I would never *mate* with that man!"

"It is my understanding from what you told me that you would have had no choice, he would have beguiled you into doing so."

He was making me cross but he was also right. "Well lucky for me Shiv knew what was going on and saved me from being ...how did you put it, beguiled." I said snarkily.

"I shall remember to thank him the next time I see him." He retorted. "You do seem to attract the scyks and Xizor is one of the worst."

I sighed. "And you want me to be in the same room with this particular scyk?"

"Do you feel you are likely to wish to couple with him?" he inquired.

I gave him my best version of a hard stare. "No, he is repulsive and besides I already have my hands full, and contrary to popular belief I am not promiscuous, one man in my life is enough!"

Lord Vader laughed. Something which always made my skin crawl. It was a truly disturbing sound because the vocal augmentation and his breathing regulator made his laughter something that sounded like a cross between a haurton howler and a baby Krayt dragon. I just made a face.

He stopped pacing and stood at the window with his back to me then he glanced over his shoulder and looked at me. "I was unaware that he used chemical means to attract females. It would explain why he cannot seem to keep them around."

It was my turn to laugh. "He gets bored of them and then he dumps them often unceremoniously." I said.

Lord Vader nodded. "Of course he does. Where is the challenge in pursuing then maintaining a relationship when it is handed to you on a chemically induced platter?" He asked. "I am quite certain Admiral Thrawn did not pursue you because you were easy prey. It took him nearly three years to finally bed you, did it not?"

I just blinked at him and for a few moments I was utterly speechless. That was Lord Vader, blunt and to the point as always. Tact was not high on his list of things he cared about. While I had been fairly certain that my relationship with Thrawn had never been a big secret from Lord Vader, hearing him discuss it so offhandedly in that manner was disturbing. I sighed.

"Seeing as how he is on your mind, what exactly is the nature of the Admiral's delay?" Lord Vader asked. He was picking up my thoughts.

"He is on my mind because you brought him up." I said crossly. "Stay out of my head!"

"Learn not to broadcast your feelings so openly then."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder!" He growled. "The last thing I need is a love sick assistant, who cannot keep her mind on the job at hand."

It was on the tip of my tongue to snap back, asking him what he knew about it but I managed to bite back my words in time. He knew exactly what I was feeling because he had gone through that with Padmé. During the Clone wars they had been separated more than they had been together. They had also had to sneak around, hiding their relationship, their love, their marriage. I couldn't really argue with him because he was sort of right. I hadn't thought I was that obvious but Lord Vader wasn't stupid and he had been through the same thing. Instead I answered his original question.

"Admiral Thrawn did not state what the delay was caused by, only that he expected the job he was doing to take a few hours more than previously expected." I said, finishing my drink. "The Emperor will not like you having me spy on the prince." I added shifting the topic of conversation away from Thrawn.

"Then it would be best if he were not to find out, wouldn't it." He asked looking at me.

"I guess you need to teach me to mask my thoughts better, then." I said with a little shrug.

He continued to stare at me and then gave me a small nod. "That can be arranged now as it appears we have some spare time until Thrawn returns." He said tartly. "Sit down and I shall try to get some instructions through that stubborn skull of yours! These techniques will require discipline, something you lack a great deal of."

I nodded and did as he bid, grateful for the time alone to train with him. I knew he had learned to mask his feelings from the Emperor and now I hoped he would teach me this technique. As he paced around the room around me I sat and slowly slipped into the stillness that I found when I meditated. With his words in my ears I began to follow his instructions. I had learned to listen and do as he said. It would be a long session and he was going to work me hard but I expected nothing less and smiled. As I sat, desert style listening to the cadence of his voice I wondered if he knew how much he had come to mean to me. I was reasonably sure that my birth mother would be turning over in her grave at the thought of her daughter being taught by and admiring one of the most hated men in the galaxy, the man who had once been Anakin Skywalker the betrayer of the Jedi Order. I wondered what the irony in all of this was supposed to teach me. If there was a lesson I couldn't see it.

"Pay attention!" Lord Vader snapped, cuffing my head lightly with his hand as he sensed my drifting thoughts.

I nodded and did as he asked. Avoiding the Emperor and his probing had become my primary goal, no one was better at this than lord Vader, despite what the Emperor thought.

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My fingertips danced their way around the night table in search of the source of the beeping which was slowly breaking through my sleep. I activated the comm and brushed the hair from my eyes. It seemed as though my head had barely touched the pillow and already I was awake. I wasn't happy.

"What!" I barked.

"Miss Gabriel?"

"Yes?"

"The Admiral has returned, he wishes to see you in his ready room." The annoying voice said.

"I'll be there in a moment." And shut the comm off before he could say anything else. I rolled out of bed and stumbled to the 'fresher to wash my face and clear the sleep from my eyes. I had been dreaming when the comm had gone off. All I could remember now was fragments. The desert, the man my uncle had called Qui Gon Jin and a dreadful sense of sorrow. I was grateful I couldn't recall any details. When that man showed up in my dreams it was usually a sign of bad things not good. I cleaned my teeth, brushed my hair back and pulled it up into an untidy knot held in place by mismatched Zenji sticks. I threw on a loose dress and grabbed my data pad then made my way to the Admiral's ready room.

Captain Niriz was just on his way out as I headed in. "Good morning Miss Gabriel."

"I take it he is in one piece?" I asked, pausing at the door.

Niriz smiled. "It would appear so. Lord Vader was just here, asked me to tell you to wait until he returns."

"Thanks." I said as I walked into the ready room.

Thrawn sat back in a chair still wearing the Mandalorian armour, he was drinking mineral water. He looked tired but satisfied.

"How was it?" I asked as the door hissed closed behind me.

He gave me a smile. "Very interesting. Your uncle was right about Thyne and the information he gave me was most valuable. What he didn't mention was Thayne's appalling taste in art."

I raised my eyebrows then. "Unlike you, that's not really the first thing Zte'sa Vahlek tends to notice."

Thrawn grinned. "He would have noticed this, trust me."

"Are you planning to tell me what happened any time soon or will I have to pry it out of you?"

He gave me a short laugh. "I'll tell you all, I promise, when the time is right."

"I've heard that before." I told him testily.

"I promise, Tekari, when the time is right." He said gently, he had that look on his face which said *there is more going on than you know about so stop digging*.

I sighed and gave up, switching the topic. "Need help getting out of that armour?"

"Already wishing to undress me? You have a one track mind, my dear." Thrawn smirked.

"I am quite happy to let you struggle on your own." I shrugged that *I don't care* one shoulder shrug.

He looked at me for a moment then smiled. "Very well, you can assist me if you like." He said getting up.

I was in the middle of helping him shrug off the body armour when the door slid open and Lord Vader walked in. He paused for a moment while Thrawn untangled his arms from the chest pieces and then handed the Admiral a datapad. In typical Vader style he then turned his back on us both and stood, with his arms folded across his chest, to stare out of the window.

I took the armour piece and set it on the table as Thrawn studied the information Lord Vader had given him. "Do you wish me to formulate a strategic plan for this?" He asked as he studied whatever was on the datapad.

"By all means." Lord Vader replied, "It was your information that has given us this opportunity. I have some ideas but your input would be...welcome." Then he turned to look at me, "I need you to prepare the *Sigiri* for a long haul run."

"Yes, my lord." I said with a nod.

He looked back at Thrawn. "Your hand in this battle plan will please the Emperor and your elegant touch will be unmistakable but he will not wish it overtly known that you were instrumental in the planning of this. He has instructed me to request that you be onboard the *Avenger* for the briefing and planning. On the way there you can work on the details. I must return to the *Executor* but will rendezvous with you on board the *Avenger* before the briefing takes place. I take it you have no objections with Miss Gabriel piloting you?"

Thrawn gave me a slight glance. "Not at all, your assistant is a most efficient pilot and I am certain she will enjoy the chance to log more hours in the L-class shuttle."

Both men stared at me but I said and did nothing. This was unusual, even for Lord Vader and while a shuttle could be piloted by one, usually a crew of minimum three ran it. A high ranking official travelling without a guard compliment was very irregular. I wasn't happy with this situation but there was nothing to say about it. This was not a time to argue with Lord Vader about my likes or dislikes of his orders.

Lord Vader nodded. "We will be expected to join the *Avenger* in seven days from now; they are currently en route to the Derra system but the Emperor does not wish the *Admonitor* to be involved in the conflict. He prefers that you come alone."

Thrawn nodded. "Yes, I expected as much."

"The hundred-and- eighty- first will be the fighter group you will be planning for. I have enclosed their information on the data pad and given the *Sigiri's* capabilities you can make it to the *Avenger* in just under a week. This gives you plenty of time to study the pilot records and best determine how to plan for their abilities." Lord Vader said. "Your return to the Unknown Regions will be delayed."

Thrawn nodded. "I work for the Empire, Lord Vader. When the Emperor requests my presence I obey." He said. "The Unknown Regions of space are not going anywhere. When do we depart?"

"As soon as you are ready and your shuttle is prepared." Lord Vader said turning to look at me.

I nodded. "I'll get right on it. Admiral, I take it I can requisition anything I need from your stores?"

He looked at me. "The quartermaster will see that you are given what you need within reason, of course."

"Thank you." I said. "Lord Vader, will there be anything else before you leave?"

"No. Just see that you keep the Admiral in one piece." He admonished.

"Yes, of course, my lord." I nodded. "*So I will see you in about a week then?*" I asked him silently.

"Yes." He sent back then added. "*Behave yourself, especially on board the Avenger. Be discrete and stay out of everyone's way! I will hear of any problems.*"

"Yes, my lord." I said out loud and then, ignoring the one eyebrow question from Thrawn, I left to go and pack my stuff and ready the *Sigiri*.

The Quartermaster looked at the list I had given him and made a face but before he could say anything negative I told him if he had problems with the items I had requisitioned he could confirm them with the Admiral or Lord Vader. He pursed his lips and nodded.

"I will see what I can do but it will take at least an hour to get all these things together. I am also not certain about the food stores but will do the best I can. Do you wish to be apprised of substitutions?"

I nodded. "That would be very considerate of you."

He sighed and nodded. "Very well, Miss Gabriel, will there be anything else?"

"No. I have to do some minor repairs but I will speak with the deck officer about the ship parts I might need, although if you have a spare set of coveralls or a flight suit that I can get dirty in I'd appreciate that, I wasn't planning on playing mechanic this trip so I didn't bring mine."

"You are a certified mechanic as well?" He was surprised.

I grinned. "Yes. I am."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Come with me, I'll kit you out. I am not sure we have one that will fit you properly, you are a little on the small side for regulation Imperial clothing."

I laughed as I walked beside him to the ship's stores room, where he dug through his supplies until he found a fabric flight suit which was small enough that I would not swim in it. I thanked him and made my way back to the flight deck to get to work on the shuttle. I took a walk around the *Sigiri*. I never tired of looking at her, she was a pretty ship. I guess I was not alone because I had to shoo a very persistent maintenance droid away from her. The droids were usually assigned to hull scrubbing and minor repairs but I generally didn't want their help. Once he left me alone I did a quick outside check and then went inside to check the engines.

The engines were located under the passenger compartment. There was a maintenance hatch located midship's behind the exit ramp. There was enough room to move about and whoever had designed this ship and her engine room had done a bang up job. I went through the airlock and the EV suits to check that everything was in good shape and then I went to work on the engine. I was in the middle of checking the hyperdrive fluid levels when the supplies started to arrive. By the time everything was on board and stowed away, I had pretty much finished what I was doing and was satisfied that we would not blow up half way there.

I commed Thrawn to tell him the shuttle was ready whenever he was and then headed back to my quarters to shower and change for the trip. As usual, I took the long way up, along the stairs and gantries. I was almost out of the docking bay when I caught sight of Lord Vader sweeping in. I stood on the high gantry and watched as he stood with Thrawn talking to an alien the likes of which I had never seen before. He was small of stature and had grey skin. There was not an ounce of fat on him, bipedal and muscular. I knew without a doubt that this was a creature honed for the hunt. I stared at him until Lord Vader, sensing my presence looked up, the alien's gaze followed. He wasn't pretty and I suppressed the urge to shiver. Lord Vader sent me a wave of displeasure at my hesitation. I was wasting time, something he despised. I sighed and quickly left the hanger bay. The sooner I was ready to get on the go the soon this job would be done and I could get back to my regular chaotic life.

By the time I was ready, Lord Vader and the alien had gone from the hanger and Thrawn was speaking with his deck officer. I glanced at him and he gave me a slight nod of acknowledgement. I was anxious to get on the go. I dumped my belongings in the crew room, did a quick walk through the ship to make sure that everything which should be safely stowed away was. I was sitting in the cockpit going through my pre flight check when Thrawn joined me. His hand warm on my shoulder as he let me know he was there.

"You all set?" I asked putting the headset on.

He slid into the co-pilot's seat and strapped in. "Yes. I take it you found everything you needed?"

I nodded and began departure procedure. The ship's engines hummed and flight control gave me the okay to go. The *Sigiri* slid out of the hanger, through the force field and into space. I was happy with the little tune up I had given her. She sounded a lot smoother than when I had flown her here.

Corellia danced beneath us and I smiled. We would have to get away from the gravity well of the planet before we could go into hyperspace but to see a planet whole and beautiful, hanging in the inkiness of space always took my breath away. I began to punch in the coordinates and routes into the nav-computer to meet up with the *Avenger* in the Derra system. Once we were clear of the planet's gravity the hyperdrive kicked in, stars elongated and we slid smoothly into the hyperspace lane.

Ten minutes after our jump into hyperspace Thrawn sighed as he looked up from the datapad he had been studying. "So, my dear, how long will the first jump take?"

"Seven hours." I told him as I set the auto pilot.

He got up and patted my shoulder. "I have not had a chance to rest since my return from Corellia will you be alright up here on your own?"

"Yes." I told him. "When do you want me to wake you?"

"In six hours, unless there is a problem."

I nodded, getting up. "Okay, what cabin did you take?"

He told me as we left the cockpit.

"Okay." I said following him as far as the small galley. It was late morning now and I was hungry. I hadn't had the chance to grab breakfast so now was as good a time as any. He stopped and looked at me as I set the kettle on the small heater.

"Maybe you'll make some spiced 'caf for me later?" He asked.

"If you're lucky."

"I could make it worth your while...." He teased.

It had the opposite effect it was supposed to. I sighed. "Why am I here?" I asked him suddenly. "You should have a proper pilot and a gaggle of stormtroopers watching after you. This is highly irregular."

"A gaggle?"

I gave him a look, rubbed my forehead with my fingertips. I was tired and in no mood for games.

He gave me a slight smile "Lord Vader seems to think we work well together. The Emperor wants my involvement in the project kept quiet and both men know that I work better alone without an entourage. You are a good pilot and trust me, we are in no danger. Or would you rather be surrounded by the Emperor's finest?"

I sighed. "Just wondering about this arrangement, it seems awfully convenient."

"Are you complaining about being alone with me?"

I shook my head. "No, but it feels a bit like a set up or something."

He grinned. "The *Sigiri* is not full of spy and surveillance equipment, no one is watching us flirt."

"How would you know?"

"The reason you were assigned this shuttle is because she is not set up for that. She is used for milk runs with lesser dignitaries. She flies under the radar, so to speak." He said. "My crew did an internal and external sweep after you and your uncle disembarked. She's clean."

I drew a deep breath and nodded. "If you say so."

He frowned. "What's bothering you?"

"I should not be your pilot and you should be travelling with a full crew. This is just not right on so many levels I cannot even begin to list them. Is this a game to you and Lord Vader? You think this is fun to keep putting me in a situation like this?"

"What situation is this like?" he asked coolly. I could hear the crossness in his voice now and knew that the conversation would start to go downhill, unless I got to the point. He was tired.

"Don't you find this improper?"

"No." He said then with a sigh added. "A'myshk'a, Vader knows what you are capable of, he trusts you to do your job and he knows that I will do mine. The job comes first for both of us. I know what you are thinking but that simply isn't the case. I discovered something while I was on Corellia, a smuggler ship with a shipment of arms for the rebellion. No one and I mean no one but you, myself, Lord Vader and, I suspect, the Emperor knows of this information. Vader is making certain it stays that way. No matter how many precautions we take there are breeches in security, lately, far too many of these leaks for my tastes. We wished to make it difficult for the spies who seem so prevalent among us." He paused, when I didn't say anything he continued.

"The more people on board this shuttle the greater the chance this information that we have will be leaked, the greater the chance that someone will warn the rebels that we know. We will only get one shot at this. That is why it is just you and me. Vader knows just how good you are and he knows you have what it takes to get me there in one piece. He trusts that I will do my job and come up with a way to stop these people from delivering this arms shipment and whatever else they may have planned." He stopped and looked at me for a moment. "Did you think this was some sort of punishment? That Vader has you here with me because he likes to watch you suffer? He could care less what relationship you and I have as long as we get the jobs we are assigned to do done." He shook his head. "You need to start looking at the larger picture. You stopped being just his office girl a long time ago, when will you wake up and see this?"

It was my turn to sigh. "You both make my life so damned complicated!"

He came to me then, cupped my face in both his hands. "Complications keep it interesting." He said. His eyes staring into mine, studying my expression trying to read my thoughts, trying to make his understood. I closed my eyes as I slid my arms around his waist and held him to me tightly. I didn't speak, I didn't look up and I didn't let go. With my head against his chest, I could hear his heart beat. He kissed the top of my head as he wrapped his arms around me. I felt him relax as he sensed the tension I had been holding slowly unwind. He drew a deep breath and separated himself from me. I just rested my forehead against his chest.

"Not everything is one of the Emperor's games and not everything that happens is about you, either." He spoke gently. A curled finger lifted my chin upward so I looked him in the face. "Vader trusts you; you have an unbelievable position in his life which no one understands or dares to question. I think that you need to learn to trust his judgement. You would not be here if he did not think you were more than capable. If you can't trust him, will you at least trust me?"

I just stared at him then, after a moment, nodded.

He smiled slightly. "I know you are tired, wound up and that the last few days have not been easy but try to relax a little. We have time to be together before we reach the *Avenger* and there is nothing else going on. No one except Vader knows our destination, you checked out the ship from stem to stern so there is nothing to worry about. When I've rested I'll cook for you if you like and over dinner I'll tell you about my time as Kast and what happened on Corellia."

"Okay." I said, accepting his peace offering. "You should go and rest, you look exhausted."

He kissed me lightly on the lips, more an affectionate afterthought than a sign of passion, and then went to his cabin. I sighed as I made myself a sandwich and poured a generous cup of tea then headed back up to the cockpit. I had a half finished book to read



in my satchel and there was no place else I needed to be but as I tried to read I found I just couldn't concentrate. No matter how much I wanted to believe everything Thrawn had told me a small part of me could not help but feel uneasy. I ate my sandwich absently, stared out into the eerie light of the hyperspace lane and tried to put my worries aside. He was right I was over tired and stressed, never a good combination. It had a tendency to make me jumpy and paranoid. I put my feet up on the consol and picked up my book again, determined to get beyond my own case of nerves.

I knew from my past experiences when flying longer hauls with Thrawn that we generally abandoned the traditional watch system in favour for what worked for us. We took turns on watch and mostly worked with as well as around each other. He could go for longer periods without sleep than I could but I found it easier to doze or take little naps, something he didn't do. I enjoyed sitting in the cockpit reading, studying the star charts and ship's database or just staring out into space but I fidgeted a lot. He would get annoyed with that and leave, often going to some quiet out of the way space to meditate or read. Yet for all these differences we travelled well together.

I set up my own routines. I walked through the ship once an hour give or take, spent time with the engine, and mostly read a lot. No matter what people said, long haul space travel was dull for the most part. I was very happy with dull.

With Thrawn resting, the ship was very peaceful. Unlike my own ship, the lambda class shuttle's engines were very quiet by comparison. The ride was smooth and easy. As I walked through the *Sigiri*, checking everything was in order I thought about my uncle's question as to why I had not chosen a career as a pilot. Certainly I was never happier than when I was flying. It made me smile as I navigated my way through the ship under blue light which the Imperial Navy favoured over red.

Space was dark unless one travelled too close to a star. Having standard lighting was useful but for a pilot going from normal white light to the dark cockpit it was annoying. It took time for my eyes to adjust, okay, not much but enough to make a difference should something go wrong. I insisted that the ship go to dark when I flew. Thrawn didn't mind, he had exceptionally good night vision anyway and the blue watch light didn't bother him at all. I liked the quiet atmosphere it gave the ship. Somehow it made the trip seem less hectic and calmer. The *Sigiri* was easy to navigate around. It hadn't taken me long to get to know her and be able to get about without worrying about bashing my feet, or knocking my knees into something.

The six hours Thrawn had wanted to rest passed by quickly and uneventfully. I had managed to nap, catching up a little on my sleep, as well as spend time studying the star charts for the system we were headed to. Ten minutes before he had asked me to wake him I got up and made spiced 'caf.

Spiced 'caf was a Tatooine drink, locally known as mek'kefa. I don't know who had first created it although the myths often said it was the Sand people. I doubted this was actually true since the beans that made the 'caf were not locally grown and expensive to come by. I suspected it was actually something the Hutts had brought with them. They had a liking for exotic things but since no one ever wanted to admit to liking something the Hutts liked a whole story had been woven up around the drink and like most things that made their way to Tatooine the recipe had been adapted to the planet over the years.

I liked my spiced 'caf the way my uncle made it so after much wheedling and pleading he had finally, under pain of death should I ever tell anyone else, given me his recipe. I was pretty certain he was teasing about the pain of death threat but sometimes one could never tell with him. You could get premixed, ready to go spiced 'caf but I always found it tasted awful so I always made it from scratch. I had dark roasted beans that were finely ground to a powder then added the spices and the honey. The specially designed carafe allowed the mixture to boil without overflowing, you had to watch it and nurse it a

bit and it took longer than using one of the automatic machines that could be found around but it was worth it. I liked the procedure, there was a sort of peace in it, and I suppose it reminded me of home. The scent of the spices mixed with the dark roasted grounds always reminded me of sun, warmth and my uncle's kitchen.

Thrawn had not enjoyed the drink the first time he had tried it. I had expected this, it was an acquired taste. The drink, which was usually served in small glasses without handles, was thick and strong and there were always grounds at the bottom of the glass. The first taste on the tongue is very bitter, but the aftertaste of the honey is delicious and it is easy to become addicted to it. I had not expected him to come around because he wasn't overly fond of things that were bitter so when he developed a taste for it I was surprised. I smiled as I poured a glass for him. Sometimes I would wake him up with a cup in the mornings if I had gotten up first when we had been living together.

He had chosen the state room down at the end of the short corridor. It was quiet and relatively spacious. I wandered down the darkened hall humming to myself. The scent of the drink I carried wafting through the air. There was a specific way of holding the glass so that one didn't burn one's fingers, but it was a tenuous grip to say the least. I hit the door button and stepped through into the room. The door hissed shut behind me and the room was almost pitch black. For a second I stood to get my bearings and let my eyes adjust to the darkness. I knew where he was, I didn't need to see him I could sense him through the force. I stepped towards the bed, smiling in anticipation of his reaction.

He had told me once that the open affection between us was a rare and precious thing, that he treasured it deeply. The Chiss were not generally known for their ability to be affectionate. He had said that I allowed him this. I had not thought that I would have anything to give back but he had remarked that this could not be further from the truth. I could still hear his voice telling me in the quiet of the night that I was as much a gift to him as he was to me and that while maybe I complicated his life, he would not have it any other way. The memory of that night and what had followed after he had said this to me caused me to blush, if there had been time I would have been grateful for the dark but instead at that moment something, someone grabbed my arms from behind, the glass in my hand fell to the floor and smashed, as I began to yell a powerful hand clamped over my mouth and the second hand that held me moved to clamp around my throat. I could not move. I flinched when the room was suddenly flooded with light and blinked the sudden tears away as my eyes watered in protest. The hand at my mouth moved to hold me from struggling. I twisted my head around to see who it was that was holding me, trying to choke the life out of me and then I yelped in fright.

A billion thoughts crashed through my head in the space of the time it took Thrawn to switch on the lights, get out of bed and assess the situation. Most of them had to do with my seeming inability to defend myself. I had been trained in the Bunduki arts, I was a force user and had been taught to fight by some of the best and the most brutal teachers this galaxy had to offer, so why was it that the moment some creature with a grip of dura-steel grabbed me I panicked or at least froze. The first thing I did was try to get my heart rate and breathing back down to a sane level. The creature that held me could break my bones as easily as Lord Vader could force choke a room full of idiots. There wasn't much use in struggling further.

"Release her." Thrawn spoke quietly but there was such ice, such command in his voice that I wasn't certain who I should be more afraid of, him or the alien who held me in the death grip from hell.

"Now." Thrawn insisted calmly. "I shall not ask you again."

The creature did as he was asked and Thrawn pulled me towards him to shield me with his body.

"Are you alright?" he asked. He looked at my throat and I suspected from the dull pain that I would have bruises there. For once, I thought, they could not be blamed on Lord Vader.

I nodded and swallowed. My knees were still shaky but that would pass.

"Who...what is this?" I asked.

Thrawn drew a deep breath. "This is Rukh." He said coolly. He was angry, angrier than I had seen him in some time. "Rukh is a Noghri warrior assigned by Lord Vader to protect me."

I looked at the Noghri called Rukh, who simply stared at me and then I looked back at Thrawn. He was naked. "You should get dressed and put shoes on; there are glass shards on the floor." I said. Before either of them could say anything else I left the cabin.

The adrenaline that had flooded through my system receded and left me cold with anger. Thrawn had not seemed in the least bit surprised by the Noghri's presence which led me to believe he had known the creature was on board my ship and he had not told me. I stopped at the galley, filled up a large cup with the rest of the spiced 'caf then I made my way calmly to the cockpit, closed the door and locked it. I needed some time to calm down and think and this was the one place that was mine and mine alone. I sat for a very long time just staring out of the window cradling the warm cup in my cold hands, trying to sort through this latest incident and my seeming inability to defend myself. It was depressing. For over three years I had been training and I still could not seem to get it right when someone grabbed me. I doubted that, given the strength I had felt from the Noghri I would have been able to break free from his grip even if I had tried but that didn't change how ineffectual I felt now.

A knock at the door broke my thoughts. I ignored it.

"A'myshk'a...?" Thrawn asked.

My answer, in his language, was very rude.

I could sense his frustration mixed with concern. "Open the door, please." He tried again.

I repeated my previous statement. There was a lengthy silence and I thought that maybe he'd actually done as I had told him for once. Maybe he would leave me in peace to calm down but no, that was not the case. Instead he had used his official override code and unlocked the cockpit door. Opened it, walked in then closed it again. I could feel him stand directly behind me but I didn't turn to look at him.

"Get out." I wondered if the tone of my voice matched the icy fury in my veins.

"I need to know that you are unharmed." He said quietly.

"I'm fine. Go away!"

"I know you are angry with me but I am not responsible for this." He said maintaining the same calm quiet tone.

I drew a deep steadying breath and had to relax the grip of death I was inflicting on my cup. I heard him move to come and crouch down at the side of the chair. The nav computer beeped letting me know we would be coming out of hyperspace soon.

"Tekari, look at me." He said. When my jaw clenched and I did not move he added, "Please?"

So I did as he asked. "Where is your *friend*?" I growled.

"Back aft." He said.

I nodded and went back to staring out of the window. "Keep him the hell away from me."

He reached out to touch my face but I pulled away from him. "You should have told me he was on board." I said coldly.

"I did not know he was on the ship. I was under the impression he had remained on board the *Admonitor*. If I had known so would you." Thrawn spoke to me the way Navaari had, in that steady calm voice which soothed timid creatures and fractious children.

"How is that possible?" I asked angrily. "You know everything! Prepared for every, any and all eventualities! How could you not know this?" I was being nasty but I didn't really care.

He sighed and got up to sit in the co pilot's chair across from me. "Lord Vader was pleased with the work that I accomplished on Corellia, as part of a reward if you like, he has given me command of the Noghri, a race of beings most efficient in the warrior arts and quite deadly as commandos. He introduced me to Rukh earlier, before we left this morning." He paused to look at me, I ignored this. "I agreed to take Rukh on as a bodyguard and I thought I had made it clear that he was to remain on board the *Admonitor*. I was obviously mistaken. I am sorry."

"Since when do you need a body guard?" I asked.

"I don't believe I do, but these Noghri believe in a form of life debt and they apparently feel they owe it to the Empire, especially to Lord Vader who convinced them this passes on to me. You know as well as I do that respect for other cultures is tantamount to maintaining law and order. It would have been imprudent to dismiss their beliefs and their service."

"Well your body guard just tried to kill me." I said coldly.

"He was doing his job. You entered the room without turning on the lights. He thought you were going to assassinate me."

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him. "Maybe next time I'll try that instead of bringing you spiced 'caf!"

He sighed. "How many times shall I apologise for this before you back down?"

I shook my head. "Just go away."

"A'myshk'a..." He drew a deep breath and I could feel him struggle to keep his own temper in check.

"Blast it all to Corellia's nine hells and back! I don't need this crap when I am piloting. I do not need this stress because travelling with you is stressful enough! That... that... Noghri tried to kill me. He is not welcome on my ship so get him off it!"

"And just how am I supposed to do that? Toss him out the nearest air lock?" Thrawn's tone had gone from concerned to cold.

"That would be one way." I replied. I watched as we slid out of hyperspace into normal space. The next jump would be a lot longer and follow a standard shipping lane, but we would have to fly for half an hour to get to the right hyper point. I set the co-ordinates into the nav computer and engaged the autopilot.

"You are not being reasonable." He said crossly.

"Reasonable? Some alien I have never seen before in my life, that I did not even know was on board my shuttle just tried to strangle me for bringing you a glass of spice 'caf and you tell me I am not being reasonable? Get him off my ship, confine him to the cargo hold, or tie him up with pipe tape for all I care! Do whatever it is you need to do to keep him away from me, because if he comes at me again I will chop his head off with my lightsaber or die trying! Am I making myself clear?" I asked getting up. I knew he was right but I was just too angry to want to see reason.

I brushed passed him but he caught my arm with a steel grip that bordered on painful. Whatever he had to say next he was making sure I would not just hear it but listen as well.

"If I had known he was on board I would have told you." He said very calmly. He was now angry with me rather than anything else. "I would have made it perfectly clear to

him that you are not out to kill me and that if I am under his protection then so are you. Do you really think I would have withheld this information from you?"

I glared at him. "I don't know! With you I never know!" I said. "Damn it I have enough complications in my life as it without you and your new pet adding to them! Now will you get the hell out of my cockpit?!"

"Merlyn, please..." He started. He never called me by my first name unless he was being formal or he was annoyed with me. In this case the latter was the reason. I was testing his patience to the bitter end.

I stamped my foot down hard on the floor. "NO! NO! NO! This is not acceptable, no! I want that ...that...bodyguard-warrior-Noghri-creature- whatever off my..."

I never got to finish my sentence because suddenly there was a huge BOOM as an explosion blasted the port side of the ship, rocking the shuttle violently. Alarms and lights started going off and flashing madly. If Thrawn had not been holding my arm I would have been flung backwards. I grabbed hold of his chair as he let go of my arm to scan the instrument panel.

I scrambled back into my chair and strapped in. "Now what!" I hissed crossly. "Did we hit something?"

"No, that was blaster fire." He told me. He activated the shields and I said a silent prayer that whatever had hit us hadn't hit anything vital.

"Blaster fire???" If I hadn't been angry before now I was. I scanned the systems readout but nothing serious had been hit or compromised. We had been lucky.

The shuttle was rocked by a second volley of fire.

"Affirmative. Blasts hit us port-side aft, nothing significant was damaged. Shields are holding." Thrawn told me. He was setting up tactical even before I had to ask, transferring the gun controls to his consol.

"Someone is shooting at us? There is nothing registering, no proximity alert nothing on the scans....Who...what the hell is shooting at us?"

A third blast shook the ship and I heard the engines whine, just a little, from the power drain of the shields.

"Whoever it is they are still attacking us port side aft. Shields are now at ninety percent. They have better guns." He said as dryly as if he were commenting on a news net article.

"You strapped in?" I asked taking us off auto pilot.

"Yes what did you...?"

"Hang on!" I yanked hard as I could on the throttle and sent us into a wide arcing loop. The shuttle's engines protested but I knew what she was capable of. "Find whatever it is that is shooting at us! I take it you know how to work the guns on this thing?"

"Yes."

The gravity plating and inertial dampers compensated for the sudden motion but not quite fast enough to offset the sense of spin. I hated sudden rotation like this it always made me queasy which was why I would never have made a good fighter pilot. I gritted my teeth and hoped for the best. The shuttle wasn't designed to be flung about like a TIE fighter or an X-Wing.

"Well?" I asked as a volley of laser fire sliced past the nose of the shuttle by millimetres.

"Nothing, according to the scans we are completely alone."

"Okay well your aloneness is trying to kill us." I sent us barrel rolling to the starboard, shutting my eyes tightly as we did so.

"I know you are cross with me right now, but I need you to take orders from me and not be stubborn or argumentative, can you do that?"

"Will it make them stop shooting at us?" I asked as I began to compensate for the next spin.

"Yes."

"Then you are in charge, Admiral."

"Bank hard to port on my command." He said. I glanced at him and wondered what he had in mind. "Now!" His command left no room for discussion. I pulled to port hard and Thrawn fired a series of shots that arced as we banked.

"The last shot hit something."

"Hard to starboard now." He said. I marvelled at his calm. My heart was in my throat. I did as he said and my stomach lurched. The engines whined and the ship shuddered. He shot again and again the last set of laser bolts hit something. I watched in amazement as out of the nothingness a ship began to decloak then was suddenly invisible again.

"On my mark pull up hard, loop wide then hard roll to starboard."

"Aye."

"Mark."

I did as he asked and watched as he fired the aft canon but before I could express my elation that we had maybe won we were once again hit by a volley of fire and the shields fluttered.

"What ever is shooting at us will take out our shields if they keep hitting us like that!" I told him.

"Micro jump." He said. "We need to get out of here now!"

"What? Are you out of your mind? You can't micro jump in this thing!!!" I yelled at him. I had never actually done a micro jump, they were almost unheard of.

"Give my full control now!" He ordered. Another blast hit us starboard side and the shields dropped to forty percent. The shield generator couldn't get enough power fast enough to regenerate the shields to full.

I did as he asked then watched as he manually set the spatial co ordinates and then punched the hyperdrive. The stars elongated and twisted in a way I had never seen before and then suddenly we were back in normal space. A blow out showered sparks from the main control panel and alarms shrilled out in protest of the treatment of the shuttle. I clapped a hand over my mouth and forced my lunch to stay put.

"Wow!" I said when I found my voice. "You so need to teach me that trick."

"Next time, I'll talk you through it." He replied tersely.

"Bloody better not be a next time!" I started running through a systems check and looked over at Thrawn who frowned. "What? You have that look on your face."

"Did you recognise that ship?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "No, I didn't get a good look at her. Was she really cloaked? How is that possible? I thought cloaking technology on anything smaller than a dreadnought was a myth."

He drew a deep breath. "Yes, she was cloaked and she is small and manoeuvrable. She was also, I believe, Imperial in design."

"What?!" I almost exploded.

"What's our status?" He ignored my question.

I blinked at him for a few seconds but he just gave me that one eyebrow higher than the other '*answer my question*' stare. So I answered him. "Shields need time to regenerate and apart from some blown fuses we are actually in good shape. The *Sigiri* may be a milk run shuttle but she's got teeth and a hard shell. How the hell did they find us, who the hell are they and why the hell were they shooting at us if they were Imperial?"

"Those are the questions aren't they? Guess I will need to go for a little walk to find out." he said getting up.

"What?"

"Do you recall the tracker we found on the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma*?"

"How could I forget?" I asked undoing the buckles and following him out of the cockpit and through the ship as he made his way aft.

"We will need to do a hull inspection. I think that someone has pulled the same trick on us."

I sighed this explained why he had not gone into a longer hyperspace jump. If we had a homing device on our hull whoever it was would find us again no matter where we jumped to. "Then I guess it isn't you going for a spacewalk it's me."

"A'myshk'a..." He started.

I put my hand on his arm. "You are far, far better at tactical than I ever could be. It's not something I was ever trained for. If something goes wrong you can still get to the Derra System. I do the space walk; you stay here and keep me alive, that's the deal." I told him.

He made a face. "Do you even know what you are looking for?" He asked.

"Yes and the scanner I swiped...er... I mean borrowed, from the *Admonitor* will tell me how to find it." I said. I could feel him about to protest but I stopped him. "You are the more valuable of the two of us so you stay on board. Unless you got word from Lord Vader to say otherwise I am still the pilot which sort of makes me the captain and since I am not actually in the navy you don't get to outrank me which means I get final say. I walk, you stay here."

"Your logic is a little flawed, Tekari." His voice was soft as he caressed my face.

"You know I'm right." I said. "How long do you think we have?"

"Not long, the jump was incredibly short but if this is what I think it is they cannot go into hyperspace with the cloak and if they are using some sort of transport ship to carry them into hyperspace she won't be able to micro jump. They'll have to find us sublight which means I bought us two maybe three hours at the most, depending on how fast the transports sublight engines are."

"Okay, then that will have to do." I nodded.

"You checked the suits and air before we left?" There was genuine concern in his eyes.

"Yes. I always do that."

"Make sure you tether twice."

I stopped and turned to look at him. "You know, while I have never done a micro jump before, I have done this. Trust me I know how to handle myself EV."

"Then why do you look like you are going to your death?"

"EVA sometimes makes me sick but there's no time to find an antiemetic." I said tersely. "Help me get into the suit; it's good to have a second set of eyes check it. And keep your body guard away from me. I don't think he'll like it if I throw up on him."

The passageway was silent but I had the distinct impression I was being watched.

"Okay, you can come out now!" I yelled. Thrawn looked at me with a raised eyebrow. I just glared back at him. "Rukh, get out here right now! No hide and hunt games on my ship!"

There was a moment's breath then the Noghri slipped silently out from where he had been hiding almost directly beside me. He was sneaky and silent. Now that my fright had subsided I got a good look at him. He was shorter than I was but he was powerfully built. His skin was a grey colour and he was, by human standards, pretty ugly. He had a short snub nose, sharp, needle like teeth and dark eyes that held far more intelligence in them than one might first believe. We just stared at each other for a moment until Thrawn broke the silence.

"Rukh, this is Merlyn Gabriel she is Lord Vader's personal assistant. She is never to be harmed by you or your kind. You will treat her life with the same importance you would Lord Vader's. Am I understood?"

"I understand." He said in a gravelly voice. He then took my hand and sniffed at it. I didn't fight him. His clawed hands were cool to the touch. He let my hand go and stood back.

I just nodded, took the EV suit that Thrawn was handing me and began to get into it. I had to fight the sudden sense of claustrophobia that swept through me. I steadied my breathing and nodded to Thrawn who handed me the helmet. I hated suiting up, the feeling of being constricted, the sense of being confined and the strange metallic scent the oxygen always had.

With everything in place, I locked the helmet down and the flow of O<sub>2</sub> started with a dry hiss. Thrawn went over the suit carefully, checking that everything was okay.

"You're good to go." He mouthed opening the maintenance hatch that led under the passenger compartments.

"Scanner's in that box there, needs a lanyard on it." I said, my voice sounding tinny from the helmet comm. Thrawn nodded and grabbed it. He clipped the end of the lanyard to the utility belt and handed the scanner to me. I slipped it in the large pocket on my right thigh.

"Admiral, I need you in the cockpit." I said. "You," I said pointing at Rukh, "go find some quiet place to sit and stay out of trouble."

He looked at Thrawn who gave him a slight nod. "Yes, Lady Merlyn." he said dutifully and stayed exactly where he was.

"Okay I'm going out for a walk, see you both in a bit." And then I began to make my way down the ladder to the underbelly of the ship, to the external airlock. I grabbed the tether lines, clipped one end to the safety hook on the back of the suit.

The maintenance area was small and dimly lit. I walked carefully to the airlock. Opened the inner doors, watched them shut then began decompression. It took seconds, a warning light flashed and I knew that Thrawn was in the cockpit watching because my comm double clicked.

"I'm fine, just heading out now. Watch for invisible bad guys. I don't feel like getting shot to day." I told him as I began my little space walk.

"Be careful."

"Copy that." I answered then concentrated on walking with the magnetic boots out and under the hull of the ship.

Space is huge. Never endingly, overwhelmingly huge but most of the time when we are safe and sound in our space ships we never see how vast it is. We are surrounded by alloys and metals, engines and all the comforts of home and we don't generally go tromping around outside because outside is not a nice place to be, even in a really good EV suit. The thing about space is probably the hardest to get used to is the lack of gravity, the lack of up and down. While the inside of the ship has artificial gravity or gravity plating and inertial dampers to offset spin and so on, outside there is none of that and were it not for the magnetic soles on the boots I was wearing with the suit I'd be free floating, grabbing hold of the hand grabs that were placed all over the hull of the ship. No gravity meant my insides had no idea what was up or down, it was a really disconcerting sensation and incredibly disorienting.

Most commercial or private pilots avoided EV like the plague and almost never went through any sort of formal training for it. Unlike the Imperial Navy, which had simulators for this sort of thing, the only experience we ever got with zero G and space walks was when we actually had to go extra vehicular to fix something in order to get to a space port to fix the rest.



My father had made certain I had some experience with this and had taken me EV for basic training three times. The very first time I had gone EV I had thrown up in the suit. It had been a very short, very unpleasant trip and a very long lasting memory. After that I usually made sure I took an antiemetic before I went EV, then again usually time allowed for it.

I tried not to look at the stars which spun slowly, even though we had stopped engines the ship still moved and that movement was making me sick. I took deep, slow and steady breaths and concentrated on the job at hand. With the scanner active I began to walk across the underbelly of the shuttle. My stomach rolled and I gritted my teeth as a wave of nausea washed through me making my whole body cold with sweat. I fought it because throwing up in an EV suit really was terrible. It had happened to me only once but that was more than enough to know I never wanted to experience that again. My insides just didn't like zero G at all.

"Za'ar, you there?" My voice was shaky. I walked slowly from port to starboard and back in a slight zigzag, but the scanner showed nothing.

"Are you okay?"

"Just need to hear your voice." I said.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"You mean apart from the fact that I'm walking outside of my perfectly good space ship to find a tracking device that is allowing some invisible enemy to shoot at us and that the galaxy won't stay still, then nothing at all is wrong. Just talk to me, okay?" I said. "I am trying to remember where it was my father had found the tracker the last time we had had this problem."

"I cannot help you there, Tekari I was onboard at the time your father discovered it." He said.

"Maybe one of your famous best guesses then?"

I could sense Thrawn smile as he answered me. "Try near the port side wing." He said. "Internal scanners show nothing but that was the side of the ship least visible in the docking bay."

I nodded although he could not see me. "Copy that." I said starting my way back over to the port side. It was slow business. I concentrated on staring at the ship's hull and not the slow spinning stars all around me. Port-side had also been where I had to shoo away the maintenance droid. I didn't think that was a coincidence.

"So, talk to me." I prompted again.

"What do you want to hear?" he asked. His warm voice in my ear was a welcome distraction.

"Tell me about your trip as Kast." I said.

"Well I suppose now is as good a time as ever." He replied and then he began to describe in detail his adventure on Corellia while posing as a bounty hunter. His voice was soothing and it made it easier to concentrate on the job at hand and not throwing up but it was slow going. I sighed and scanned the hull. It wasn't often I got to see a ship from this perspective, looking down on it not craning to look up or worse crawling under it. Walking across a ship's hull in space with mag boots and tethers was tiring and tedious, when you are under a severe time restriction due to the threat of some invisible unknown enemy ship attacking you; well that just makes it even more fun. Searching for this tiny tracking device was like looking for a specific grain of sand in the desert.

"So, let me get this straight, the CorSec guys were father and son but they lied about it?"

"Yes. They did not trust me. I suppose they did not want that particular bond known publicly but if one looked close enough the resemblance was easy to see." He said.

I sighed, wondering why people made things so complicated. "Go on." I nudged as I trudged across the ship's hull. There was significant carbon scoring across parts of it. It was a small wonder the ship that had attacked us had not done more damage

I smiled as Thrawn continued his story about his time posing as Jodo Kast. I laughed at some of the things he was telling me and shook my head in disbelief at others.

"Did this Corran guy tell you how he knew about Chassu's works?" I interrupted in the middle of a description of Corran Horn's conversation about this artist's works.

"Sort of, although I am not so sure he was actually telling me the truth." He replied, "There was just something about him which gave me the impression he was a little better educated than most and he knew a lot more about the topic than he was letting on. Of course I am quite sure he was very surprised at my own interest in the art field."

"You sound like a match made in heaven." I commented dryly.

"Hardly." He said and continued with his story. He was half way through a description of Thyne's terrible taste in art when the scanner lit up. Right under the start of the wing join, there it sat. It was almost exactly where the maintenance droid had been fiddling with things. I would have to look into that when we got back or at least alert Thrawn to the possibility of a droid that wasn't what it seemed onboard his ship. I stood for a moment and stared at the tracking device. It was tiny and I knew I would have some issues trying to pry it off with the bulky gloves. I bent close to it and studied it for a second and then figured that the best way to get this thing off the ship's hull was not with my hands.

"I found it." I said.

"Good, try to get it off intact and get yourself back on board, the chrono is counting down."

"Copy that, now I need you to not speak for a few minutes."

My comm clicked twice and I grinned at how well he took orders from me sometimes. I squatted down as best I could in the EV suit and concentrated on my breathing, finding my center. I found that thread of the force which wound its way around everything, with that in mind I pictured the little tracking device lifting up and moving towards me. When it was safely in my glove I slipped it into one of the flap pockets on my leg. I tucked the scanner back in the other pocket and began the trip back to the airlock.

"Got it, am on my way back now." I said. I was hurrying as much as was possible in the bulky suit. That nasty sensation of all the hair on the back of my neck suddenly standing up on end was starting to worry me. I was almost at the airlock when a blast rocked the ship. If I hadn't been tethered, even with the magnetic soles of the boots I might have come off, as it was I managed to grab a hold of one of the hand bars.

"What the hell was that?" I yelled.

"Get inside now!"

"I'm trying, it's not like I can actually run in mag boots!"

"Hurry up!" He pressed.

"Not helping!" I yelled into the comm.

"I need to know the second you are in and the airlock is sealed so we can make another jump."

I rolled my eyes but hurried anyway. Another blast hit the ship and she rolled like a pregnant bantha. I swore and gritted my teeth as the galaxy around me spun violently. The airlock opened up, I unclipped the tether from the ship and I scooted inside the hatch as fast as I could, slamming the close door button hard.

"Is it cloaked as well, I couldn't see where the shots were coming from?" I asked as the small airlock re-pressurised. Another blast hit the ship.

"Cut the chatter and get inside now!" Thrawn said crossly.

"I'm in. Go!" I told him as I slipped through the inside door and shut it. The ship rocked and the engines whined. I felt *Sigiri* shudder as the hyperdrive engaged. The ship lurched forward and so did my stomach. I scrambled up the ladder to the main bay. The Noghri was waiting for me and grabbed my arm as I struggled with the last steps and hauled me up easily.

"You are safe, lady Merlyn." He said.

I nodded, afraid to open my mouth. I ripped off the helmet as fast as I could, clapped a hand over my mouth and then ran to the head, the helmet clattered on the deck as I dropped it. I made it just in time to throw up in the toilet and not all over the floor. I hated going EV. When there was nothing left in my stomach I just knelt on the floor with my head resting on my arms, listening as the toilet vac-flushed, remembering to breathe and willing my head to stop spinning. Zero-G was a lot like being very drunk without having the fun of drinking.

"Are you okay?" Thrawn asked as he offered me a cup of water.

I nodded and rinsed my mouth out with the water. "Going EV always, always makes me sick." I told him. "Usually I take something against it but that wasn't possible in this situation."

He helped me up. "Come on, we have some time. I'll make some tea that should help settle your stomach."

I got to my feet and pulled off the gloves, dug around the little pocket on my thigh and pulled out the little tracker device. He took it from my still shaking fingers and frowned. While he studied it, I washed my face and cleaned my teeth.

"The same design as the other one?" I asked struggling out of the suit when we were in the passage way and out of the tiny 'fresher.

He nodded then helped me with my battle against the EV suit and turned to head back to the main passenger area. I followed him with the suit slung over my arm. When he reached the small galley he filled the kettle with water and put it on the small stove.

"Where's Rukh?"

"I am here, Lady Merlyn." the Noghri said from the shadows of the tiny dining area, his eerie voice making me jump in surprise. I had not even seen him.

"Do you ever not sneak up on people?" I asked. Thrawn, watching this exchange, just sniggered quietly to himself making me want to shoot him.

"I am trained in stealth." Rukh answered.

"Well, maybe you could go and be stealthy someplace else?" I asked crossly, sitting down.

He just stepped back into the shadows.

"How long did you put us in hyperspace for?" I asked.

"Long enough to test a theory." Thrawn answered. He made tea, poured a cup into which he put a lot of sugar and handed it to me. "Drink." He said.

While I drank the tea gratefully, I watched as he played with the tracking device in his hand.

"You know who is doing this don't you?" I asked.

"I have some ideas." He replied. There was an edge to his voice that I had never heard before. I didn't like it.

I sighed. "Why is there no peace and quiet when I am with you?" I asked.

"We do have our moments." He said with a slight smile.

I just made a face and finished my tea.

"Feeling any better?"

I nodded.

"Right let's get back to work, shall we?" He said getting up.

"That thing still active?" I asked nodding at the little device in his hand.

"Yes."

"So, whoever is after us will find us the moment we come out of hyperspace?"

"Yes." He said.

"And they'll shoot at us again?"

"That's the idea."

I nodded. "I see." I said. "And you have a plan that won't get us killed?"

"I do."

I gave him that look that said '*uh huh*'.

He gave me that smile which said. '*A little trust, Miss Gabriel.*'

I rolled my eyes. "Lord Vader will not be happy if I bang up the shuttle, you know, he just had the paint touched up."

He gave me a tight smile that never quite reached his eyes. "Let's hope we will have a shuttle to bang up after this." He said.

I sighed as the ship came out of hyperspace and we slowed to a quarter speed with shields up. I glanced at Thrawn and checked over the instruments while he looked at the little tracker in his hand and drew a deep breath. I hoped he knew what he was doing.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"Now we wait." He said.

"Great." I muttered.

He just gave me a grin.

According to the star chart we were not that far away from where the second attack had taken place. Thrawn's ability to make these mini and micro jumps amazed me. They were often a topic for hated debate amongst pilots as a theoretical possibility and I had been involved in many such discussions but always the general consensus was that it was far too dangerous to attempt. The forces of going into and coming out of hyperspace in such tiny increments of time were thought to do more damage than was worth it. While the two micro jumps he had made had put great stress on the hull so far I saw no real damage of any sort showing up on the sensor's and the *Sigiri* had very good sensors. Micro jumps were thought to be improbable yet he managed to do it with the shuttle effortlessly.

The attack came at us from the starboard side. Laser blasts flashed brilliant in the darkness and for a moment it was all I saw. The ship rocked but the shields held. I scanned the instruments but nothing showed up on the screens.

"Swing around to port." Thrawn said. I did as he asked, wondering what he was up to since the fire had come from the Starboard side.

"What are you doing?" I asked, watching him recalibrate something in the external sensors.

"Testing a hypothesis." He told me. "If this is what I think it is then certain trace elements and residue will be emitted from the cloak, while we can't see the ship the sensors will find this residue, exhaust if you like."

The shuttle rocked violently as the cloaked ship fired on us.

"Evasive manoeuvres." Thrawn said.

"Okay but do you mind telling me how I evade something I can't see?" I asked as I swung the shuttle hard about.

"Do your best to not get us killed while I make these calibrations." He said calmly with a hint of a smile.

I made a face. "If you say so."

"The proper response to a command from a superior officer would be 'yes sir'." He teased.

"Oh... well in that case...Yes sir." I said banking us hard to starboard and looping us around in a tight circle.

"There is hope for you yet!" he told me with a smile.

"How can you be so calm at a time like this?" I asked as the last of the latest volley of fire hit us. The shields strained and the engine whined. Thrawn fired a wide strafe of fire but nothing happened.

"Is there a reason to not be calm?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know maybe because some invisible ship is trying to blow us to tiny bits and we have no way to find them? I'd say that was reason enough to not be calm."

He glanced at me and smiled. "Well then, my dear, allow me to give you something to sooth your concerns." He flipped some switches and suddenly there was a blip on my screen.

"You can see it on the read out now?" He asked.

"Yes on the display, but not when I look out the window." I told him. I banked us hard around to avoid the latest blasts to come out of nowhere. "How did you...?"

"Follow the instruments and ignore what you don't see outside." He said without giving me any explanations.

So I did what he said and followed the blip I was not what was outside, or rather not outside. Thrawn gave instructions and when we were close enough he fired on the invisible ship. I watched as the cloak began to fail and the ship slowly appeared. Thrawn fired again specifically at the engines and the ship twisted and lost power.

"That looks like a lot like some sort of weird TIE phantom copy." I said.

Thrawn nodded. "The design is similar."

The ship rocked and slowly stopped moving. I scanned her. "I read one life sign but her engines are not functional. She's dead in space."

"Hail her." He ordered.

I did as he asked but shook my head. "Whoever they are, they are not answering. There is a power spike in the hyperdrive."

"Ktah!" Thrawn swore. "Get us away from her, she's set to self destruct."

I powered the *Sigiri* away from the strange ship, watching the read out on the small screen the massive energy spike which would destroy the ship which had tried to destroy us. When she blew the explosion was surprisingly violent. The *Sigiri* rocked with the shock wave but the shields held as we were showered with debris that was much smaller than I would have expected. We waited in silence, watching as the debris scattered and slowed and everything returned to being quiet.

"That's it?" I asked after what seemed forever.

"There would have been only one ship. They would not have wasted two." Thrawn said coldly. When I looked at him I could see he was angry but I wasn't sure of the exact reason behind it.

"You care to explain this?" I asked him starting to get annoyed.

He swivelled the chair to look at me, then looked at the small tracking device in his hand. He unstrapped the harness and got up. "Get us into hyperspace; we have a rendezvous to meet." He said and left the cockpit as abruptly as he had spoken to me.

"Yes, Admiral." I answered biting my tongue from saying what was really on my mind.

He was obviously furious and I didn't need to or want to provoke him further. I was reasonably sure he'd tell me in time what had just happened and more importantly why it had happened. I took a good look around the debris field. There was nothing but unrecognizable, tiny pieces of metal. The ship had definitely had an Imperial design but it had not been like any ship I had ever seen, and I was pretty sure I'd seen them all. I set the co ordinates into our nav-computer and then began a very thorough ship wide diagnostic. While the vessel that had fired on us had not done any visible damage I wanted to be sure. I didn't really fancy the idea of blowing up in hyperspace. Once I was certain we'd be fine and we'd reached the jump point we slipped into hyperspace. If all went well we'd be in this

route for the next sixteen or so hours. I watched the rippling and shifting of light that formed the hyperspace lane for a while then set the ship on auto pilot. I was tired, I was hungry and I needed to shut my eyes for a while. Angry or not it was Thrawn's turn to stand watch and keep an eye on my ship.

I found him sitting in the dark of the galley. He had disassembled the tiny tracker and was toying with the pieces in his hands. I switched on the small blue light over the stove, then put the kettle on for tea and sat down across from him. For a long moment there was a thick silence between us then he looked at me, his eyes glowing with that eerie light they had of their own.

"You look tired." He said sounding just as weary as I felt.

I nodded. "That would be because I am." I told him.

He went back to looking at the pieces of the tracker. "I find it difficult to comprehend that someone working for the Empire would go to this much trouble to eliminate one being simply because they are alien." He said after another lengthy silence. There was a bitterness in his voice which I had not heard before. It made me sad.

"You know who it is, don't you? I mean, you know exactly who it is, not just some vague guess." I asked, getting up to make tea.

He drew a long, slow deep breath. "I believe I do." He said, "And it disgusts me."

I poured two cups of white Chaya leaf tea and sat back down. "How did you know how to find the ship?"

"I am involved in a project dealing with cloaking devices." He said. "What you saw was a prototype but it was not the same one that I have been involved in fitting with a cloaking device." He took the cup of tea gratefully and sipped at it slowly. "Cloak technology is a tricky business and we have not yet managed to get it quite right. I knew how to track the ship because I knew exactly what to look for."

"I don't understand. Why did this happen?"

"I believe that I am a threat to someone high up in the Imperial echelon. One or perhaps several members of the Emperor's elite think he is wrong to keep me in such a high position of power but their complaints about me have fallen on deaf ears as far as he is concerned. I had hoped the public disgrace we arranged would quell this but it would appear that not everyone believed it as we had hoped. I have experienced great amounts of prejudice for being non human, which was part of the reason for arranging the fall from grace. It is impossible for me to accomplish my work, my goals when I must deal with the day to day xenophobia which seems to run rampant in this galaxy."

I sighed because I did not know what to say to this. I felt guilty just by association.

Thrawn must have seen this on my face because he said. "It is not just humans that act this way, Tekari, my own people are also the same, fearing that which they do not know or understand. It is most counterproductive, but what happened here was a complete waste of Imperial resources over petty jealousy and hate based on prejudice and ambition." He sounded so angry but underneath his words I sensed a hurt that I was not sure I fully understood and there was nothing I could do to ease it.

"All these incidents are connected aren't they? The first tracker, the spice cake, now this...."

He nodded slowly. "It would appear that someone is trying to sabotage my career in the Imperial navy. At first they tried subtle means with the poisoned cake, hoping that by eliminating you while under my care I would feel Vader's wrath, then the first tracking device which I now believe did have something to do with that pirate we ran into. Only, as luck would have it, you knew something about him the people who hired him did not, which was sloppy on their part but I suspect that when the incident with the spice cake failed they had to work fast. You are a lot tougher to kill than they thought and Doctor Thracer was much better at his job than the average ship's doctor." He paused to take a

thoughtful sip of tea. "What this tells me is that someone on my own ship, of my own crew set these incidents up, now again it has to be someone on the *Admonitor*. That I cannot even trust those working on my own ship...." He shook his head in disgust. "You, my dear, are unfortunately caught in the middle of this and for that I am truly sorry."

"Who is it?"

He shook his head. "While I have my suspicions I'd rather not voice them just yet, not because I don't want to tell you but because it is better, safer for you if you don't know. When I am certain I will address this issue but I beg your patience until such time. We are investigating this but covertly, while I am sure you know more than the average person does, it is better that you be kept out of it. I don't want you becoming any more of a target than you already have been." He spoke quietly and I knew then that it wasn't just the attacks on him that had angered him but that I had also been in the line of fire. "I expect the rest of this trip will be quiet, unless the ship was damaged and you need to repair something." He pinched the bridge of his nose and then looked at me.

"The diagnostic showed all clear. I expect there are some serious blast burns on the hull but apart from that I could not find anything that requires repair or attention. The hull's integrity wasn't compromised, she's a tough little ship this. I suspect Lord Vader knew that when he assigned her for my use."

Thrawn smiled. "So you won't be spending anytime hanging upside down in the engine room?" He was teasing me.

"Not if I can help it, besides *Sigiri's* engine room is better set up than the hwk's." I told him stifling a yawn. "I really do need to sleep." I said.

"I told Rukh to take the crew cabin." He informed me.

I frowned. "My stuff was in that cabin."

He nodded. "I know. I had it moved to the one I was in. I thought that it made more sense, less work for the cleaning crew on the *Avenger*. And don't worry, the broken glass has been dealt with."

"So you assume that I want to share your bed?" I asked with a little smile.

"I don't assume, Sji'u' Tekari, I know." He said smugly. "Besides you'll have it all to yourself because I will be on watch."

I sighed and although I felt oddly disappointed by his statement I just nodded. I really was tired. "Okay." I said getting up. "Wake me up in four hours or so?"

"As you wish, although you can sleep longer if you need it. There will be no more such attacks and especially not while we are in hyperspace."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself there."

"I am."

I stared at him for a moment then nodded. I was too wrung out to even contemplate trying to argue or get into a discussion with him about how and why he was so certain.

The stateroom he had chosen was the largest of all the rooms and was the most comfortable. The crew cabin had four single bunk beds. I could see why he'd prefer this room to that one. I readied for bed and when I was done I slipped in between the covers. His scent lingered on the pillow and I found that comforting. Surprisingly enough I did not toss and turn with thoughts of the past couple of day's events racing through my mind. Sleep came swiftly and was welcome.

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After the second time Thrawn and I were parted from each other and from Coruscant I would dream of him often. I would slowly surface from sleep with the essence of his touch on my body and his voice in my mind. Always upon waking fully, only to realise that it was just a dream and he was not really there, I experienced a terrible sense of

sorrow. Now, as sleep receded and I began to wake up, I found myself once again caught in this reoccurring dream. It was so real it made me ache with longing that was painful and I fought against opening my eyes until I realised I wasn't dreaming, that the touch of fingertips on my skin was very real. I rolled over to find him lying on top of the blankets beside me, his head propped up on his arm. He was smiling.

He brushed tangled hair from my face. "And she who dances as light upon snow finally awakens."

"Finally? How long did you let me sleep for?" I mumbled, ignoring his strange poetic manner of calling me by my Dantassi name.

"It's been almost eight hours." He said. "You needed it. The last thing I want is my pilot exhausted." I frowned but before I could protest that I had only needed four hours of sleep, he added, "Especially since I plan on working her hard."

"The ship okay?" I asked wondering if we now had some sort of engine trouble I needed to deal with.

He nodded. "Everything is fine. Rukh is keeping busy practicing being stealthy, the ship is working within normal parameters and we are on schedule."

I yawned and stretched. "So... now what, you mentioned work?"

His fingertips brushed down my bare arm and then followed the curve of my waist to my hip. "I thought we could spend some time catching up." He said with a lazy smile.

Goosebumps prickled along my skin and there was a sudden flash of heat that danced through me, making me momentarily dizzy. "Catch up on what?" I was trying to think of what work he could mean. The only job I had been given was getting him to the rendezvous with the *Avenger* on time. As far as I knew I was on schedule with everything else. I was still waking up and therefore a bit slow on the uptake. He smiled at the sleepy confusion on my face then he pulled me closer to him. He shifted to lie over me, covering me, nudging my knees with his own so that I made a place to accommodate his body.

"Our covert conversational practice. We are a little behind on that." He whispered in my ear.

"Oh." I said finally getting it.

"Too much sleep makes you slow." He chuckled softly and then before I could make a sound of protest he shut me up with the easiest, fastest and most delightful method he knew. He kissed me. I didn't complain, I just followed his lead and wrapped myself around him. I had missed him, missed this physical contact. He took his time showing me just how effective his lips could be at expressing themselves without uttering a single word. We were in no hurry. It wasn't as if there was any place we could go and there was nothing in particular we needed to do.

Rediscovering the wonder of what his touch, his mouth could do to me was as much fun as my exploration of his beautiful body. He had once told me that seduction was an art form but so was this and I delighted in the lessons given and learned. We came together, pieces of a puzzle that fit perfectly, one within the other and despite the lingering shyness I still sometimes felt there was no hesitation. He slipped me out of the night clothes I had slept in and I undressed him the way I might have unwrapped a Boonta Eve gift, carefully, with utter delight and expectation of all good things. I was not disappointed.

"I hope you locked the door." I breathed in his ear as he nibbled that place on my neck which always made me crazy.

"Why?" He asked, taking delight as I shivered under his caress of fingertips that were exploring possibilities.

"I would hate for Rukh to think someone was being murdered in here." I told him. "And come bursting in at an inopportune moment."

His expression was one of amusement. "Yes, I locked the door. Yes, the ship's auto warning systems are all on and no, Rukh will not think anyone is being murdered. Now



before I have to take drastic measures to keep your oh-so inquisitive mind occupied are there any more questions?"

I grinned as my fingers traced that fine line of blue-black hair which ran from his navel to his groin. "Yes."

His smile was slow and hungry as his body responded to my touch. He couldn't find his voice so he arched his eyebrow in that *get to the point before I devour you* sort of way.

"Can we do this more than once?" I asked as sweetly as I could.

His smile widened. "I think that could be arranged, Tekari, given enough time. Though if you keep that up..." he said catching my hand in his. "I can't be held responsible for the consequences..." His voice was all warm and husky, his breath brushing against my skin. I pulled my hand free from his.

"Good, because you did say that we have some serious catching up to do!" I told him poking his chest with my finger.

"And now you understand why I wished you to be well rested." He said.

"Mmm." I just smiled and moved my body to accommodate him.

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I sat at the small table in the galley drinking tea and reading. Thrawn had sequestered himself in the cockpit to work on his current project, asking to be left alone so that he could meditate on the work at hand. He had said it was easier for him to think where he could see the stars and I had just smiled because I understood this. I had made him tea then left him to his thoughts. We were still at least forty-eight hours away from the *Avenger* and while he had worked on his plan for dealing with the Rebels and the arms smuggling that was going on, he wanted to be certain that he had all possibilities and permutations thought out. He would not speak of what he was working on and I did not ask. I was pretty certain that sooner or later I would learn of the results of this plan anyway. I didn't want to know details. I didn't hear anyone moving around me but when all the hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood on end I knew I wasn't alone any more.

"I know you're there." I told the air and a second later Rukh stepped out of whatever shadow he had been hiding in to stand beside me.

"Can't you just walk around like most normal beings, what is with all the sneaking about?" I asked without looking up at him.

"We are trained to be silent."

"Well, if you keep this up you will give me a heart attack." I told him. That wasn't strictly true since I had sensed him but I didn't really want to spend the rest of the trip wondering when he'd suddenly pop up giving me the fright of my life.

"That is not my wish." He said. "Admiral Thrawn specifically said you were to be protected and not harmed."

"Then I suggest you sneak louder." I said crossly.

"That will be difficult but I will try."

"I'd appreciate it and so would the Admiral, he's getting tired of me complaining about you scaring the sandjiggers out of me."

"May I ask you something, lady Merlyn?" Rukh asked after a moment.

I nodded. I had given up asking him to stop calling me lady Merlyn. He just did what he wanted to do no matter what I said or asked.

"You are the Admiral's bond mate." He said. It wasn't really a question.

I raised both my eyebrows in question and I was about to say something not so polite about him minding his own business but then managed to squash that impulse. In the end, considering the obvious fact that sharing a small shuttle space left no room for secrets and Rukh was not stupid, I didn't see the point in trying to fabricate some huge

story or explanation. "Well, I suppose that is one way of calling what we have, although I am not sure what I'd call it myself." I answered. Truth of the matter was I had no idea what to label the relationship I had with Thrawn.

"Do you have offspring?" He asked bluntly.

"Uh... no." I made a face and shook my head.

"But you are his mate." He pressed. "You will bear him offspring, yes?"

"Uhm... not right now, no" I said and then seeing the frown on his face added. "It's complicated." I told him. "The Empire isn't exactly happy about our uhm... relationship. Why do you ask?" I couldn't believe I was having this conversation with an alien assassin who had nearly throttled me not so long ago but then again considering my life in general it wasn't weirdest thing to have ever happened either.

"He protects you." Rukh said. "He has asked I protect you as well. He has said he is bound to you. He said...."

I interrupted him. "I get the idea, Rukh. Why are you asking this?"

"If there were offspring they too would be under my protection but for that I would need to know where they are."

"Well, there are none so you don't have to worry about that. Is that why you have been following me around like a love sick bantha, because the Admiral told you to protect me?"

"Yes, lady Merlyn."

"Rukh, we're in a shuttle in hyperspace. No one is getting onboard any time soon to do anybody any harm. You can relax." I told him. "I don't need you to bodyguard me here, so for the love of the great and almighty Sarlacc will you knock it off?"

"You did not know I was onboard and I can do great harm." He pointed out.

"Yes well, unless there are more of you hidden away that I don't know about, I think we are all safe for now. You can stop shadowing me it's unnerving."

"I am to protect you at all costs."

"Admiral Thrawn told you this? In those exact words?"

The Noghri nodded.

"Well you can stop with the 'at all costs' bit, for now we are all safe and once we get to where we are going I don't think lord Vader would be pleased if I brought you back home with me."

Frowning, Rukh thought about what I had said and decided there was a failure to communicate somewhere and gave up pressing the matter. I guessed that when it came down to whose word had more weight; it wasn't mine that had priority. Whatever Thrawn had told the Noghri warrior about our relationship I didn't want to hear it. I was already confused enough by some of the things done and said by this man who was still a mystery to me in so many ways. I was still mulling over in my head what exactly had happened on Hjal at the unmasking ceremony. Of course, I really wasn't sure I wanted to know that either, so I hadn't pushed for answers. Now I began to wonder if perhaps I should especially considering his words to me our last night together on Coruscant. "*I am already bound to you,*" he had said. "*You do not need to mark me as yours.*"

I hadn't given that much thought at the time but as his words suddenly echoed in my head, resonating with Rukh's I wondered if perhaps I might want to bring this up with him and find out exactly what he had meant. I was beginning to suspect that there had been great significance in the Dantassi ceremony, especially the part that no one had explained to me, that I had blindly said yes to but for the moment I was mostly content with the whole ignorance is bliss idea. I was brought out of my thoughts when Rukh moved slightly.

"You know, you can sit." I told him. It was a little unnerving to have him stand stone still all the time. He was very good at standing very still.

"I do not enjoy to sit." He told me.

I looked up at him then. "What do you enjoy?"

The Noghri was silent for a few moments then said. "I enjoy the Hunt." He said. "It is what I am trained for."

"How long have you been training?"

"From birth the Noghri warriors are taught the ways of battle. We train and practice daily for many hours."

"Sounds like fun." I muttered. "Well, you are really good at it and you scare the sandjiggers out of me." I told him. "Maybe I should train with you." I half joked.

"You have warrior skills?" He asked, sounding very sceptical.

I might have been insulted except I had been on the receiving end of his skill and knew exactly how good I was not. "I'm starting to wonder about that but Lord Vader sometimes teaches me in his ways of combat and I have been trained in the Bunduki arts."

"We do not use the ways of the followers of Palawa. I would be happy to teach you but the Noghri ways are not easy."

"Nothing ever is." I told him flatly. "But you jumped me like I was a brainless patch-piece doll and there wasn't anything I could do about it. I'd like to be better prepared."

The Noghri gave me what I hoped was a smile and said in that rough voice of his, "Few ever see the Noghri coming; fewer are prepared to fight us." He nodded.

"Right." I looked at him suddenly wondering when he last ate anything. "Are you hungry?"

"I have already had nourishment." He said and then before I could say or ask anything else he slipped into the dimly lit corridor and effectively vanished. I guessed the conversation was over.

I sighed and refilled my tea then spent the next hour mulling over the whole bond-mate, belonging to someone, having offspring conversation. At some point I was going to have to talk to Thrawn about this but not yet. For the moment I was just content to share his bed and bits of his life.

The rest of the trip passed easily enough, especially since no one else decided to shoot at us. When Thrawn wasn't locked away somewhere working out his brilliant plan for saving the Empire and I was not checking on the ship or learning some pretty interesting, but according to Rukh very simple and basic Noghri combat techniques, we spent our time together. Both of us knew it was limited and precious, so we made the most of it. Only when we were a couple of hours away from our rendezvous with the *Avenger* did the distance of duty and work slink back in between us. That side of him which I suspected few ever got to know, that was warm, tender and often funny, receded behind his mask of cold, calculating logic.

Thrawn withdrew to the galley and buried his thoughts in the datapad he had with him to study and finalize his plans. He had spent a great deal of time working out battle tactics for Derra IV and he needed to be sure they would work. A lot was riding on this going well. I knew better than to distract him when he was working so I left him alone.

My retreat was to the cockpit where I sat reading or watching the hyper-space lane. The last hour of the journey was filled with the usual last minute preparations and tidying. While a cleaning crew would come on board and magically make the ship spotless, I never liked it when pilots left their ship looking like a garbage scow just because someone else would do the dirty work. I also didn't want more rumours starting up so I stripped two beds in the crew cabin and the one in the stateroom we had been using.

Our arrival on the *Avenger* was quiet. There was no large honour guard waiting to meet Thrawn just the ISD's captain, a slender, nervous looking man called Loth Needa, two young looking officers and two stormtroopers. They looked a little more worried when Rukh shadowed behind the Admiral but he waved their concerns off with a brusque flap of

his hand. Thrawn and Captain Needa spoke briefly, there was a flurry of saluting and then the captain ordered the young officers and the two troopers to escort Thrawn and Rukh to quarters. I watched all this from the top of the ramp and I was the last to leave the shuttle. The Captain looked at me as I walked down the ramp with a mixture of distaste and amusement.

"Miss Gabriel, I presume." He said with that polite yet frosty manner all Imperial men seemed to have been trained to use when meeting someone they have to be respectful to despite their dislike.

"Captain Needa, it is a pleasure to meet you in person." I said cheerfully.

"Likewise, welcome on board *Avenger*." He said but he didn't mean it. "Lord Vader has sent word that he will be joining us in a day from now and that you were to be afforded every courtesy."

"Lord Vader is most considerate." I said knowing this would really confuse the captain because that description didn't do my boss any justice at all. "I take it you have accommodations for me?"

"Yes. Lord Vader requested that you be quartered close to him."

"Thank you." I said with a smile. "I have to finish the paperwork for the journey here, maybe you can send someone to show me to my room in, say, half an hour?" I was letting him off the hook because he was very uncomfortable in my presence.

He smiled. "That will be arranged." He told me then handed me a datachip. "Lord Vader's instructions were to give you this upon arrival."

"Thank you, Captain." I said taking the chip from his hand.

He gave me a curt nod then turned and left the hanger. I watched him go, looked at the datachip in my hand, sighed, then went back inside the shuttle to sort out the last bit of my work as pilot and get my things together. I was looking forward to a hot bath and some decent food. When the young aide came to fetch me I was more than ready.

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Darth Vader stood with his back to me, arms folded across his broad chest, staring out of the window. I stood at his side and watched with him. The battle of Derra IV raged about us and every now and then a small shockwave rocked the *Avenger* as a blast struck its shields. This battle was no contest, Thrawn's strategies were flawless. I had watched unseen, from the back of the briefing room, as Lord Vader had outlined the battle plans to the men who would carry the battle out on the front line. Thrawn had also been present at the briefing but had remained silent. While it was his idea no one was supposed to know that so under the Emperor's orders Lord Vader was the one tasked with presenting it. Once the briefing had been given the training for the mission began and, after several weeks of serious drills and hard work, I guessed it had all paid off. It had not been my original intent to remain on board the *Avenger* but Lord Vader had insisted. I wasn't about to question him. I was happy to be near Thrawn, who had been asked to continue to give his expertise on the battle tactics, behind the scenes. It didn't stop me from complaining about it though.

"Perhaps he fears you will get lost on board of the *Executor* and that would be embarrassing." He had teased one evening as we sat in the quiet of his quarters playing Dejarik.

"Ha very ha." I had said crossly as he beat me at the game for the fifth time in a row.

I wasn't much of an opponent. I think he just enjoyed playing against me for the smart ass running commentary or maybe it was that I teased him in between moves in way that made him lose his concentration. He accused me of using unfair tactics until I pointed out he was winning anyway.

Like mine and Lord Vader's, his quarters were in the VIP and coincidentally the most secure and quiet part of the ship. Thrawn and I were the outsiders here and we both knew it. He hid behind that mask of alien cool and I hid behind Lord Vader and the work I did for him. Under orders from Lord Vader, I stayed out of the way and mostly out of sight. The VIP area of the ship was complete with a comfortable lounge and dining area with small kitchen. My days were busy, filled with work and my free time was spent on my own or with Thrawn when he had time.

My work for Lord Vader, who was busy chasing down rebels and other Imperial problems that just didn't seem to want to go away, kept me busy. He had begun to complain a lot lately about the *Millennium Falcon*, Han Solo's ship. The last thing I had heard about Solo was his fairly dramatic escape from the docking back on Tatooine and some rumours that he had joined forces with the Rebellion. I wasn't sure what to make of that, when I had known him, Solo wasn't the most charitable guy in the galaxy. So when Lord Vader began to request information on the smuggler I was surprised to say the least especially when I needed to read the reports of Solo's actions with regards to the Rebellion's attacks. I had never figured him for the good cause kind of man and I often wondered what it was that had made him change his mind.

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The days on board the *Avenger* were mostly routine until the moment came to put Thrawn's plan into action. The ship went into battle alert and outside all hell broke loose. The *Avenger* was the ISD flagged to lead the assault and there was nothing else to do but watch. For the rebels it was a slaughter and I was grateful that I could not see details, just flashes of brilliant orange light as the ships were destroyed. I had been briefing Lord Vader on some details about a planned meeting with Prince Xizor when the battle alert alarms had sounded. Lord Vader had stormed off, presumably to watch and co ordinate from the bridge and I had been left to my own devices, deciding it was better to just stay in the small private ready room I had been using as a makeshift office. At least here I could make tea and eat the sandwiches that had been prepared for my lunch.

A couple of hours after he had vanished Lord Vader had returned. I suppose he had wanted to continue where we had left off but instead he stood beside me as I stared at the carnage going on outside. We did not speak, we didn't have to. I was both in awe and sickened at what I saw. I could feel death surround us and it wasn't a pleasant sensation. *All living things were connected in the Force*, I had once read in the small journal my birth mother had left for me and I supposed that if that were the case then when a living thing's life ended violently it left some sort of a mark, some sort of a ripple in the force. It wasn't pleasant. In fact it felt as though someone was pinching little bits of my soul apart. I didn't think it prudent to bring this up with Lord Vader though and worked hard to just breathe normally and not get upset. At some point nearing the end of battle, Thrawn joined us and along with Lord Vader and myself, waited for confirmation of what we already knew the outcome to be.

I wondered if Jyrki was among the rebels in this battle. I could not sense his life force but it would have been like him to join in something deemed impossible. A part of me hoped he was not amongst the casualties. Despite all he had done to me over the past few years I didn't want him to die although had anyone asked I would have been hard pressed to explain why.

When a comm signal eventually came through to inform Lord Vader that the battle had been successful the sense of relief in the room was palpable but there was no discernible celebration, I supposed that would be left up to the fighters who had put their

lives on the line. I didn't think there was much to celebrate though but I didn't voice this opinion out loud.

"Your plan was well conceived, Admiral." Lord Vader said to Thrawn after a lengthy silence. "This was a great victory for the Empire and it has put a severe dent in the Rebellion's numbers and weapons. Thank you for your work on this matter." It was probably the only thanks Thrawn would receive.

Thrawn gave Lord Vader a curt nod. "It is my duty to serve the Empire in every way I can." He said.

Lord Vader inclined his head slightly. Both men knew that Thrawn would never be given credit for the plan he had come up with but that did not seem to bother him too much. He had told me while we were still en route to the *Avenger* that sometimes the acknowledgment of achievement was not in his best interest. Considering the great lengths someone was going to to have him eliminated I wasn't about to argue with him. Still, a part of me felt it wasn't quite fair that he do all the work and receive none of the recognition.

"I expect we shall be recalled to Coruscant. The Emperor will wish to personally congratulate the men who have fought here today." Lord Vader said absently. "Admiral, I am sure you will wish to observe the debriefing when it occurs?" Vader said to Thrawn who nodded. Lord Vader continued. "I must communicate with my Master about how events here have transpired." He told Thrawn and then turned to me. "You may do as you please with your time until I have our orders." And then he left.

"So what did you think?" Thrawn asked me once we were alone.

"It was like watching some bizarre ballet done with space ships." I told him. "A lot of people died out there. It was difficult to watch and even harder to experience."

Thrawn looked at me, his eyebrow cocked in question.

I shrugged without looking at him. "I can't explain it, I expect it has something to do with the force but every time someone was killed it was as if I could feel it, like ripples through time and space, as if the universe were a lesser place. It was just painful. I have never been so close to anything quite like this before."

He nodded. "Battle should always be painful." He said coolly. "The moment we can watch a slaughter such as was done here today without feeling something, sorrow, remorse, or even some sort of regret for the loss of life then we become our own worst enemy."

"Your plan worked well though." I said looking up at him. His expression was hard and he remained distant from me, closed off and shrouded in the calculating air of 'otherness' he often wore.

He nodded. "The rebels are quite intelligent but they are not the military machine that is the Empire. Their pilots are often more lucky than they are skilled or well trained. A lot of people lost their lives due to inexperience." He said and then added. "However, they will most likely not make the same mistakes again."

"Doesn't it bother you that no one will know it was you who came up with this plan?" I asked.

For the first time since he had entered the room the hardness of his expression broke and he smiled at me. "Sj'iu' Tekari, you of all people should know me well enough to know by now glory and reward are not high on my list of priorities. I was asked to do a job, it is done. I see that the fruits of my labours are successful and I learned much about how these rebels fight by watching the battle at hand. What do I care if the Emperor tells the galaxy it was someone else who formulated the plans and decides to give them a medal for it? What use does a worthless piece of metal pinned to my chest have? It would change nothing." He stared out of the window and sighed.

The salvage crews were already out in the debris field collecting what ever they felt was of use to the Empire.

Thrawn continued, "I did find it interesting to note that during the briefing one of the pilots realised it was I who came up with the plan for the battle and not Lord Vader. About a quarter of the way through Vader's speech he stared at me as though some brilliant idea had suddenly gone off in his head. You could watch him put two and two together. I'd like you to find out more about him. I believe his name is Fel." He continued.

"Can't you just look up his records in the database?" I asked.

He smiled. "Of course I can and I will but you have a way of finding out things about people that are not in any official database so I am asking you to discover a bit about what sort of a man he is not just what his service record says about him."

"So you want me to spy." I said a little crossly, folding my arms across my chest. This spying thing was becoming a bad habit the men in my life kept asking me to do.

He chuckled. "Not at all, I want you to help me understand why it was that he recognised that the plan was not Vader's and whether or not I should take a personal interest in this man. There are very few Imperials who think outside of their own little world, or past their own personal glory, I am now quite curious about this Fel. I know that your methods of extracting information are far more subtle and kinder than anything the Empire could come up with so will you do as I ask?"

I made a face.

"If I say 'please'?"

I could not help the smile but added an eye roll for emphasis to tell him I wasn't happy about doing this for him. "Okay. I will see what I can learn but I am not making any promises."

He reached out and caressed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers.

"Thank you."

I nodded and we both returned to watching the salvage crew until my comm beeped and broke the silence.

"Lord Vader." I said.

He nodded absently. "Best not keep him waiting, my dear."

I left the small ready room and made my way through the halls to meet with Lord Vader as per his request. I eventually found him in his personal chambers pacing a hole in the floor. The Emperor had recalled the *Avenger* along with himself and Admiral Thrawn to return to the Core. There would be a ceremony to honour the heroes of the day, to show the might of the Empire and how it rewards those who serve it. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him how Thrawn would be rewarded for his work but I bit the comment back. Interfering where I wasn't wanted would not do anyone any good, least of all me or the Admiral.

"Are we to stay on board or return to the *Executor*?" I asked.

"We will remain with the *Avenger* for the time being and return to *Executor* after the ceremony. Why? Do you not wish to return to the Core world and see our heroes rewarded for their hard work?" There was a hint of threat in his voice.

"Yes, my lord I do, it's just that I am running out of clothes to wear." I told him also a little crossly.

He laughed. I shuddered.

"The *Avenger* is equipped with laundry facilities. You have permission to make use of them." He said smugly. "You can replenish your wardrobe on Coruscant." He added sarcastically.

I sighed. I knew all about the ship's laundry facilities and used them but was getting tired of some of my clothes being mangled and ruined as well as going missing, particularly some of my favourite pieces of lingerie. I never liked the idea of complete strangers handling my clothes, especially my underwear. I wasn't sure what happened to my missing clothes but with a crew of several thousand people, mostly male, I wasn't about to ask. I

had taken to washing my undies in the sink in my quarters instead. I was also running out of dress clothes as well. Dining with the Captain was a practice that had become more common than I would have liked. I refused citing headaches, work and other ailments as often as I could respectfully get away with but that only worked so many times.

"You will be joining the Captain's table for dinner tonight, by the way. A few of the pilots have been invited to dine with the Captain and Admiral Thrawn felt you would be a welcome addition." Lord Vader broke into my thoughts.

I smiled grimly and thought '*I'm going to have to hurt him*' because I could guess who was among the pilots I'd be eating with and why Thrawn had made this suggestion. What I actually said was, "Yes, my lord, as you wish."

Lord Vader nodded, satisfied I was being obedient and non argumentative. There was a lengthy pause as I waited to see if there was anything else. He broke it by barking at me. "Don't you have work to do, girl?" He asked. This was Vader speak for *you can stop annoying me and go away now*.

"Yes, my lord I do."

"Then I suggest you stop procrastinating and get to it." And with a brusque wave of his hand I was dismissed.

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As I had suspected the dinner was a fairly stiff affair and although the food was very good, I picked at it. While I had been conveniently seated next to Sootir Fel it was my other seat mate who tried to monopolise my attention. Eventually, I had given him a hefty force suggestion that I was dull and he would rather speak to the person seated across from him more than me. It was relief that the force persuasion had worked because I was getting tired of him staring at my cleavage the entire time he spoke to me. Sometimes being the only female at these functions was a real pain. I then turned my attention to the pilot who had peaked Thrawn's interest. He was a handsome, tall, broad shouldered man who radiated confidence and I was struck by his deep and quiet intelligence. Here was a man who was like swallow-sand, unfathomable and probably quite dangerous if stirred up enough.

I learned that he had come from an agro-combine on Corellia and had spent most of his life flying. It was the one thing that lit up his eyes when he spoke of it and when he found out that I was also a pilot and mechanic we had our common ground. We spent the rest of the dinner quietly speaking of the passion of flying and the roots which had brought us into the Empire's service. I also learned that he was married to the famous Wynssa Starflare, a very well known Holo Drama actress. This was the second thing that lit up his eyes when he spoke of it. I asked him if he found it difficult to be apart from her, to balance work with a relationship. He shrugged and replied that she was what helped him to keep going. She inspired him and reminded him of all that was good and bright in the galaxy. When I had smiled at those words he had thought that I was making fun of him. He seemed surprised when I told him 'quite the contrary'. Then I explained that I had smiled because someone had once described me in much the same way. I knew he had been slightly curious and had we known each other better he might have asked for more details but as it was he let the topic slide back to the more neutral ground of flying and ships.

As I listened to him talk about the battle he had most recently been engaged in I realised that this was a man who was fiercely loyal but something behind his words hinted that he was beginning to question how certain things were done in the Empire. It wasn't anything I could put my finger on and no one else in the room would have picked up on it but I was using all my senses to read him and something underneath what he was saying rippled. Behind his veneer of the perfect pilot he was not altogether happy. I wondered if



even he knew this because it was very faint. As I watched and listened to him I became aware that he was incredibly sensitive to subtlety. He watched people and understood the finer points of how they worked. It was an interesting talent to observe.

I was incredibly grateful when the dinner ended and I could politely make my excuses and leave. There was enough testosterone in that one room to run an entire ISD for months and I felt very out-numbered. Thrawn, who was seated at the far end of the table from me, had made a point of ignoring me all evening. Lord Vader, as was to be expected, had not been present. The fact that he could not eat without removing his mask and that his presence in general tended to put a huge damper on any social gathering were strong reasons for keeping him away. While he never said it out loud I was certain that he loathed these functions almost as much as I did and was glad of the excuse to concentrate on his own work rather than be bored to death sitting at a table full of pompous men who loved to talk about how wonderful they all were, or argue about politics, and discuss women, among other things.

The *Avenger* was well on her way to the Core and in less than a day we would be back on Coruscant for a short while. I should have gone straight to bed when I returned to my quarters but I was neither tired nor calm. Instead I was surprisingly cross but I couldn't put my finger on why. I changed into workout clothes and found one of the smaller exercise rooms. I should not have been surprised when Rukh slipped in behind me and made me jump with fright.

"Are you still following me everywhere I go?" I asked him as I closed the door.

He gave me that scary Noghri smile which gave me goose bumps but not in any good way and replied. "Admiral Thrawn felt you might wish to relieve some aggression."

"He did, did he?" I hissed through gritted teeth. That man's uncanny ability to read my mind was beginning to annoy me.

"We can continue to practice the Noghri ways; this would be a good opportunity, would it not?" Rukh asked.

I nodded. What could I say? He was right. "So...where do we start this time?" I asked and before I could even think about saying anything else I found myself flat on my back on the floor with a nasty looking knife blade at my throat. He had moved so fast I had not even sensed it, never mind seen it.

I looked up at him and grinned. "Okay, that's where we start. Teach me how to at least see you coming." And my lessons in how a Noghri could best a human at every turn began. It was going to be a long, probably painful night and I couldn't wait because anything was better than sitting alone waiting to get back to Coruscant, to the Emperor and all that dreadful palace intrigue. Learning to spar with a Noghri wasn't any less painful but it was a whole lot more fun.

## **Chapter 7**

The more time I spent away from Coruscant the less I enjoyed it when I returned so when Lord Vader informed me we would be on planet for five days I was grateful it was a

short turn around. When he told me that I was to make myself scarce this had caused me to look at him as though he had sprouted two heads.

"You're giving me time off?" I asked in surprise as we walked through the Palace halls.

"Yes, I am required by the Imperial Palace Worker's Council regulations to provide you with personal time." He told me.

"Since when have you ever cared about IPWC rules?" I asked trotting to keep up with him.

"I don't but I will not require your annoying efficiency this week as you have already prepared the schedule I requested and the rest of my time on Coruscant is spoken for." He replied testily. This last bit was Vader speak for *'The Emperor is being difficult and I need to deal with it.'*

"So... I really have five days off?" I asked just to confirm I had actually heard right.

"That is what I said the first time, girl! However, you are required to attend tonight's ceremony to honour the heroes of Derra IV and you are expected to dress appropriately not disgrace my name. I trust this will not be an issue?"

"No, my lord." I said having to bite my tongue to keep from asking him if I had ever disgraced him. I didn't want to know the answer to that. I had contacted Cati as soon as I had found out about how big this medal ceremony would be and ordered a dress made. Since she had my measurements and a pretty good idea of what sort of colours and style I liked I trusted her judgement. I arranged for the dress to be delivered to the palace office.

"I shall expect you to be available should I have need of your services but unless I summon you, you are free to do as you wish." He said. In other words I was to stay out of his and the Emperor's way. This was more than fine by me.

"Yes my lord, thank you." I said and before he could say anything else or change his mind I scurried off to find out if the dress I had ordered had been delivered and then head home before the main event. Time off was an incredible luxury for me, the last time I had taken a holiday was when I had gone home for Boonta Eve and then I had sort of been sneaky about it.

The flat was empty and quiet when I arrived so I took advantage of it by doing what I loved to do best of all, soak in a bath tub full of hot bubbly water. I was still lounging in the bath when Thrawn arrived home. He poked his head in the 'fresher to tell me if I didn't get a move on we would be late.

"Especially," He added, "knowing how long it takes you to get ready for one of these functions."

I threw the wet sponge at him but he ducked out of the way so it hit the door with a loud splat!

He was sitting waiting in the living-room, perfectly dressed in his dress uniform, switching through the HoloNet when I was almost ready. I had done my hair, my makeup and added a touch of perfume in record time but the dress presented some problems.

"Can you help me with this?" I asked walking into the living room, and turning my back on him so that he could fasten the straps.

He sat speechless for a moment and then got up. "The men who helped win the Battle of Derra IV are supposed to be the center of attention, my dear, not you."

He was right. My dress was a bit of an eye-opener Cati had created a work of art from dramassian silk and true to Cati style it had a very open back along with a fairly revealing décolletage. It was fitted through the bodice but flowed over my hips to my ankles like water, layer over layer of mist fine silk dyed the colours of sky fire. It was held together by two fine straps decorated with what Cati had called Jenn'ai-ice crystals, they had to be hooked, criss-crossed at the back of the dress and I couldn't do that by myself.

I shrugged. "Cati likes to show off."

"So do you, apparently." He remarked with a wolfish smile.

"Everything that should be covered is covered." I said defensively.

He traced a finger from the nape of my neck down my spine to where the dress finally caught up with itself. "It's not what it covers; it is what it leaves to the imagination." He murmured in my ear.

"I can't help what men think." I said, not for the first time.

"This dress will get you into trouble."

I smiled. I could sense his sudden arousal and it made me smug. "That might have been the idea." I said, leaning back into his body and his touch.

I felt him take a deep breath. The kisses he laid on my shoulder and neck did not match the words he finally found. "We shall be late if we don't leave now." He said and I couldn't argue with that. There would be time enough for play later but I turned around and kissed him passionately anyway. This teasing between us was almost a competitive sport. I grinned as he pulled himself away.

"You are a menace." He told me, placing the shawl that went with the dress over my shoulders.

I couldn't argue with that.

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We arrived together but as soon as we had entered the grand hall we separated. I was part of the general public and he would be up on the stage as part of the higher ranking military officials, paying honour to the heroes of the day.

"I shall come and find you at the reception and perhaps we can leave earlier rather than later. We do have some unfinished business to take care of, my dear." He whispered in my ear in Cheunh. I shivered despite the sudden rush of warmth I felt. I blushed and looked away shyly.

"Miss Gabriel, until later." He said in Basic giving me a smile that made his eyes twinkle. I nodded politely not wanting to add yet more fuel to the gossip fire. With a curt bob of his head he left me to my own devices. I watched for a moment as he walked away, admiring the view. He was a handsome man in excellent physical shape and he made my knees weak. I drew a deep steadying breath and then I made my way through hall to find a seat next to Ynyth and Bobbyn.

"Wow, you look fabulous!" Bobbyn exclaimed when he saw me.

"Thanks, you two don't look so bad yourselves. Where's Shiv?"

"He got called off world at the last minute, some decorating disaster on Naboo at the retreat. Don't ask, I don't know. He should be back by tomorrow. Antygra is here somewhere, but he doesn't bother with us so much anymore, mostly he tends to hang with the HR crowd." Ynyth said sounding a bit peeved. "His girlfriend works there."

I nodded and was disappointed. I had been looking forward to seeing Shiv again. Before we could chatter and catch up on the gossip the lights in the hall dimmed and the stage lighting was increased. Everyone stood when the Emperor appeared and the evening's event began.

The ceremony was long and filled with high praise from the Emperor. There were a lot of speeches which I tuned out filled with words like, 'heroic', 'great' and 'mighty'. The three men that had been picked out for their bravery and great deeds were given new ranks, and rewards such as land and new commands. I watched Soontir Fel with great interest but he was stoic in his expression and gave neither pleasure nor displeasure away. After what seemed far too long the medals were presented and the ceremony ended with thunderous applause. After the stage had been emptied the rest of us followed to the room where the reception was held.

If the Empire knew how to do anything, it was how to throw a party for its heroes. The reception was very crowded, leaving little room for mingling, let alone the wait staff who were trying to make sure that everyone had access to the potent sparkling wine and the Hors d'oeuvres. I had come in with Ynyth and Bobbyn but we got separated pretty quickly and I was on my own so I scouted the room as best I could for friendly faces. When I couldn't see anyone I opened myself up a little to the force to find Lord Vader, which was a bad idea. The next thing I knew I was in the presence of the Emperor. I curtsied low and bowed my head and put into practise some of the techniques that Lord Vader had been teaching me to keep my thoughts to myself.

He motioned for me to stand and tucked one finger under my chin to raise my face so that I was allowed to look at him. "Miss Gabriel, what a delight to see you again. I was most pleased to hear from Lord Vader that you would be in attendance this evening. I understand you witnessed the great battle for which we honour our valiant men this evening."

"Yes, your highness." I said as demurely as I could trying to hide how the memories of what had happened at Derra IV made me feel.

He gave me a toothy grin and chuckled. "You disapprove?" he asked.

"No, your highness but I found it... disquieting to watch so many die."

He nodded knowingly. "Yes, I imagine that for one such as yourself that would be a difficult thing to observe first hand." He said. "You are as compassionate as you are lovely, my dear, but you must learn to temper that. I had rather hoped that your time spent in Lord Vader's presence would help with that negative little trait of yours."

I wanted to ask him how it was that he could say that compassion was a negative thing but before I could say anything he had patted my arm and moved away, swallowed up by the crowd, surrounded by his Royal Guard. I shivered involuntarily and grabbed a glass of sparkling wine from the nearest waiter; I finished it and swiped another before the surprised young man had time to blink.

I was half way through the second glass when the leader of Intel, Ysanne Isard came to stand beside me. When her conversation began with, "I understand you are quite close with Admiral Thrawn. He a most intriguing man and I would love to learn a little more about him..." I knew it was going to be a long evening. The party went downhill from there.

After more than an hour of pretending to be cheerful, despite people's best efforts to really make me cross, I had collected a circle of unwanted admirers. My dress was attracting entirely the wrong sort of attention and I did not know how to politely tell them to bugger off and leave me the hell alone without being very rude or worse. When the fourth young man tried to make a pass at me I was on my fifth or maybe sixth glass of sparkling wine. His face contorted as I caught the hand he had placed on my behind and I pinched the pressure point hard enough to elicit a squeak of pain from him.

If Shiv had been with me he would have dragged me out of there long before it had gotten to this stage but that was not the case. I was bored, on my own, had not eaten anything since breakfast and was quite happy to drink whatever was in the glasses that kept being handed to me by stone faced waiters because that kept me from killing someone. By the time Thrawn made his way through the crowd to join me and had taken stock of the situation I was very giggly and the room was spinning.

"Miss Gabriel, there you are, Lord Vader said I might find you here." Thrawn said lightly but the tone of his voice did not match the stern look on his face as he took stock of the state I was in. It never ceased to amaze me what a high rank and a scowl could do to a crowd of eager, libidinous, young Imperial officers. I had to bite my tongue to keep from giggling loudly as they all stood smartly to attention. He did not bother to tell them to stand at ease.

"Admiral..." I began but before I had a chance to speak he had removed the glass from my hand and was in the process of ushering me away from the young men who had suddenly discovered someplace else they desperately needed to be.

"A word, if I may." He said tightly.

I just gave him a dazed look and began to complain that my drink was gone. He ignored my protests and I found myself in the subtle grip from his strong hand which guided me gently but firmly out of the reception hall. He walked me down the corridors, keeping a tight hold on me because the more I walked the more unsteady I became on my dainty but perilously high heeled shoes. How he managed to get me into the little speeder and home I had no idea. Even more of a mystery was how I had gotten out of my dress and into a pyjama top and tucked into bed without really remembering that either. All I recalled was wishing the room and the bed would stop spinning. When I woke up sometime in the small hours of the morning with the desperate desire to violently remove everything in my stomach, I wished I was dead and that I could forget about this as well.

My sudden dash out of bed woke Thrawn up. He popped his head into the fresher to see if I was okay but I force shut the door on him. I didn't need help and I didn't want him to see me like this either, especially when it was entirely my own fault. When I felt well enough to stand, wash my face, clean my teeth and then stagger back to the bedroom I found Thrawn sitting on the bed waiting with a cup of some sort of strong smelling tea. How he managed to look both sympathetic and smug at the same time was beyond me. I took the cup from his hands but I didn't think I could drink the tea, let alone keep it down. I felt like an idiot.

"Do you know, I don't recall ever seeing you that drunk before, especially never at an official function." He said calmly. "What possessed you to drink so much of that terrible wine they were serving?"

I shook my head and then wished I hadn't. "No idea." But that was a lie. Thrawn knew this, gave me that stare which said *you don't get away that easily, so tell me what I want to know or suffer the consequences* and waited.

I sighed. "Okay I was cross and bored." I told him. "Well mostly cross."

He waited some more. Leaning back against the headboard of the bed, his legs stretched out, one ankle folded over the other and his arms folded across his bare chest, a hint of a grin playing across his lips.

"Well first the Emperor cornered me and that was just unpleasant, then I had a run in with Ysanne Isard who was being particularly nasty, she kept asking questions about things I couldn't and wouldn't answer, mostly about you, oddly enough. After that I spoke with Antygra, who had also had too much to drink and was in an even worse mood and was ranting about on about something to do with how the Empire works and how one of his family was killed at Derra IV. Then I overheard someone say some very unpleasant and untrue things about you and then someone said some very inappropriate things about Lord Vader and then someone else said some incredibly inappropriate things about me. After that, I suppose, because I was on my own, the Empire's finest and randiest felt I was easy prey and that's when I kind of took matters into my own hands because it was either hold a glass and drink or kick someone's butt." I told him. "I just didn't think showing off some of my newly acquired Noghri put-you-on-your-ass moves would go down well at this reception." I took a deep breath. "I really hate these stupid functions! I hate having to play nice and be all smiles and sweetness listening to stupid men talk about their stupid conquests and it's even worse when they get all grabby, with hands on places they should not put their hands or when other women get all bitchy and sarcastic, claws and teeth, and I can't hurt them! I really, really hate being back on this stupid, single sun, freezing cold, filled to the brim with snivelling sycophants planet!" I had to stop so that I could breathe.

He stroked my hair and tried very hard not to laugh.

I sat back against the pillows and shuddered. I looked at the cup of what ever it was he had given me and made a face. My stomach was making rebellious type motions.

"Drink it, it will help." He said.

I did as he asked and was surprised to feel a little better. "What is this stuff?"

He gave me a grin. "Ancient Dantassi remedy for those who indulge a little too much the night after a successful hunt. I'd tell you what was in it but then I would have to kill you. I am sworn to secrecy."

I sighed. "Was I complete idiot?" I asked wearily.

"Not as much as you could have been but I dare say there are a few broken hearts wandering around tonight. You are actually delightfully charming when you let your guard down, even when you are cross. Perhaps I should ply you with cheap sparkling wine more often."

I made a face. "I'd be forever grateful if you wouldn't mention that stuff to me right now."

He caressed my face and ran his fingers through my hair. "Welcome back to Coruscant." He said, leaning over to plant a kiss on my head. "Now get some rest. While this tea is good, I am certain you will not be feeling so well when you get up for work tomorrow."

"Lucky me then, I have the next five days off."

"Vader gave you time off?" He asked, surprised. "What did you do, annoy him to death?"

I stuck my tongue out at him and snuggled back under the covers. The last thing I remembered was the caress of Thrawn's fingertips through my hair.

I woke up alone late the next day with a headache strong enough to kill a bantha. Bleary eyed I got out of bed slowly, moving hurt. After a lengthy stay under the shower and an analgesic patch at the base of my neck I began to feel more human, less sarlacc victim. It should not have surprised me that it was nearly one in the afternoon, but it did. I made a mental note never to drink anything fizzy or alcoholic or both ever again. The note on the kitchen counter which waited for me along with a thermal pot of secret Dantassi hang over cure was short and neatly written. It made me smile.

*Sj'iu' Tekari,*

*Drink at least two cups, I promise it will help. I shall be quite late this evening, I am afraid, as I have some lengthy meetings and strategic planning sessions to deal with. I hope that you enjoy your day. Do something fun and relax. Don't be too alarmed if Rukh sneaks up on you, he was quite put out when I told him he could not accompany me as a bodyguard to the palace. I assigned him to keep an eye on you, should you leave the flat. I imagine this task will either keep him incredibly busy or bore him to death, depending on what you decide to do with your day. Either way, he is occupied.*

*Oh and Cati left you a message asking about confirming the appointment you made while en route to the planet. I told her I appreciated her work and her reply was most amusing.*

*A'mera,*

*Za'ar*

Since I had nothing better to do, I did as his note had told me to and I drank the strange tea. It worked well enough that I could actually stomach some toast for breakfast. After an hour of sitting quietly, reading I felt mostly human again and decided it was time to get out and go shopping. I confirmed the appointment with Cati and made a mental list of all my favourite places to browse. I needed new lingerie, new casual clothes and new fancy dresses, which also meant new shoes and probably some make up. As I got ready to

leave I wondered when I had turned into the girl who cared about these things because on Tatooine that had not ever been the case. I almost never wore make up, my clothes were usually loose and practical and often covered with machine grease and hyper-drive fluid, my nails were always a mess and my hair more often than not resembled something that rats frequently nested in it. So what had changed I wondered. I came to the conclusion that probably I shouldn't ask that question as chances were I would not like the answer.

I decided to stop off at the Imperial Palace first to see if Shiv had returned but the office secretary droid told me he wasn't back yet and she didn't know when he was due in. As I was on my way out I bumped into Antygra who surprised me by apologising for being rude the night before.

"It was just that I had some bad news, well, I guess I told you that." He explained. "I should have stayed at home but my girlfriend insisted I go with her. I was not really in a celebratory mood and I took it out on you."

"I remember, you said that a relative had died in the battle? I'm really sorry to...." I started.

He held up his hand. "It's okay, I was being an ass. I'm the one who is sorry. You know how I get about all this pomp and ceremony over war. I think it is a big waste of money." He said with a shrug. "Are you going out, or just coming in to work?" he asked.

"On my way out, I have some time off so I am going shopping, want to tag along?"

He shook his head. "Can't, gotta work." He said. "Any place in particular?"

"CoCo town and then Cati's." I said.

"She's the designer who made your dress from last night?" He asked.

"Yes." I said a bit surprised that he knew this, Cati was not a well known designer, despite her amazing talent.

"Shiv's mentioned her name a few times. Do you think she'd do something for Terisse, my girlfriend?" he asked.

"I am sure she would." I said. "Her studio and store is on the south concourse, next to that pastry shop Shiv loves so much."

He nodded. "Okay, yeah I know where it is, thanks. Terisse loved your dress and wanted to know where you got it, so I said I'd ask."

I nodded, and then asked. "Say if Shiv gets in before six can you get him to comm me? I'd love to meet up for stim'caf and cake."

He gave me a smile. "Will do, he's due back around threeish I think." He said and we parted ways. So I was on my own. I drove the small speeder to the CoCo district, determined to enjoy what was left of my day.

I parked in the multiplex and decided to walk through the main shopping concourses and walkways. It had been a while since I had had my feet on a planet and it was nice to get out. I wandered in and out of the boutiques that Shiv had me hooked on, and made the mistake of popping into Bam's hair salon before my appointment with Cati. I had wanted to buy some of the wonderful conditioner he sold and instead I ended up being forced to listen to Bam's exclamations of horror at the state of my hair. This led to me being unable to argue with him and finding myself sitting in the studio being fussed over by Bam himself. Ever since the first time I had been placed under his capable hands, I was considered a 'special case.' I was never quite certain how to take this but when I saw the results Bam got, I couldn't complain. Forty minutes later my hair looked like someone else's and I had a bag full of hair-care products, enough to last at least six months. I left the hair salon promising to come back the next time I was on planet. I looked at my chrono, I still had an hour before I needed to be at Cati's so I decided to take a little detour and visit my favourite bookshop.

Bevin's Books was owned and run by a burly man called Bevin Glack. He specialised in antiques, imports, hard to find titles as well as the standard faire of current Holo-novels.

I loved his shop. It was chaotic and had a musty bookish smell which always reminded me of good things so time slipped away from me when I stepped into his shop. The store was just on the quiet side of a small walkway which was not well used. Bevin didn't go out of his way to encourage customers and he was quite particular about who he sold books too, which of course made him incredibly popular. I knew from experience that it took me five minutes to get from his shop to Cati's using a short cut if I hurried, so a few minutes of browsing would be well worth it. As usual though I spent far too long gazing through shelves of books and bought far too many. I was going to be late getting to Cati's if I didn't hurry.

I walked quickly to the short cut. I was about half way there when that weird nagging sense of something wasn't quite right started up. I stopped and looked around but saw no one following me. I reached out with my force sense but couldn't really tell anything other than someone was near. It was probably Rukh, his ability to be invisible never ceased to amaze me and despite my best efforts to find him by using the force I often failed. That was not one of my strongest gifts and it was such hard work that I rarely applied it. Thrawn had told me he had sent Rukh after me so I shrugged it off. I sighed, if it was him there wasn't much I could do about it. He was like a ghost, hard to see, impossible to catch and if I had to be brutally honest, I didn't actually mind. I decided that if Rukh wanted to waste his time trying to follow me while I was shopping that was his business and I continued on my way, turning the corner to the small ally that led to Cati's. I was about halfway there when I was jumped.

Two men. One large and powerful grabbed me from behind and held my arms behind my back in a vice like grip that hurt. The other facing me, clamped a hand over my mouth and smiled. My heart thumped painfully in my chest as I recognised my attacker.

"Hullo Mouse." Said Jyrki calmly.

I just stared at him.

"Can we talk without a fuss, I don't want to hurt yer?" he asked.

I nodded and he removed his hand from my mouth. I drew a deep breath. I should have been terrified but I wasn't, instead I was about as angry as a person could get. I didn't fight against the grip that the man holding me had. I had learned a thing or two so instead of screaming or struggling or succumbing to the fear that had frozen me when Rukh had grabbed me and that was now edging its way into my gut I concentrated on my breathing and relaxed, taking stock of what I was up against.

"That's better. Yer looking good, I take it the Empire is treating yer well." He said. He glanced at the shopping bags that had dropped by my feet.

I arched an eyebrow and didn't dignify it with an answer. "Who's your new friend?" I asked.

"Teldahn is insurance. Yer know how to fight, a little muscle doesn't hurt when it comes to ensuring yer do as yer told." He said coolly. "I seem to recall yer were never too good at that."

"How did you know here to find me?"

"Yer easy enough to track." He shrugged. "I have my ways."

"What do you want?" I asked.

He stepped back a pace from me and studied me carefully. "I want yer to get away from here. Come with me and be safe." He said.

"Be safe from what?" I asked. "I think we have established the Empire isn't going to hurt me, you on the other hand...." I tensed a little as I spoke and I felt Teldahn's grip increase. He wasn't taking any chances with me. I shifted my senses slightly to the touch the force but he was not force sensitive, his strength was purely physical.

"Yer left me no choice, Mouse." Jyrki smiled. I had forgotten how beautiful that smile could be, but behind it there was something not so pleasant. His ice blue eyes



remained cold and humourless. It was as if part of his soul had died somewhere along the line.

"So you risked everything to come and find me again?" I asked, trying to find the logic in what he was telling me and failing. Nothing Jyrki did made sense to me anymore.

"Yes. Thanks to yer I am a wanted felon. I believe there is even a decent price on my head now." He said softly. "But I can get past the security easily enough."

"Why are you really here?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"There are events set into motion that will lead to the downfall of the Empire. It will be too dangerous for yer here."

"What events?" I asked narrowing my eyes.

"Doesn't matter, yer just need to come with me, things are going to get hot for the Empire soon enough and we have plans for yer talents." He spoke with a serene calm that I found unnerving.

"I don't think so, Jyrki."

He sighed. "That is what I figured." When he withdrew something from his belt that looked a lot like a very slender stiletto knife, I frowned.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Just something to make yer more docile, last time we tried this yer were not exactly compliant until we doped yer." He said as he approached me with a smile that made me shudder. If I hadn't felt fear before, I did now.

I sighed and decided I had had enough. Time to see if all the training I had been given and the time spent with Rukh had done any good. I waited until Jyrki was close enough for me to do maximum damage to and then I moved swiftly. I pushed back using Teldahn as a brace and kicked out with both legs at the same time catching them both by surprise. I kicked Jyrki directly in the chest and sent him sprawling backwards to the ground, trying to catch his breath. The thug who held me made the mistake of leaning forward to try and hold me tighter and I smashed my head backwards as hard as I could catching him squarely on both his chin and nose. I heard him grunt in pain and I was certain the entire planet heard the crack as his nose broke and his head snapped backwards, hitting the wall. As I had hoped, the pain loosened his grip. I used two of the anzati moves I had learned from my uncle and watched in satisfaction as the man who had grabbed me slithered unconscious to the ground. He'd stay that way for hours and wake up with the worst headache of his life. For a split second I considered killing him but I had other problems to deal with.

I whipped around to see Jyrki stagger to his feet. There was a brilliant anger in his eyes. One hand clutched at his chest, the other held the knife in a tight grip.

"Nice little trick, Mouse." He acknowledged, still catching his breath. "Why don't yer ever listen and come easy?" he asked. "I only want what's best for yer."

"Ktah!" I swore. "Why don't you just get the hint and leave me the hell alone? I don't want your help. I don't want you in my life!" I told him, watching his eyes carefully. "You don't know what is best for me! You are the worst thing that ever happened to me."

He moved much faster than I had suspected he would. His moves were elegant, even with the slight limp he still had and the fight between us began. I did the best I could to avoid the knife thing he held. We were well matched. I remembered that from the fight on Rothana, he remembered as well but we had also both learned new tricks since then. Fighting with him was like fighting my own past. I was a bit surprised that no one had seen us in the small alleyway and called the local law enforcement but we were remarkably quiet and it was possible that the surveillance equipment that had been installed all over the city didn't cover the smaller alley ways. I could not remember being so angry and had to work to contain it.

This worked until he got in a lucky shot that slapped my face and set me off. I gathered my fury and channelled it into the force which augmented my strength, just as Lord Vader had often taught me. I ducked Jyrki's next blow and dropped low, catching him off guard with my foot, smashing the same knee I had the last time we had seriously faced off. It was a weak spot for him. He hissed in pain, but the knee didn't break and I wondered if he had some sort of cybernetic implant because it had felt harder than I remember bone feeling. Still, it had hurt him. He snarled at me and lunged forward. I stepped backwards to avoid him but stumbled slightly over the arm of the unconscious man on the ground. Jyrki was faster than I could recover from tripping and before I could get away and he drove the knife deep into my left shoulder.

I was so angry I didn't feel it at first. I struck out using the heel of my hand to violently connect with his face. The brutal punch sent him staggering backwards, leaving the knife still embedded in my flesh. A burning flash of pain made me look at it. At first I didn't understand what it was then I yanked it out, suddenly realising that the left side of my face and my left arm were starting to tingle. I held the knife in my hand and stared at him. He was struggling to get back up, his knee was hurting him and his nose and lips were bleeding. I took a grim satisfaction in watching him wince as he stood.

"You bastard!" I spat at him as the world was starting to slither around me in a very bad way. "I hate you." And as I said those words out loud I realised they were absolutely true. A blackness swirled around my soul and all I wanted, in that single moment, was for him to die, horribly.

He started towards me, his face distorted in a mixture of anger, pain and something else I was scared to name. A shadow moved out of the corner of my eye. I turned to look at it.

"Lady Merlyn." A sandpapery voice said near my side.

Jyrki turned to look and saw Rukh standing there. He looked at me then back again at the approaching Noghri and decided that leaving was a better idea than trying to fight the latest addition to the party. As he slipped away I heard him say. "This isn't over Mouse."

"Rukh, follow him, catch him." I tried to say but my words were slurring. It hurt to breathe.

"You are hurt." Rukh said ignoring my commands.

"It's nothing. I'm fine, you need to catch him!" I couldn't feel my legs anymore and just sort of crumpled to the ground. I looked up into Rukh's face and sighed. I stared at the knife I was holding and realised that at the tip of the blade was a tiny needle. This was a kind of assassin's blade and he had pumped me full of some sort of sedative. The knife slid out of my hand to the ground because I couldn't hold onto it any more. I couldn't feel my fingers. I looked at my shoulder which was bleeding and wondered how I was going to stop the blood because I couldn't really move my arms. I tried to swear but the words tangled on my tongue. The last thing I remember was thinking before the world went dark that Cati was going to be very cross I had not made the appointment on time.

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The world swam back into place painfully. My eyelids were pried open and a very bright light was shone into my eyes, I tried unsuccessfully to bat the light away. Slowly the blur came into focus. The medical droid ignored my attempts to hinder its examination of me. When I tried to sit up I was firmly pushed back down by someone's hand.

"Lie still!" Commanded a voice I knew all too well.

I lay back, turned my head and looked up into the red eyes which stared into mine. "Not my fault, I swear." I mumbled. I knew exactly what he was thinking by the look on his face.

Thrawn was far from happy. He drew a very deep, long breath and turned to the med-droid who had been hovering next to me. "Well?" He asked.

"She will recover, Admiral. The knife wound was a deep puncture but did not hit anything vital, I cleaned it out thoroughly. The sedative the assailant used should pass through her system in twenty-four hours and the bacta injection should prevent further problems. As far as I can discern it was not life threatening but there may be some undesirable side effects such as vomiting or headaches. She has some severe bruising and is quite dehydrated but she can go home as long as she rests and drinks plenty of fluids." The medical droid gave me one more cursory exam and then left.

Now that the droid had finished his exam, I decided to try and get up again, this time more slowly. The world was still incredibly unstable but considering the hangover I had had earlier, I thought this was liveable. Thrawn offered his hand which I took gratefully and used his strength to help steady myself. My knees felt like rubber, my shoulder ached dully and the rest of me felt as though it had been run over by a herd of angry banthas.

"Where am I?" I asked, not recognising the room I was in as anything other than a med-lab.

"CoCo district emergency clinic. I thought it best you get treatment quickly." He said.

"Oh."

"Can you walk?" He asked.

"I think so."

"Good. Let's go."

"Where is Rukh?" I asked, looking around.

"Hunting." He said between clenched teeth.

"Oh." I could only imagine who he was hunting.

"Shall we?" Thrawn asked a little more tightly.

I nodded, stood up too quickly and swore as the world swam about me. Whatever Jyrki had shoved into my system was a lot more potent than I had thought. My knees buckled but before I reached the ground Thrawn had scooped me up and carried me out of the clinic to the speeder he had waiting. He didn't wait to ask if I could stand when we reached home, he just repeated the procedure and carried me into the flat to dump me on the couch.

He sat beside me and said in a voice laced with dura-steel. "So, now I need you to tell me *exactly* what happened, *exactly* what you did after you left the flat this afternoon, every single tiny detail."

The look on his face and the set of his jaw told me he was in no mood for messing around so I told him everything as well as I could remember it with as many details as possible. He listened with a quiet fury I found even more frightening than my encounter with Jyrki. He said nothing long after I was done.

"Did they find the other one?" I asked, breaking the awful silence. "The brute Jyrki called Teldahn?"

He nodded. "He's been taken for questioning but whatever you did to him was enough to knock him out cold, never mind the jaw and the nose. It will be a while before he's able to be of any use. Intel has assured me they will take care of the interrogation personally."

I shuddered at the thought. "They're planning something." I said. "Jyrki kept hinting they were going to do something terrible, some sort of attack, maybe. He wanted to

get me away. I got the impression that he meant away from the palace, away from Coruscant. He wasn't very specific but he wasn't lying either."

Thrawn just stared at me.

"What about the knife?"

"I have that and will pass it over to the investigation team." He said then he added crossly, "Didn't you get the feeling someone was following you? Doesn't this force talent of yours give you some sort of sense of danger?"

"Yes, sometimes but it isn't my strongest talent and, to be honest, I thought it was Rukh so I didn't give it much thought. It didn't occur to me that Jyrki would actually be stupid enough to try a stunt like that in the CoCo district in broad daylight. He must have been following me but how he knew I was back on this planet, and how he knew where I was today...well that's the real question and it worries the sandjiggers out of me." I said with a frown.

Thrawn sighed and got up. "I have to return to work. Rukh's message caught me in the middle of something I very much have to deal with. I don't know how long it will take. Will you be alright on your own?"

"Yes." I lied, sounding a whole lot braver than I now felt. I started to shiver as the anger and sedative wore off to be replaced by shock and a frustration I could not seem to define. I fought back the tears in favour of the anger that still lingered.

"Really?" He asked concern edging into his voice to replace the earlier fury.

"Yes, really. I don't think he'd try twice in one day and I am sure he has no idea about this place. Even if he did...." I said. I was still lying but he didn't need to know that. He picked up the blanket from the adjacent chair and put it around my shoulders.

"I don't know what it is about you that attracts all the trouble you do but I want you to promise me that you will stay on the flat until I return." He ordered.

I nodded. Not trusting myself to open my mouth as my stomach rolled, just a little.

"Say it." He insisted. "If I come home and find you not here, you will have so much more to worry about than Jyrki Andando."

"I promise I will stay put." It was an easy promise to keep. I felt like hell, so much for a nice quiet afternoon of shopping.

He nodded, satisfied. "There needs to be an official report made and you'll have to come in and speak with whatever Intel agent is in charge of this case." He said thoughtfully. "Vader won't be pleased to hear this man has not yet been caught."

"Lord Vader is never pleased." I answered automatically.

He sighed and gave me a look which said *I don't like leaving you here alone but I don't know what to do about it.*

"I'll be fine. Stop fussing." I told him. I gave him a small slight shrug, masking how I really felt.

He smiled slightly but it never reached his eyes. "I have told Rukh to return here when he was completed his search but I have no idea when that will be. I am quite certain he will scour the entire planet given half a chance to find this pash'kja'anta. Get some rest." He told me as he planted a kiss on my head and then left.

The flat was quiet and even though I knew he had locked the doors upon leaving I double checked anyway, then went into the kitchen to make tea to try and sooth my queasy stomach. Once I had done that I reached Cati, explained the reason for missing the appointment. She had not seemed too surprised, commenting that I seemed to have a knack for trouble and that she would send over a datalogue with the new designs for me to look at.

Then I contacted my uncle. I watched as his holo image appeared. Before he could speak I said. "Zte'sa, if you don't do something about Jyrki Andando, I'll find someone who will."

There was a second of silence and then he replied. "Tell me what happened."

I took a deep breath mainly to try and quell the ever growing unquiet in my stomach and began to tell him about the attack. When I was done there was another moment of silence.

"You said he used a knife to sedate you?" He asked still trying to put together all the information I had told him in my somewhat jumbled manner.

I nodded. "It had a very long and slender blade with some sort of needle on it." I said. "I don't understand why he didn't use a hypo-spray like everyone else would. Now I have a hole in my shoulder and it hurts like hell!"

The expression on my uncle's face changed from concerned to dark and angry. "How are you feeling now?" he asked.

"Not so wonderful but the EmDee droid said I should be okay." I told him.

Wondering, as a flush of cold sweat swept down my neck and back, just how true that was.

My uncle looked sceptical but didn't say anything else.

"I need to know what to do, Zte'sa, I am getting really tired of this stuff." I said.

"How does he always find me?"

My uncle shook his head. "I don't know." He sounded incredibly sad.

"I mean we only arrived on planet yesterday, there was a huge reception last night but that's it. How did he know exactly where I would be today, this afternoon?"

"Who else knew where you were going?"

I shook my head. "No one." I said and then frowned. "Well, I told Tygs but that was like maybe an hour or two before the attack.

"Who is this Tygs, friend of yours?"

I sighed. "Antygra Zyllendel, he's one of Shiv's friends. I bumped him when I was at the palace earlier looking for my friend, Shiv. We chatted and I told him I was heading into CoCo town to go shopping. But he's the only person I spoke to, well him and Shiv's secretary droid." I shrugged. "Maybe the hallway was bugged or something." I sighed and closed my eyes for a moment as the room decided to spin and my stomach lurched threateningly. I clapped a hand over my mouth and fought the wave of sudden nausea that washed through me.

"Is everything okay, Lei'lei?" My uncle asked.

I shook my head. "Not really, the EmDee droid from the ER said there would be some side effects of the sedative and I guess I'm feeling them now. I think I have to go, Zte'sa, I think I am going to be very sick."

"Did someone recover the knife?" My uncle asked quickly.

I nodded. "The Admiral has it, I think." I nodded fighting against the rising swell of nausea. I clapped a hand over my mouth again, this time was for real.

My uncle frowned and started to say something else but I didn't hear him. Without saying goodbye or disconnecting I ran to the 'fresher, getting there just in time. For the second time in what seemed as many hours I found myself head over the toilet emptying my stomach violently. This was not a good thing.

Many hours later it was still not a good thing only I was too sick and too out of it to care. I sat in a small pathetic huddle on the 'fresher floor, shivering so much my teeth chattered. I was freezing, my head was pounding and my stomach, despite the fact there was absolutely nothing left in it, refused to stop trying to empty itself further. Every time I had tried to stand up waves of dizziness and nausea had swept through me, spots danced in front of my eyes and I relived that awful sensation of losing consciousness. The floor was the best place to be, next to the toilet was even better. I lost track of time because I kept slipping in and out of a feverish doze. On top of it all the stab wound had begun to burn and itch. If I hadn't been so out of it I might have worried more about that. Instead I just stayed put and concentrated on not retching every time I moved my head.

What was probably hours later I heard Thrawn come home and walk through the flat calling my name. It was dark and I hadn't turned any lights on before my mad dash to the 'fresher because it had still been daytime. I could hear the anger and annoyance, mixed with a hint of fear, rising in his voice with each room he explored and didn't find me in. I knew he'd eventually come into the main bathroom off the bedroom because he always showered after work. My voice was too hoarse from all the vomiting to shout for him and I felt too awful to care. The bathroom light flicked on and it hurt to open my eyes. Finally he had found me, stopping mid yell, and was at my side in a flash. His hands felt like ice against my skin and I know he was asking me questions but I couldn't follow them.

"It burns." I croaked trying to point at my shoulder.

I felt him undo my top and lift off the bandage. I heard him suck in a breath and hiss it back out again as though just looking at the wound somehow hurt him.

"Your shoulder is incredibly inflamed and you are burning up with fever. I need to get you to the Palace medical facility right now." He said.

I tried to focus on his face but he was all wobbly. "I'm so cold." I told him. "Every time I move... I get sick..." My voice was rough and my throat ached.

He vanished for a moment and returned with the thick Dantassi blanket. He wrapped that around me and then picked me up. I just closed my eyes grateful to no longer have to worry about anything because he would do that for me. Time passed the way the city outside the speeder passed, in a big blur of unrecognizable motion.

Thrawn brought me to the same facility that I had been taken to after the Rite of Tet' fight. My guess was that he had gotten the doctor, the same one who had treated me before, out of bed because at first the man had not seemed too impressed but when he saw me his annoyance turned to concern.

While his aid got me undressed and into a gown, Thrawn gave the doctor the run down on what had happened. After the doctor had finished with his physical exam of me he looked even more concerned. Blood was taken, my temperature was taken and someone began to poke about in the knife wound which was about as swollen, red and ugly looking as it was possible to get. It was incredibly painful and I yelped when they touched my arm.

"The EmDee from the ER clinic cleared her this afternoon. Claimed the sedative she'd been injected with was harmless." Thrawn said.

The doctor glanced up at him. "Probably it was and I will read the report filed for further information but this has all the earmarks of a very powerful poison. Do you still have the weapon that did this?"

"Yes, it is currently with security."

"It would be best if I could study it, there may be a chance to find out what poison, if any was used, without knowing that I can't administer the right antidote."

"Just how serious is this?" Thrawn asked quietly.

The doctor took a deep breath. "From what you have told me the knife wound was cleaned and the bacta injection administered earlier should have prevented any infection but it didn't. As far as I can tell from the preliminary exam and your information this infection is spreading very rapidly. Her fever is dangerously high and she is very dehydrated. The look of the knife wound reminds me very much of what happens when someone is stung by a venomous insect or creature, but I can't say for sure until I get the blood analysis back. We have a number of things we can try but without knowing exactly what it is we are dealing with it is difficult to know exactly what to use against it. Sometimes the cures are worse than the actual illness, especially in the case of a poison or venom. She needs to go into a bacta tank because the way her fever is spiking right now and from the look of that wound, if the bacta doesn't slow down what is happening...." He didn't finish his sentence, he didn't have to.

There was a needle prick and I felt the rush of warmth spider its way up the vein in my arm. I tried to make sense of the jumbled thoughts in my head, reaching out I caught the sleeve of Thrawn's arm and gripped at it. "He knew where I was going." I said. The latest drug in my system was beginning to make my head swim even more than it already was.

"Who knew?" Thrawn asked.

"He knew...Uncle Vahlek..." I shook my head trying to organise my words, my thoughts but it just wasn't going to happen.

"Merlyn, you are not making any sense." Thrawn said.

The doctor sighed and looked at Thrawn. "She's delirious. We've given her a sedative and something to control the fever to slow things down a bit and buy her some time but unless I find out what this is," He sighed, "You might want to notify Lord Vader and her family that she is here."

Thrawn stared at me briefly then nodded. "Do what you can for her, doctor."

The doctor looked at him. "We are Admiral. Get me that weapon or a sample of what was injected into her."

I knew this was bad and I should have been more worried about it but the part of me that cared was very far away. I watched with an eerie detachment as they began to prepare me for immersion into the bacta tank. Thrawn stood at my side, out of their way. I couldn't read the expression on his face but I knew from his body's subtle language that he was worried.

"He knew ...." I said. I wanted to say more but the words wouldn't cooperate.

He nodded. "I know, we'll find him."

I shook my head. He didn't understand what I was trying to tell him. Someone tried unclasping my pendant but I grabbed it and would not let go. I didn't want to take that off.

"No jewellery in the tank." One of the aides told me, struggling with my fingers.

"Let me." Thrawn told them and gently he pried the necklace from my hand. "I'll keep it safe until you are well enough to wear it again, I promise."

I nodded then and let it go feeling as though I were letting go of a whole lot more than just a little pendant.

Thrawn took my face between his hands and made me look at him. He spoke quietly but fiercely in Cheunh. "Fight this thing, fight it and stay alive. That is an order!" He said and then he left.

Voices and faces blurred around me. I felt as though I were freezing to death and burning in hell all at the same time. When I was tank ready someone tried to put a mask on my face so that I could breathe but I fought against them. I did not want to go into the bacta tank. I had bad memories of this procedure. Eventually they won and I lost consciousness, which was probably a good thing.

Bacta is a disgusting, viscous substance that combines alazhi and kavam bacterial particles mixed in ambori, the fluid one is dumped into when one is submerged in a bacta tank. It is like being submerged in a thin, gelatinous clear soup which closely resembles erskj, a favourite side dish of the Hutts. No one is certain why this combination of ambori and the two bacterial agents holds such astounding healing properties but one thing is for certain the galaxy would be a whole different place without it.

Until I had fought and nearly lost the Rite of Tet', a challenge to the death combat match, I had never been in a tank before. I had never needed to be treated for anything that severe. The worst that had happened to me as a kid was some hefty scrapes and bruises, a seriously broken heart and a bad bout with Tournig's fever. After my first experience with the full immersion into a tank I swore I'd never ever allow myself to be put in one again. It was a disgusting, fairly humiliating and on the whole unpleasant procedure. Disgusting because bacta smells like rotting sugar fruits on a hot day and the

smell clings to your skin for days sometimes weeks afterwards. It's humiliating because you hang in this clear tank mostly naked and you look like a dying bloated Hutt, and disgusting because the stuff gets everywhere, and I do mean everywhere, plus once you are taken out of the tank they scrape and siphon the excess bacta off your body so that it can be run through a cleaning agent and recycled. Bacta was a precious commodity and very expensive.

I had heard some spacers say that when one was in a full immersion tank one dreamed strange and amazing dreams. For me, at least with my first tank experience, that was not the case. I had been a difficult patient when it came to this particular treatment and for most of the time they had to keep me sedated or else I tried with every ounce of strength I had to fight my way out of the tank. The sensation of drowning, despite the air mask, was just too much for me to deal.

This time was a little different. This time I knew I wouldn't drown and the level of sedation was kept light, just enough to ward off that look of panic I would get in my eyes when I woke up in the tank every now and then. I was aware of what was going on, to a certain extent. I was aware of the people in the room, I could see movement but I could not make out any detail if I opened my eyes. It was like trying to peer through fog for the most part. Unless someone spoke directly into the comm-link to the tank I was in I could not hear anyone or anything. Sometimes people would talk to me via the comm but I couldn't answer them and no one expected me to. On the whole it was mostly about hanging, suspended in a stinky, sticky, gooey fluid until what ever was wrong was healed. I should have been grateful to sleep through most of it, and I would have felt this way had it not been for the terrible, haunting dreams.

I was only half awake when they took me out, cleaned off most of the goo and put me back into some sort of real clothing that didn't resemble the galaxy's ugliest underwear. I remember voices whispering and some pain but mostly I seemed to hover somewhere between total unconsciousness and being awake. I had vague recollections of Thrawn sitting by my side, his gentle fingers fastening my pendant around my neck, but these memories had a surreal dream like quality to them. When I finally did surface for real I felt as though I had been asleep for years.

I opened my eyes slowly and took stock of my surroundings. It took me a few moments to realise I was not in the medical clinic anymore. The first thing I realised was that I was home. The second thing I noticed was the painting that hung on the wall in the place where the Isono Medeglia Tatooine piece used to be was incredibly beautiful and unlike anything I had ever seen before. Sunlight poured through the bedroom window and I could hear someone moving around in the kitchen. A glance at the small chrono on Thrawn's side of the bed told me it was late in the afternoon. I got up slowly because while I felt fine, my legs still wobbled a little. I grabbed my favourite robe and wrapped it around me, then went into the kitchen.

"Lei'lei, you're up. How do you feel?" Asked my uncle when he saw me.

"Zte'sa, what are you doing here?" I asked, completely taken by surprise. He was the very last person I had been expecting to see.

"Making tea, do you feel up to drinking some?"

I nodded and watched with bewilderment as he pottered around Thrawn's kitchen as though he had lived in the flat his entire life. When he was done and had tea things on a tray he carried them, with me in tow, to the living room. I sat curled up on the couch and took the cup of tea he handed me and sipped it gratefully.

"How do you feel?" He asked me again.

"A little shaky, but otherwise surprisingly okay. What happened?" I asked. "Where's Thrawn? Why are *you* here?"



"Well, firstly, the Admiral was called off world while you were in the tank. He should be back late tomorrow evening. I am here to look after you and as for what happened," He drew a deep breath, "well that might take a few moments."

"Well, I guess I am not going anywhere." I said.

He smiled. "No, you are grounded until the Admiral gets back." He said.

"How long was I out for?" I asked.

"You spent close to three days in the bacta tank, then forty-eight hours at the clinic under observation and then the rest of the time you were here sleeping."

"It feels like weeks." I told him frowning.

He nodded. "Yes, well tank immersion has a habit of twisting time perception. Once the Doctor had the antidote to the poison you were dosed with your recovery was rapid."

"Poison? I thought the sedative Jyrki used was harmless?"

He nodded. "It was, but the blade he used to deliver the sedative was not so harmless." He said. "He used an Anzat assassin's blade called a Scha'ad'uk. These weapons are ancient, not used all that often any more so I am at a loss as to why he would have chosen it. The only thing I can think of was that he had to act fast and that it was perhaps something he had on hand. The problem was not the sedative he had chosen but the residue left in the blade's reservoir from a previous use."

I sighed. "You're telling me that all of this was an accident?"

"He was trying to abduct you not kill you, Lei'lei. If that had been the case he would not be trying to secure you with sedatives and hired help."

"What was the poison then?"

"It was a very powerful venom found in the Uspa snakes on Anzat." He said. "Once the Doctor and his team figured this out they were able to give you an antidote that worked and the turnaround in your condition was amazing. The bacta healed the secondary infection in your shoulder and helped to speed up the recovery. You slept through most of it; I suspect your own body was doing a lot of its own healing, something that might be attributed to your ability to use the Force. You have a very strong will to live but it was touch and go for a couple of hours."

I sat back against the couch and huddled with my knees tucked to my chest. My uncle refilled the cup of tea and for a moment we were silent.

"So, what are you doing here? Does papa know what happened?" I asked.

My uncle smiled at my questions. "As soon as you described the knife to me and that you were feeling so sick I suspected there might be more at stake than just a reaction to sedatives. You didn't look so well and I have seen Uspa venom at work before. I hired a ship and came straight to Coruscant; en route I got in touch with the Admiral to tell him my own suspicions. He confirmed them via comm and I was able to give them more information on the actual venom and exactly what anti toxin to use. By the time I arrived they had already sorted most of it out. After they got you out of the bacta tank Thrawn suggested to me that you might be happier recovering at home since there was nothing more that could be done at the clinic other than wait for you to wake up, which you did. After that I brought you home. He asked if I would stay to look after you because he was called off world for work and he didn't want to leave you in the care of someone he did not trust." He said. "I spoke to Kit this morning to tell him you'd be fine. He wasn't too impressed with what happened I can tell you. Thrawn had him notified of the situation when they put you in the bacta tank and he would have been here as soon as he could have but I told him to wait."

"Why?"

Uncle Vahlek gave me a smile. "Your father has some outstanding violations with Coruscant Customs. Setting foot on the planet would have been a bad idea for him. Had

your condition not improved so dramatically I would have found a way to get him on planet, but as it was ..."

I sensed a hint of something not quite true about this statement but let it slide. I didn't really want to consider the possibility of my father being arrested by the Empire. "He was worried sick though, so you might want to message him when you feel up to it." He continued.

Uncle Vahlek continued, "I understood from the Admiral that you were on holiday when this all began. He asked me to tell you that you are now on sick leave and that Vader has been made aware of the situation."

"Not much of a holiday." I said with a frown.

He nodded. "No, I suppose not."

"Did they catch Jyrki?" I asked after a long silence.

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. "Not yet."

I just sighed and huddled into myself even more and sipped my tea. Unspoken questions and issues hung in the air heavily. Jyrki was not a good subject of conversation for either of us and I was in no real mood to pursue it.

"Are you hungry?" My uncle asked after a moment.

"A little."

"Good, I'll make some food. You need to eat."

"How long will that take?" I asked.

"Depends, why?"

"I want a bath, I still stink of bacta." I told him wrinkling my nose.

"Yes, you do. I have something that will help with that." He said getting up and vanishing down the hall to the spare room. When he returned he handed me a small bottle of a violent green looking liquid.

"A few drops in the bath water and it will take away the bacta residue and smell. It's nei'tka algae from Iridonia. It works very well."

"Thanks." I said.

"I'll have food ready in about forty five minutes if that's enough time?"

I nodded and got up to head to the 'fresher off the master bedroom but before I did I turned to look at my uncle. For a moment our eyes met and a million things I wanted to say to him flashed through my brain. Instead of blurting them all out I said, "I'm glad you're here."

Before he could answer I turned away and left the living room to run my bath. I still had so many questions about what had happened but they could wait. For the moment I was content just to be home, safe and not heaving my guts up.

My uncle, despite his fierce and scary reputation, was good company. As a child I had adored him and despite our recent ups and downs that hadn't changed much. While I had made a good recovery from the snake venom I was still fairly wrung out. I read, or watched the Holonet or played Zabracki chess with him. There were questions I desperately wanted to ask him but I held back. Last time I had pestered him with personal questions it had gotten a little unpleasant and I wasn't up to fighting with him now. We talked about safe topics, mostly and steered clear of the subjects that caused friction, like what he really did for a living and Jyrki, as well as what his connection with Navaari was and where he had learned to understand Cheunh. Instead he told me stories about some of his travels and about my father when he was younger. I cherished our time together.

Thrawn came home very late. I was already in bed and asleep but the sound of his voice from the living room was enough to bring me to the surface and become aware of his presence. Sometime afterwards my uncle slipped into the bedroom and kissed me on the cheek.

"I'm heading back to Tatooine now, Lei'lei. I just wanted to say goodbye."

I know I mumbled something but I was still too asleep to make sense. I was a little more aware when Thrawn came to bed some time later and spooned himself around me. I snuggled into his warmth and went back to sleep in the security of his presence. When I woke up next morning it was already light and Thrawn was up making breakfast.

"When did you get back?" I asked stifling a yawn, stumbling into the brightly lit kitchen.

"Around four this morning local time. How are you feeling?" He asked.

"Good, going a bit space crazy. When can I go back to work?"

"In a hurry to get away from me?" He teased handing me a plate of sweet rolls and pouring me a cup of stim'caf.

"I want off this wretched planet." I told him. "It was safer in space."

That earned me a raised eyebrow. "As I recall the last time we were in space someone was shooting at us."

"They were shooting at you, I just happened to be there at the same time." I corrected him.

He smiled. "There is a shuttle due out tomorrow morning at ten to meet with the *Executor*. Vader requested that if you were fit enough he'd like you to be on it."

"Where is he at the moment anyway, do you know?"

"He returned to the *Executor* and is currently Mid Rim, I believe." He said looking at me as though there was more on his mind.

"What?" I asked as he continued to stare at me.

"How well did you know Antygra Zyllendel?" He asked.

I shook my head. "Well enough to hang around with at functions and the occasional night out with the gang but we weren't really close friends or anything. I mostly know him because of Shiv, why?"

"He was arrested this morning for treason."

I nearly choked on the sip of stim'caf. "What?"

"You had no idea did you?" Thrawn asked.

"No idea about what?"

"Antygra was part of a rebel cell that was based on Coruscant in the Imperial Palace. They are very small in number but they have been slipping information to the Rebellion for some time now."

"Tygs is a rebel?" I could not quite take all this in.

Thrawn nodded. "Intel has been watching several people for some time now but he wasn't on that list until this latest incident with Jyrki Andando."

"What does Jyrki have to do with Tygs?" I asked.

"They're related."

I narrowed my eyes. "If you tell me they're long lost twins separated at birth I'll have to hurt you."

He smiled. "Nothing quite so dramatic, they are cousins. It would seem that while Jyrki was an only child, he has a very large extended family. His mother's sister has several children, Antygra being one of them."

"How did you figure all this out?" I asked. "I thought all trace of Jyrki's family had been deleted from any records when he was admitted into the Jedi Temple."

"I didn't figure it out it was Vahlek that did with your help." He said.

"With my help? How I was clueless." I told him.

"You told him Antygra's full name which he recognised. Zyllendel was Jyrki's mother's maiden name but no one knew that, except your uncle who had known her before she was married. He thought that you being attacked by Jyrki so soon after running into Antygra was just too much of a coincidence. Turns out he was right to follow the hunch. He told me about the connection and I informed Intel immediately. It turns out that Antygra

Zyllendel was not even being looked at as a possible rebel but he was the missing link. Once they started to investigate him a great many things fell into place." Thrawn said. "He has been feeding Jyrki Andando information about you for a long time now. No wonder Jyrki's timing was always so perfect. He knew exactly where you were because his information was up to date."

"I knew Tygs was unhappy about some of the things the Emperor and the Empire have been doing, but that he turned rebel?" I should not have been surprised but I was. I could not even express what I felt that Tygs would help Jyrki do what he did to me. "Please tell me Shiv isn't involved in this somehow as well."

"He isn't. He had no idea. Intel cleared him."

"I guess I don't want to know how Intel determined that." I buried my head in my hands and let the breath I had been holding out. I didn't think I would have dealt very well with the knowledge that Shiv had done something to betray me or the Empire.

"I'm sorry, Tekari." Thrawn said gently.

I glanced up at him. "How did Tygs and Jyrki figure out that they were related? How did they meet? I mean Jyrki didn't really know much about his parents."

"Vahlek told him about his family and helped him to get in touch with them, but this was quite some time ago, long before you were part of the picture as I understand it. There's a connection between Jyrki and your uncle I haven't quite figured that out yet and Vahlek wasn't particularly forthcoming." Thrawn said. "It seems that after Jyrki found out you were working for Vader, he got in touch with his cousin. Antygra has been passing Jyrki information about you ever since. We are not sure if that is when Antygra joined or maybe even helped to form the small rebel cell in the palace but certainly it is all connected together."

I shook my head. "This doesn't make any sense at all. Why would Tygs hate the Empire so much?"

Thrawn shrugged slightly. "I don't really know yet, Intel wasn't giving that information out and even I am not privy to everything. I suspect it has been an accumulation of things over many years. People feel they are treated unfairly by the Empire, they do not like the rules and restrictions imposed upon them." He shook his head. "What we do know now is that Antygra's younger brother was one of the rebel pilots killed at Derra IV."

I shuddered. Intel had some very unpleasant ways to extract information. I knew that first hand. Part of me felt sorry for Tygs but part of me was furious. He was the reason Jyrki had been able to find me. He was also the reason that Jyrki had been able to slip in and out of the Palace so easily. Tygs's position had allowed him a lot of freedom in the Palace and access to many areas that were usually off limits. I was shocked. It would never have occurred to me that he would do anything to hurt me or anyone else. Now he had been arrested as a traitor. The implications were enormous and left me wondering just who I could really trust.

I sighed. "Do you know what the rebels were planning?" I asked. "Jyrki said the reason he wanted me off world was because they were planning something big here. What about the man Jyrki was with?"

Thrawn nodded. "Intel is investigating that and questioning Teldahn." His answer was cagey and something in his voice made me look at him carefully.

"You're not going to tell me anything else, are you?"

"I am under orders not to." He said. "Please don't push."

I nodded, "But whatever it was, they found it?"

He gave me an almost imperceptible nod but said "I am not at liberty to reveal anything in conjunction with the ongoing investigation."

I sighed and my body language told him I would accept that for now. "What about Antygra's uncle?" I asked. How does he feel about this?"

Thrawn gave me a blank look.

"Don't tell me you don't know that Admiral Harkov is Antygra's uncle." I was really surprised.

"I did not but most assuredly Intel does and is keeping the relationship quiet." Thrawn said thoughtfully. "That information is not on any official records."

"How is *that* possible?" I asked, wondering why such information would be kept hidden.

"How did *you* know?" He countered.

"Shiv told me, he said that it wasn't something Tygs wanted everyone to know because he was worried people would think he got his job at the Palace through nepotism." I said. "But I didn't think it was that big of a secret." I frowned trying to recall the conversations that had been about this topic.

Thrawn sighed. "Well, I am quite sure that Intel is aware of this and you should never mention it out loud to anyone else, even as idle palace gossip."

I nodded. "How deep does this all go?"

Thrawn was quiet for a moment. "Deep enough to be of concern, but now, thanks to you and Vahlek there was a major break in the investigation. I expect sorting the rest out will not be so difficult. Your friend Antygra was very clever. He covered his tracks extremely well but Intel has a way of getting information. Ysanne Isard has been instrumental in finding and exposing small rebel cells, but this one eluded her and her team. She was impressed by your fortitude, her words not mine, when I explained the situation that led to this discovery."

I was quiet for a moment sipping my drink. "Well," I said, "I guess I am glad some good came out of this mess. Maybe now Jyrki will leave me alone."

"I wouldn't count on that, Tekari." Thrawn said softly.

I looked up at him glumly. "Me either." I agreed unhappily.

He reached across the breakfast counter and caressed my face. "Well, he can't get to you here."

I nodded and sighed. "I hope not. I am so tired of this. I am so tired of bacta tanks and med-lab clinic beds, doctors fussing and the stink of disinfectants." I said. "I don't remember much after talking with my uncle via the 'Net, just bits and pieces. I do remember you sitting by the med-lab bed for a while. It was funny because all I could think of was 'hadn't we done this before?' It was a very odd sensation." I absently touched the pendant at my throat.

"Indeed, watching you recover in a hospital bed is getting to be a bad habit, one I am hoping we will grow out of." He said dryly.

I gave him a slight smile. "I just wanted to go shopping." I said. "I needed to see Cati."

He grinned. "Speaking of Cati, she sent a datalogue of designs over. I took the liberty of browsing through it." He said as he went to fetch it. "I am rather partial to design number seventeen." He said as he handed me the datalogue. There was a hint of teasing in his voice.

I glanced at him as I skimmed through the designs to the one he had pointed out. "Oh!" was all I could think to say when the image popped up. "I don't think I could safely wear that in public." I told him. "That dress is more likely to cause bad accidents than fetch me compliments." I told him.

His eyebrow shot up. "Who said anything about you being allowed to wear it in public?"

I glanced at the dress which was more a collection of delicate fabric scraps strategically and prettily placed than an actual dress and then changed the subject because I could feel the blush creep up my neck to my face. "So what is your plan for the day?"

He studied me for a moment, grinned then shrugged. "I have work to do but I can deal with it from here so I'll be tied up for most of the morning in my study but once that's done, I am all yours."

"All mine?"

He didn't answer but his smile did.

I leaned over the counter and gave him a light kiss on the lips which made him smile. "Then I will go have a nice long bath." I told him.

"Try not to drown." Was his smart assed reply.

"I'll do my best." And with that I vanished into the bathroom to pick out bubble bath, something that smelled like flowers not bacta.

Shiv had messaged shortly after breakfast asking if I felt well enough to go out for lunch and catch up. When I told Thrawn of my plans he had not been pleased and the discussion had rapidly gone downhill from there. Stubbornness was a trait we both had in common. I knew this was going to be a fight when he folded his arms across his chest and drew a deep breath. I had my hands on my hips and was fighting the urge to stamp my foot and scream at him.

"Absolutely not!" Thrawn said for the second time.

"What is your problem with this? Shiv wants to take me out for lunch, you have to work and I am going stir crazy. You can't keep me locked up here all day!" I countered as Thrawn and I faced off on what was starting to build into a giant argument.

"What my problem is with this is that there is a mad man running around out there trying to abduct you. Every time you have a run in with him something bad happens to you. Every time something bad happens to you I worry. I dislike that greatly because worrying about you interferes with my work. So today you stay put where I can keep an eye on you." He said. He spoke calmly but the hardness in his voice that told me he meant every single word.

I sighed. "This was supposed to be my time off and I spent most of it, through no fault of my own I might add, in the med-lab. Jyrki won't attack me now and I need to get out of this flat before I go mad. Shiv is not a threat, he's one of my best friends and I haven't seen him in ages. You are not my prison guard, please don't act like one. If you are that concerned then you can send Rukh out with me. I know you worry but you can't save me by keeping me locked up here." I said calmly hoping to appeal to his softer side. I actually didn't know where Rukh was, I had not seen him since he had intervened in the fight between Jyrki and me but I assumed Thrawn knew his whereabouts.

He pursed his lips and frowned. "If I order you to stay here you'll just sneak out anyway, won't you."

"Yes." I told him honestly. "Look, it's just lunch, I'll be with Shiv and we'll go someplace very public." I gave him my best baby-jax eyes look and knew I'd won by the disgusted look on his face which was accompanied by a deep sigh which said *why me?*

"Okay but I want you back here by three pm no later or else I will have Siavaan's ...."

He didn't get the chance to say whatever it was he wanted to say because I shut him up with a kiss. I was so relieved we were not going to fight over this and so happy to be able to get out of the house. By the time he had untangled himself from me but before he could utter another word I'd bounced off to get in touch with Shiv and tell him to come and get me.

Shiv arrived shortly before noon. I watched from the kitchen window as he parked his speeder on the landing deck. Then ran to the entrance and had the door open before he could knock.

"So this is where you have been hiding." He grinned as he engulfed me in a hug huge and held on tightly. "When I heard what had happened, I was worried sick." He said as he pushed me back to look at me.

"I'm fine, really." I told him. "Come in." I dragged him inside and closed the door behind him.

"Admiral Thrawn, it is good to see you again, sir." Shiv said as Thrawn walked into the living room. He approached Thrawn and shook the offered hand.

Thrawn gave him a genuine smile. "Likewise, Siavaan." He said. "When did you get back?"

"Yesterday evening, much later than I had hoped. There was more to deal with on Naboo at the retreat than I had anticipated. I just heard about Merlyn's accident when I returned, they told me when I went to see her in the Med-lab that you had taken her home." He said glancing at me.

Thrawn nodded. "She made a remarkable recovery. Fortunately there was only a trace amount of the venom left in the weapon used or else things might have been quite different."

There was a moment's silence all around and then Shiv broke it. "You have a beautiful home." He said, looking around him. I had forgotten he had never been here before.

"That's because I didn't decorate it." I told him before Thrawn could answer.

Shiv grinned. "I can see that." He told me. "The Admiral has exquisite taste."

Thrawn smiled and inclined his head accepting the compliment gracefully.

"And I don't?" I asked.

"When it comes to decorating, not really, no." He told me with a grin, ruffling my hair as he did so.

Thrawn watched us in amusement.

I shrugged. "My talents lie elsewhere." I told him loftily. "Can we go now?"

"Where will you be going?" Thrawn asked.

"I made reservations at *B'schu'le's*." Shiv said told him. "It's busy and very public."

"Excellent choice." Thrawn said then after a moment's pause added. "Please, bring her home in one piece. I am getting weary of visiting med-labs."

Shiv nodded. "I can understand that, it must be quite tiresome." He said. "She does have a knack for landing herself in difficult situations."

"Your talent for understatement is almost as brilliant as your eye for colour, Siavaan." Thrawn said dryly.

"Hey!" I yelled. "I'm standing right here!" Both men turned to look at me and both of them raised their left eyebrow at exactly the same time. I had to bite back a giggle.

"Well, you really are more trouble than you know!" Shiv said. Thrawn nodded in silent agreement.

I looked from one to the other. "Maybe you'd like to take each other out to lunch?"

Thrawn gave me a slight grin. "Perhaps another time I have a great deal of work to do."

I pulled my wrap across my shoulders and tugged at Shiv's sleeve. "We're leaving now!" I said giving Thrawn a look.

Shiv grinned. "Best not be late, they won't hold the reservations."

"Be careful." Thrawn said, all signs of his earlier teasing gone.

Shiv looked him in the eye and nodded. "You can count on that Admiral." He said and with that we left the flat to go and have lunch.

*B'schu'le's* was a popular diner style restaurant off the main strip in the middle of CoCo town. It had begun its life as a small diner that recreated the look and feel of a Tatooine cantina but had grown to look like an explosion of various planetary cultures. It

was known for its excellent food, which was plentiful and tasty without being too fancy or expensive and it's rather peculiar drinks menu, which changed weekly.

We were seated at a small table tucked out of the way by a window in a part of the restaurant that looked like Nubian Swamp meets Tatooine desert. It was weird and fun all at the same time. Shiv ordered drinks while we looked at the menu. Once we had ordered and the drinks arrived we got down to the business of catching up.

The first thing on Shiv's mind was Jyrki's latest attack and Antygra's arrest. He was quiet and thoughtful as I told him all that I could remember. When I was done he sat back and played with his glass. The look on his face told me nothing but I could feel how angry he was.

"You have to help me out here, kiddo, why does he do this?" He asked me after a silence that was too long.

I shrugged. "I don't really know. My uncle says it is because he loves me...but..."

"Love!?" Shiv exclaimed before I could finish my sentence. "Love?" He shook his head in disbelief. "That man, you know the one with the exquisite taste in everything, the one who did not want to let you out of his sight today, he loves you. I'd bet my life on that." He said firmly. "For the record, so do I, but I wouldn't know what to call the emotions that drive this Jyrki Andando. Obsession, perhaps, I don't really know nor do I care, but what your uncle tells you is wrong. It's not love and you shouldn't believe that." He said. "If it was love, he wouldn't be trying to hurt you, even in the name of trying to protect you."

I sighed. I was certain that Shiv was right about Jyrki, though and whatever it was that was driving him was not love, not any more. Again we were silent for a few moments and I was grateful when the food arrived.

While we ate, we spoke about Antygra.

He shook his head. "I knew he was unhappy but I had no idea he was part of the rebel cell. That was as much a surprise to me as it was to you." He said. "Intel hauled all of us in for questioning but neither Bobbyn nor Ynyth knew either. It was a big shock to us all, let me tell you. I heard that Intel now believes he was spying for several years. Bobbyn told me this morning that Antygra lost a brother in the recent battle that took place, but he was fighting for the rebel side." He looked at me. "What would make them go against the Empire that way?"

"I don't know, but I don't also don't what life was like before the Emperor came to power and my father doesn't talk a lot about those days, not like it mattered much on a planet like Tatooine. I've read some of the history books and reviewed some of the data that's available but all I can gather from that is that even before the Clone Wars the senate was a mess. The senators were bought off or pushed aside but corporations and alliances between wealthy factions. The whole reason the Clone wars even started was because a group of peoples wanted to separate from the Republic. It doesn't sound like good old times to me and at least now the system in place is stable. I know people will say that the Republic didn't enslave people but you know what, I don't see how that matters. Slavery existed anyway, even during the Republic's rule. Slavery was always huge on Tatooine and on many other planets. How does the Emperor ruling make that worse?"

Shiv shook his head. "I don't know." He said.

I played with the last of my lunch thoughtfully. "What would happen if these rebels actually were able to overthrow the government?" I asked.

"We'd be out of work." He said with a slight grin. "But I don't see how that can happen. The Empire's army is vast and incredibly well trained. It isn't as if these rebels are a huge army or even that well organised." He sighed. "What does the Admiral say to all of this?"



I sighed. "He says that we should never underestimate the underdog." I told him. "Vader feels the same way. He believes that the Emperor should take this Rebellion threat more seriously than he does."

"But we won at Derra IV, didn't we?" Shiv asked. "I thought that was a serious victory for the Empire, that it put a major dent in the arms supplies that the rebels were hoping for."

I nodded. "It was a pretty brutal defeat for the other side, but Thrawn said something like this will only strengthen their resolve. They will make heroes and martyrs out of the pilots who died and that they wouldn't make the same mistake again."

"You sound worried."

I shook my head. "No, it's not that I am worried, more like I am just trying to understand it all. I don't know what motivates them." I glanced out of the window, watching the constant movement of people and traffic.

"People are unhappy." He said. "Particularly the non human races. I hear a lot of things from the courtesans and people that work for me, as well as from the owners of the businesses, Like Bam's for example, that we deal with. It all looks shiny and peaceful on the surface but underneath..." He shrugged. "Taxes are high, there are a lot of restrictions on personal freedoms and if you are not human then life is even harder especially here on Coruscant. You and I don't feel any of this because we have a place of privilege and prestige in the Empire but for a lot of other people things don't seem so great. Not that I am recommending you do this, but were you to go down into the lower levels of this city you'd be shocked at the poverty and the crime. In some of the alien sectors there is serious overcrowding and infrastructure issues. After a while there is desire for change but how organizing a violent rebellion is going to help matters, well I don't know."

"Do you think they actually have a chance to doing serious damage to the government?"

"Oh, I doubt this Rebellion could bring down something as mighty as the Empire." Shiv said. "But they are costing the Empire money and man power."

I toyed with my drink. "On Tatooine we have a saying. *The smallest grain of sand can bring the mightiest engine to a halt.* I think it is a mistake to underestimate desperate people. I can't see them winning but I have to tell you, when I see how persistent Jyrki is, see how sneaky and clever Antygra was." I shrugged. "I have to wonder if perhaps these threats should be considered serious. A tiny part of me worries more than maybe it should, and that's not good."

"I hope that you are wrong." He said quietly. "But when people I thought I knew and trusted turn out to be rebel sympathisers and spies, well I start to question things as well."

I nodded. It was one thing for this rebellion to involve people we did not know or have much of a personal connection to but when people we considered friends switched sides and betrayed us, well that was a whole other game. We were quiet for a moment while the waitress removed the empty plates took the desert order.

"So, what about you? Are you are okay now?" Shiv asked switching the topic back to me.

I nodded. "Yeah, still a little tired but I'm fine. Like the Admiral said, it was just a trace amount of venom and the antidote worked quickly. I return to the Executor tomorrow and I am glad, truth be told. I feel a whole lot safer working in close proximity to Lord Vader than I do down here on this planet." I absently touched my shoulder where I had been stabbed. "The bright side is that I don't even have a scar this time."

Shiv shook his head. "You have the worst luck."

"You think so? I'd say the exact opposite was true." I told him. "I think I am incredibly lucky to still be alive."

He gave me a smile but his eyes told me something else was on his mind. Dessert arrived and so did my tea. He sighed and fiddled with his glass.

"What's bugging you, Shiv?" I asked. "You're fidgety and you only get like that when you want to tell me something you don't think I want to hear, so out with it." I was half expecting a lecture about my living with Thrawn, or maybe the birth control lecture, or worse the 'you don't write enough' lecture... even though we'd been over these topics a few times already.

He toyed with his fork for a moment and sighed. "I have some information for you. Actually it's the reason I was late getting back from Naboo, but it's really going to tick you off."

"Oh?"

"I found out who was behind the attempt to kill you when you were on board the Vengeance. Who it was that actually planned the whole glow spice laced cake and you are not going to be happy when I tell you who it was." He said quietly. "And you really won't be happy when I tell you why it was done."

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I waved to Shiv and watched as he drove off. It was much later than three but I didn't think that Thrawn would really mind. The flat was quiet when I went inside and the door to Thrawn's study was closed. I knew he was working so I didn't disturb him even though part of me desperately wanted to. Instead I went into the master 'fresher and ran a bath. I poured the most expensive bubble bath I had into it and then went into the kitchen to get a glass of wine.

As I undressed I could not help think about but what Shiv had told me but I didn't know how to react. It was overwhelming and it made me unbelievably angry but it also made me incredibly sad. The water was a tad hotter than was comfortable and I slid slowly into the sea of foamy bubbles with a great deal of care. Usually the bathtub was one of the few places I felt safe and relaxed but at this moment it didn't make me feel better it just enhanced the sorrow that was already overwhelming me. I took a big gulp of my wine and hiccupped.

The last few days had been stressful and unpleasant. I was getting fed up of this treatment at the hands of a man I had once looked up to and loved. I was getting tired of being hunted, of being hurt. Now I had learned that it was not just Jyrki trying to do me harm but someone who I knew fairly well, someone who I should have at least been able to trust not to do me serious harm. As the information Shiv had passed on to me slowly sank in I realised that no matter where I was it seemed that there would always be someone wishing to hurt me, even within the upper echelon of the Empire. I sat, my knees drawn tight to my chest, my forehead resting on my arms and allowed the tears I had been holding at bay to finally escape. For the first time since Jyrki's latest attack I wept bitterly and this was how Thrawn found me.

"A'myshk'a?" He asked as he knocked once on the door and came in.

The late afternoon's light was slowly fading into dusk and at first he didn't see the tears on my face. When I did not look at him he crouched by the side of the bath tub and reached over, tucking two fingers under my chin, to bring my head up to look at him.

"What is wrong?" He asked.

I pulled my head away from him, shook my head and gulped back the desire to just burst into more tears. I had had enough of crying, especially around him.

He frowned. "I didn't hear you come in. Why didn't you come to me and tell me you were home?" He asked. When I didn't answer him, he pressed. "Sj'iu' Tekari, what is the matter?"

I wiped the tears from my face angrily and with a deep breath to steady my voice I replied. "Your door was closed." I told him looking up at him. "I didn't want to disturb you while you were working."

He sighed one of those deep sighs that seemed to come from the bottom of his soul, as though he carried a huge weight and I had just made it heavier. "A'myshk'a, I know you think there is this gap, this distance between us, and that you have to respect my privacy but I am not certain why. You need to know that for you my door is always open, no matter what."

I just looked up at Thrawn his eyes glowed softly in the fading light.

"Did something happen at lunch with Siavaan?" he asked when I didn't say anything. "Talk to me."

I sighed, rested my chin on my knees. "You know, the last few days have not exactly been the greatest holiday I have ever had. I got cornered and ambushed at the medal event, so I drank too much, got a dreadful hang-over and was as sick as a drunken dewback, then when I finally felt well enough to go shopping I was attacked, stabbed, sedated by some guy I once called the love of my life. I was then dragged through hell and back due to being inadvertently poisoned by the deadliest snake venom the Anzati assassins can use, dumped in a bacta tank for over twenty hours and subjected to all the embarrassment that entails. Now, I just went out to lunch with my best friend only to find out that the man who has been trying to get me into his bed for the past two years is the same man who tried to murder me in order to disgrace you. So not only do I have to worry about Jyrki trying his best to do his worst but I also have to watch my back against the very people with whom I am supposed to work with and for, as well as trust." The last words hiccupped as I fought against the shake in my voice.

Thrawn stroked the damp hair from my face and said nothing but the hiss breath he let out from between clenched teeth told me a lot.

"You knew, didn't you?" I said quietly.

He stayed very quiet.

"Were you ever going to discuss this with me?" I asked. "You maybe want to tell me why Demetrius Zaarin tried to kill me? You want to tell me what he has against you?" I asked.

"I don't think that this is a very good time to do so, Tekari."

I frowned at him. "Why not?"

His head cocked to one side. "Because you are sitting in the bath, naked and you are crying. You have me at a distinct disadvantage." He said gently. "Even if I wanted to I could not concentrate properly on the discussion at hand, you in this state is most unsettling. I think if we are to talk about this it will not be in this room with me crouching uncomfortably on the floor beside the bathtub and you should be wearing some clothes not barely covered by bubbles. That alone is distraction enough, never mind the tears which despite my best attempts to ignore still illicit a very disturbing need to comfort you and make everything better." He said standing up and fetching me a towel.

He waited in the living room while I dried off and dressed. I slipped into my favourite pyjama top and robe and went to join him on the couch.

He curled his arm around me and pulled me close, kissing me on the forehead. "How did you find out?"

"Shiv told me." I said.

He nodded. "How did he learn of this?"

"One of his courtesans spoke to him about it. She was Zaarin's favoured companion and apparently he was drunk and boasted about it after the medal ceremony. Shiv told me that apparently, according to the courtesan, Zaarin had said you were the bane of his

existence and he would stop at nothing to rid the galaxy of the alien spawn that has fooled everyone into thinking he is better than everyone else, including the Emperor."

Thrawn's jaw tightened and he sighed. "I suspected he might have had a hand in the glow spice laced cake but I did not know for certain. He covers his tracks amazingly well. I knew that he was behind the most recent attack on me because he was the only one who would have access to that technology. He is in charge of the cloaking technology project but I have a great deal of input into it." He said tiredly. "He is very intelligent, in some areas even more so than me and he is jealous that I have a say in some of his work. While for the most part he has masked his dislike of me and the fact that I am not human well in public, in private he has spoken vehemently against me. The fact that I have the Emperor's ear bothers him greatly. He desires power and feels I stand in his way."

I made a face. "I guess lord Vader would get tetchy if I killed Zaarin." I said.

Thrawn looked at me. "I would get tetchy, as you say, if you did that." He said sternly. "I would prefer you leave that nasty little job up to someone else and trust me, my dear, when the time is right that will happen but first we must allow Zaarin enough rope to hang himself by."

It was my turn to look at him in question.

He continued. "Zaarin is power hungry and he believes that the Emperor is not the right person to rule this galaxy. The man is just biding his time before he does something rash. While he is very intelligent he does not always see the implications of his actions and he does not always think or plan ahead. He will eventually over step his bounds and then we can act without fearing the wrath of the other Grand Admirals or making Zaarin into some sort of martyr. I would be very grateful if you would stay out of his way and never give an inkling of what you know to him. Should he suspect that you are aware of his part in what has happened he will no doubt try to rid himself of you. I would prefer that did not happen, I am quite fond of you, you know." He ran his fingers through my hair.

I sighed and nestled against his body. "Then I will do my best to stay away from him." I said. I didn't think that would be too difficult. "But why does he hate you so much?"

Thrawn shrugged. "Who knows?" He replied. "There must be hundreds of reasons for a man such as him to dislike one such as me, aside from the very obvious." He paused for a moment. "I suspect he sees me as a threat. I have the Emperor's ear and to a certain extent his respect. I rose through the Imperial ranks swiftly, was inducted into the Canted Circle, and as well was given charge of many important projects. I am in his way and he feels that without me to compete with he will gain more power. The Emperor allows these petty squabbles to run through his court and his military because he feels these minor conflicts help to strengthen an individual's desire to stay alive and work harder to curry his own favour. I personally find it all terribly counterproductive, however I play the games because they are a means to an end." He looked at me. "I also have my own agenda and long term goals I wish to accomplish, there is much to do to prepare for the future. I would very much hope that you are a part of this future so stay out of Zaarin's way."

I gave him a small smile and we were quiet for a while then I asked. "So are you done with work for now?"

He nodded. "Yes, why?"

"Just asking."

"Well at some point I will make supper and then I wanted to watch the holo-news but after that I had nothing specific in mind." He said. "Was there something you wanted to do this evening?"

"I think I'm doing it." I told him as I snuggled closer into his warmth.

This earned me one of his rare, brilliant smiles and another kiss on the top of my head. "Well, we do have to leave early tomorrow." He reminded me.

"We? You'll be flying with me?"

He nodded. "Yes, Lord Vader has requested my presence for a brief face to face meeting on board the *Executor*; I told him I would be accompanying you to deliver you safely. He found that very amusing. But yes, we will both be flying out tomorrow with the transport ship. I fully expect it will be a long, dull trip and we will not be alone. Once my meetings are done I hope to be heading back to the *Admonitor* with a new rotation of stormtroopers."

"Will you tell him what happened while we were en route to the *Avenger*?" I asked.

He drew a deep breath. "I am debating the merits of that action. I think for the moment it would be best if we did not mention it. There is no proof of who was behind the attack and perhaps it would work to my advantage if it were thought that the experiment failed, that we did not experience anything unusual."

I was quiet for a moment then I nodded. "Okay, but if Lord Vader asks about it at all I won't lie to him."

Thrawn smiled. "I would not expect you to."

I made a face at him and then sighed. "What a rotten week this has been. I didn't get anything done that I wanted to." I said. "I didn't even get to buy new underwear!" He laughed. I punched him on the arm. "It's not funny! I need new clothes and I lost the books and stuff I bought when Jyrki jumped me. I'm really cross about that!"

"I know you are, Tekari." He said getting up. "Are you hungry at all?"

"A little, I didn't eat a lot at lunch. I mostly pushed it around the plate."

He nodded. "How does some ke'tahl and djaari sound?"

That made me smile. "Oh, wonderful!"

"Then you can help prepare the jaari potatoes." He said.

I loved ke'tahl and djaari, a Dantassi dish. Ke'tahl was a sort of creamy, spicy soup and djaari were small cakes of fried jaari potatoes which were sweet. It was one of the dishes that I had eaten on Hjal which I had really enjoyed. Thrawn had surprised me one day by making it for me, remembering that I had loved it the very first time I had ever tried it.

I followed him to the kitchen and took my usual place sitting on the kitchen stool by the counter watching him cook. Like everything else he did, he excelled at cooking and he really enjoyed it.

"Tea?" He asked beginning to make it before I had even answered.

"When you go back to the Unknown Regions, what will you do?" I asked.

"Continue to establish a foothold in the region and create bases to further the Imperial presence in the galaxy." He said as he poured tea into two cups.

"What about the base on Nirauan?" I asked.

He smiled. "That will be the alpha base. It is well fortified and we continue to strengthen it and grow." He gave me a peeler and a bowl full of jaari potatoes. "It is my hope that at some point I can convince some of my own people to join us. The Chiss, while not being overly friendly would be a valuable ally."

"Do you think that your people would be willing to do this? I thought that they had exiled you?"

"Indeed they had but not all of my people, not all of those who served under me agreed with this punishment. There are many who remain loyal to me despite my supposed disgrace." He said as he prepared the base for the soup.

"You seem to be falling from grace where ever you go." I teased him.

He nodded. "Yes, rather like your ending up in a hospital bed, it is a bad habit of mine." He added all the soup ingredients and began to stir the pot slowly. "It is a means to an end, nothing more, a ruse of mine to create an illusion for others."

"The Emperor exiled you, banishing you from his court but you were in attendance at the medal ceremony. Doesn't that tell people you are not really in disgrace?" I asked as I shaped the small cakes from the grated potato goo I had mixed.

"What that said was that whatever it was I was doing in the Unknown Regions was unimportant enough to be interrupted for a medal ceremony. It gave the impression that my assignment is low on the list of vital Imperial operations." He replied, taking the small potato cakes and setting them in the frying pan.

I shook my head. "That is really crazy thinking, you know?"

He grinned. "Yes. I do know."

"No wonder I lose at chess to you." I said with a sigh. "There's no way I could think like that."

He laughed. "You lose at chess with me because you spend far too much time trying to distract me with your feminine wiles."

"I like watching you work under pressure." I told him with a grin. "And I rather like the results I get when you realise that resistance is futile. Anyway I usually win at the best part of the game in the end."

His smile was warm. "Perhaps after supper we could have a rematch?"

"Gosh, I don't know, the last few days have been such a strain, I'm not sure that I could..." I started but he shut me up with a sudden, passionate kiss and then broke it off abruptly to continue cooking.

"You were saying?" He asked smugly.

"Well... uhm...since you put it that way...." I gasped. I was glad I was seated because his kiss could still make my knees wobble.

"I thought you might see it my way." He said with a grin. "Go set the table, supper is almost ready."

After we had eaten and the dishes were taken care of, we ended up back on the couch watching the HoloNet. After an hour of news which was mostly dull I decided that we should bypass that whole chess playing thing and get to the real fun.

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Dim light from the city outside filtered through the gauzy white curtains of the bedroom and cast odd shadows all around. Thrawn's flat was high enough up that there was no steady stream of traffic to disturb our sleep, especially this late into the night. This would have been great if I could have slept but instead I lay awake, half sprawled over Thrawn's body, stroking up and down his bare chest idly with my fingertips, my head resting on that hollow of his shoulder. I should have been exhausted enough to go out like a light but instead my mind buzzed and sleep eluded me which meant he wasn't getting any rest either.

"If you think any harder, Tekari, your brain will explode." Thrawn said, eventually breaking the silence.

"Sorry. I should be really tired but I'm not."

"I see I need to work you harder then." He teased.

I glanced up at him. "Why can't we just stay like this forever?" I asked. It was a stupid thing to say and I already knew the answer but for this small pocket of time, in his arms, in his bed I felt safe and whole. I didn't want it to end; I wanted this precious little moment in time to last an eternity.

"Well, for one thing, sooner or later one of us would have to get up to use the 'fresher." He replied.

I poked his chest. "You know what I mean."

"I do. Just as I also know that you are well aware of the answer to your question." He said gently. "But that does not mean I do not understand the sentiment." He paused. "These quiet moments between us are pockets of serenity in a time of great turbulence. I also treasure them."

I sighed. Marvelling, as I caressed him, at how my creamy white skin contrasted with the colour of his own. It reminded me of clouds and sky. We were so different and yet here we were together, compatible and mostly content.

"What's on your mind, aside from the obvious?" He asked when I said nothing further.

"Demetrius Zaarin."

He laughed. "Were I a jealous man that would probably bother me. Here you are, in my bed and you have another man on your mind."

I pinched him and was satisfied with the yelp I received. "Not funny." I told him.

"Yes it is." He countered. "You over-think the strangest things."

"Why is that strange? He tried to kill me, for no good reason. Then he tried to date me. You don't find that a bit weird?"

He shrugged a little. "You are a beautiful, bright young woman, which is why he pursues you but when he pulled that stunt with the cake he did not really know who you were. Once he figured out your place in the grand scheme of things he decided to make a play for you. He didn't know, I suspect, that you were already involved with someone and when he did find that out, and discovered with whom you were involved I imagine he was doubly annoyed. As I told you before, he is a man who does not like to hear the word no, especially from the mouth of a young woman he would have considered easy prey. That you chose me to consort with would only have added to his reasons to loath me and chase you. He feels I take away from him that which should be his by right of rank, although it is probably lucky for him that you do not like him very much." He glanced at me as I made a face.

He smiled. "I know just how tough and difficult you can be but he has no idea. I imagine that had he tangled with you, he would have been in for a very nasty surprise and that could have been ugly all around. While you sometimes dress like a pretty piece of palace fluff you are anything but. Even Lord Vader has commented on that."

"Oh?" I twisted my head upwards to look him in the eyes.

He was grinning. "Yes, indeed. He has mentioned on more than one occasion your propensity for surviving difficult situations, mouthing off when you should probably stay quiet and your apparent fearlessness of his temper. I think he rather admires your boldness. It's probably a relief to him that you do not quake in your shoes when he is nearby and I am quite certain he secretly enjoys your company, but he'd never admit that."

There was a compliment in there somewhere but I didn't try to find it. "Do you think that Zaarin will try to kill you again?" I asked shifting the topic back to where it had originally started.

He sighed. "That is difficult to say. I do know that by using that prototype and failing he risked a lot, most likely more than he had bargained for. I am certain that ship was not part of any official experiment and was done off the books, so to speak, so it was an expensive gamble. He has several black projects on the go and I only know that because I keep very well informed, more so than I should." He paused. "I think that after this failure he will back off a bit to see whether or not I speak of the incident and then when nothing comes of it he will certainly rethink his strategy. I do know he has greater ambitions than just my elimination, I just do not know what they are exactly."

"Does all this back stabbing court intrigue ever end?" I asked.

"No, as long as power is involved and people do not see beyond their own lusts for more."

"Are the Chiss like this?"

He drew a very slow, deep breath. "I would like to say no, that we as a people are beyond such petty power struggles but that is not the case. The ruling houses are constantly vying for more power and bickering amongst themselves." He paused thoughtfully and then continued. "I believe that my brother sacrificed himself to maintain this balance of power when he went missing, preventing one ruling family from gaining a large military advantage over another. These struggles for power will never end. There will always be those beings who desire to own more, rule more, be more and will do anything to have these things no matter what even at the cost of the lives of others."

"But you are not like that?"

He was silent for a long moment. "Do not mistake my lack of avarice for a lack of ambition, Tekari." He said carefully. "I also desire to better my station but not at the risk of everything else, including my soul. I have no desire to rule the galaxy but I would do my utmost to be a good custodian should the opportunity ever arise."

"But you wouldn't just kill someone because they were simply in your way professionally, would you?"

"It is not my way, so I don't think so." He said thoughtfully. "But that is difficult to answer honestly." I was quiet, digesting his words. He ran his fingers through my hair. "You do ask the tough questions, which is a good thing. As long as you keep asking these questions I have faith that you will never be tainted. "

I raised my eyebrows in question.

He added. "You work amongst such corruption and greed yet you seem untouched by it all."

"I'm not untouched." I interrupted. "I've learned to hate and I have learned to kill." I told him failing to keep the anger out of my voice. "And I have learned to use a power that before was just a party trick. I am not the same person I was when I first left Tatooine to come and work for Lord Vader, not by a long shot."

"But you don't let it eat your soul and twist you until you are bitter and hateful, Like Vader and his master." He said.

"Do you think the Emperor knows about what Zaarin has been doing?" I asked, shifting the conversation away from me again.

Thrawn shrugged. "Who can say for sure? I am constantly surprised at what Palpatine does know and yet by the same token I am often shocked at how blind he is." He sighed. "Half of the problems currently plaguing the Empire are a direct result of some of the laws and plans that he has laid into place. Things became worse with the implementation of the Tarkin Doctrine but this is a consequence of trying to hold on to more power. Ruling through fear is a solution which never lasts long because once people get over their fear they become angry. Angry people will fight back. Disbanding the puppet senate was not the best move for uniting an already fractured empire. Things, while they seem fine on the outside are not so fine under the surface. I wonder if the Emperor sees this. But right now he maintains his absolute leadership."

"How does he manage to do it if it is so difficult?" I asked. "The galactic empire is enormous."

"The mysterious power he has which you call the Force and, for the most part, through fear. Most populations will not form a resistance or rebel against the current government out of fear of military reprisal. Most of the time this works but push people too far and you end up causing rebellion which is what is happening now. Palpatine's uncanny ability to see the way of things, the future, aids him but you have taught me that this ability is fickle, you have shown me that the Force is not always a user's friend." He paused while I nodded. "He is incredibly powerful but he is not as all knowing as he would have everyone else believe. He can control much with military might and fear of censure, but he does not



see everything all the time. Were both he and Vader to fall, the entire Empire would most likely crumble. There is no one strong enough to hold it all together. If that happens we would see the rise of smaller war lords and then real chaos would ensue."

"Why did he want to be Emperor?"

Thrawn shook his head. "My dear, you would have to ask him that question. I do not know what true purpose it has given him but I do know he went to great lengths to obtain this power and has gone to even greater lengths to hold and maintain it."

I sighed. Politics were just about the most confusing thing I had even encountered. "And if the rebels were to win, if a new republic government was established?"

He thought about that for a moment. "That scenario is highly unlikely but of course, not inconceivable. A republic style government would be a tremendous amount of work and while at first, because all parties would be glad of the chance to air their points of view it might function, after a certain amount of time, when the power struggles begin it would be difficult to maintain. The reason the previous republic fell was not simply through the machinations of Palpatine but also because greed and corruption had finally rotted the government's core to the point that the bad outweighed the good. Change was inevitable, in this case it was Palpatine who brought it about, quite cleverly I might add. The man excels in the art of manipulation but nothing lasts forever."

I made a face. "If the Empire fell what would you do?"

My head moved with his chest as he drew a deep breath. "In truth I don't know. I suppose that would depend on how the Empire fell and what came in its stead. What sort of tools were left over to work with, in terms of military might, weapons, warships, man power and how many people were willing to fight for the Empire after its demise." He was quiet for a long moment. "I do not think it will come to that and it would take a catastrophic event to bring such change about but given the right tools and timing. I suspect, knowing my nature, I would fight to maintain the law and order that have so far been established." He said. "But to be honest, this is a scenario I have not given much thought to however, it is an interesting problem to consider."

"So leaving the navy and settling down on Hjal with the Dantassi to take over as a village elder is not your idea of retirement?" I teased.

He turned over on his side so that he could look at me. He smiled as he tenderly caressed the side of my face. "That idea is not without its appeal, my dear. If such a thing were possible, would you be at my side as you are now, wild and beautiful? Bear me lots of rambunctious and brilliant children? Teach them to be fearless and stubborn just like their mother? Would you bring me spring wine and tjani cake in the quiet of the evening and mate with me every night until the small hours of the morning?"

"Only if you paid me a very obscene amount of credits." I retorted quickly but his words made me long for something I knew deep in my heart would never happen. That longing was painful which surprised me.

He laughed that deep rich laugh that came from the pit of his chest and moved closer to me. "Perhaps if we play our cards right, one day such a future is possible but for now I will take what I can get." He whispered in my ear. "We are just a few hours from day break so no more talk of politics, the possible fall of this mighty empire or thinking of other men, especially those who would only do you harm. For now, you are all mine and I intend to take absolute advantage of this situation since it's obvious you are not going to allow me any rest at all." He told me, his velvety voice suddenly like warm honey.

"You don't control my thoughts." I told him with a grin. "I can think what I want!"

"Oh really?" He pulled me to him and began to prove to me that while perhaps he didn't control my thoughts he sure as hell could manipulate them.

"Hey, no fair!" I protested, batting at his hand.

He gave me one of *those* smiles and purred in my ear. "All is fair in love and war, my dear. You leave me no choice but I promise my terms for your surrender will be fair and perhaps even enjoyable."

"I can hurt you...." I warned.

He smiled as he began to kiss me, starting from my ear and working his way downwards. "I know...but I'll take my chances." He said. He rolled me onto my back and I decided, as he began to show off his tactical genius and familiarity with the terrain he was about to conquer yet again that in this case surrender might be every bit as good as winning.

In the morning, when we left the flat for the transport ship, it was raining, a rare occurrence on Coruscant. It did nothing to improve the look of the city or the state of my mood. The buildings were all shrouded in a gloomy mist, the rain making the landing platforms slick with puddles. It seemed to me a fitting end to a week that had been mostly unpleasant. I was not unhappy to leave this planet and it felt as though the current weather was the city's way of telling me it was not unhappy to see me go.

I didn't have much in the way of baggage with me, just the satchel I carried some of my most treasured possessions in and some clean clothes. I had thought about bringing more of my things that I kept at Thrawn's flat but decided against it. I had enough stuff on board *Executor* as it was, while I liked being on board her I didn't feel the need to move in completely.

The pilot of the transport shuttle showed Thrawn and me to the cockpit. The two extra nav seats had been reserved for us because the rest of the ship was full with troops on their way into rotation onboard the *Executor*. It felt a little odd not to be sitting in the pilot's seat and even more odd when, while we were under way just before went into Hyperspace the co pilot told me off when I had begun to fiddle with something on the console by the chair.

"Please miss, don't touch anything. That equipment is very delicate." He said without hiding his annoyance. I just looked at him surprised, about to explain, somewhat crossly, that I knew exactly what I was doing when out of the corner of my eye I caught Thrawn shake his head subtly.

"Sorry." I mumbled and glared at Thrawn who just arched an eyebrow at me, giving me an almost imperceptible grin and went back to reading the data pad he had in his hands. I sighed. This was going to be a very long and dull trip. It was a good job I was utterly exhausted. I strapped in and reclined the chair as much as possible so that I could sleep comfortably. I was looking forward to being back onboard the flag ship because it was almost the only place I knew some semblance of peace and quiet.

After what had to have been one of the most boring trips I had ever been on, I stepped off the transport shuttle behind the troops that had disembarked and was grateful to finally be off that ship. The trip had been long but thankfully, I had dozed through a good deal of it. I walked down the ramp behind Thrawn and was utterly ignored by the officers that were there to meet him which made me smile. There was nothing else for me to do except head to my quarters and settle back in.

As soon as the door shut, I dropped my bags on the floor, stripped off my clothes and headed for the shower. After the eight hour trip on the transport shuttle I felt as though I was bathed in all the grime that the universe had to offer. The hot shower felt like heaven to me. Once I felt clean and smelled more like a girl and less like a bantha I got dressed and headed to my office. I was almost certain there was a pile of work the size of the Jundland Wastes waiting for me to do. I also needed to catch up on where we were, what we were doing and where we were going. Mostly it just felt really good to be back, almost like coming home.

*Home...* that word had taken on some very strange meanings for me in the last few years and on the whole I wasn't sure what to think about it. When my droid cheerful welcomed me back with a hot cup of tea in hand I realised that I actually didn't care about what to think about it. I sat in my chair quietly contemplating the tea I cradled in my hands, staring out of the window into the star field beyond. We were at sublight speed in normal space. The giant ship's engines were barely a perceptible rumble but it was enough and it made me smile.

## **Chapter 8**

The *Executor* and the ships that flocked about her moved through space like a pack of desert scyks on the hunt. As I made my way through the vast corridors to meet with Lord Vader I could not help but notice the tension that hung in the air was more pronounced than usual. Lord Vader was determined to find the hidden rebel base, the one the arms shipment that had been stopped at Derra IV was meant for. He had seeded the galaxy with thousands of viper probe droids but so far none of them had sent back anything that was really of use. This lack of information was making him testy and incredibly short tempered. One only had to step on the bridge to feel how nervous all the men working in the pits were. Every time he swept up and down the walkway they all followed his movements with their eyes wondering if they would be singled out next to bear the brunt of his frustration and anger.

Thrawn had not stayed long on board the *Executor*, his meeting with Lord Vader had only lasted a couple of hours and then with a brief stop by my quarters to say good-bye he was back off out to the Unknown Regions to rejoin the *Admonitor* with Rukh and replacement stormtroopers in tow. I wasn't good at partings at the best of times and the closer Thrawn and I became with each other the more awkward the farewells seemed to get. It was as if, while he was near me I felt whole and safe, even complete and when he was gone off working someplace on the far side of the galaxy I could shut that part off and not miss him but the actual parting was intensely painful and it made me peevish and difficult. Saying goodbye was easier for me to deal with by being cross and moody than allowing the truth to show through. I didn't like the sensation of being torn apart or knowing that just maybe it might be the very last time I would ever see him. It hurt, it made me feel weak and I hated it. I suspect he understood this because his good-byes were always quick and without a lot of fuss, as though he too disliked the discomfort of letting go. Still, despite the stiffness and formality I had ached with sadness when he had left my quarters, his kiss lingering on my lips and his scent ghosting the air.

The sense of emptiness I was filled with after Thrawn had left was almost bewildering and the only way I knew to get past it was to throw myself into my work so that is what I did. There was certainly enough to catch upon and while I had really only been

away from it for just over two weeks it felt as though I had been gone for years. I settled down at my desk, cup of tea in hand and began to wade through the memos and messages in relative quiet. The to-do list was longer than I had imagined. At least, I thought ruefully, it was quiet here. I should have known better. My peace and quiet lasted less than an hour and then I was summoned.

Lord Vader was seated in his hyperbaric chamber when the door to his private quarters slid open. His back was to me and he was looking at the monitors on the opposing wall. He knew I had arrived but he ignored me. I stepped into the room and waited a respectable distance away from him while he conversed with Admiral Ozzel. I stood and watched; astounded at the Admiral's audacity. The manner in which he spoke to Lord Vader as he argued over something to do with the recent batch of probe droids that had just been released was rude and condescending. One of these days, I thought, that attitude was going to get Ozzel killed. Lord Vader only put up with rudeness for so long and Ozzel's only saving grace had been he had not actually screwed up in any way big enough to earn him Lord Vader's temper. When the conversation ended and the view screen flickered off Lord Vader got up from his seat in the open chamber motioned for me to come to him.

"My personal physician informs me that you will make a full recovery." He said, his gloved fingers holding my chin to look at me this way and that, as if inspecting my face would give him clues as to the state of my health. It had been our first face to face meeting since my return to the ship.

"Yes." I told him, trying not to flinch at the coldness of his touch.

"I find it disturbing that this man from your past is able to make such a nuisance of himself. Have I not taught you to defend yourself well enough? He should be dead by now not running around free, causing no end of trouble." he asked with a touch of disgust as he roughly let go of my chin.

I made a face and tried to keep my own temper in check. "Well, as far as fights go, I was doing fine, better than fine actually, until he stabbed me with an anzati assassin's blade filled with some sedative and that had residual venom in it." I protested. I felt the sting of reproach in his words and I didn't like it.

"You should have avoided being struck by that weapon. You are better than that, I have taught you better than that. I am most displeased." He growled.

I didn't know how to answer this because deep in my heart I felt he was right.

"Have you nothing to say to this, girl?" He asked turning his back on me in that manner which said *'I do not know what to do with you...'*

"Well, actually since you asked...yes..." I muttered.

His head turned to stare at me over his shoulder. "And that would be?"

"Perhaps it would be wise if you did not give me any more time off while we are on Coruscant!" I retorted. "I prefer to holiday on Tatooine!" To my surprise, this earned me a barked laugh. "Although in defence of it all, it was because of what happened that an entire rebel cell was discovered in the palace." I added.

He nodded. "Yes. That was a fortunate stroke of luck and you have won favour with Intel for your work in this matter, making me look good. Isard was pleased but do not let that go to your head." He turned back to face me, waving his finger in my nose.

"Of course not, my lord." I sighed.

"Do you feel fit enough to return to your duties or do you require more time to recover?" He asked already knowing the answer.

"I have had quite enough recovery." I snapped at him. He was irritating me and he was enjoying it.

"Good." He said, using the force to bring a datachip to his hand from the desk across the room. "You can start by dealing with this." He paused, and then added. "I understand that you know the bounty hunter Boba Fett personally?"

"I have met him on several occasions." I said cagily.

"I require his services, find him for me and arrange a face to face meeting." He said thoughtfully. "Expedience in this matter would be appreciated." The hint of threat under his politeness did not go unnoticed.

"Yes, my lord."

He handed me the datachip and I took it gingerly. "You will deal with this list in your usual efficient manner. I also have some meetings this week that will need to be rescheduled and a holo-conference with Prince Xizor that can to be cancelled. I do not have time to argue with him over matters which have already been decided."

I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes. "Yes, my lord, although the Prince will no doubt complain if you reschedule an appointment with him."

"Let him complain. Perhaps all his whining will eventually deafen my master's ears and the Emperor will see Xizor for what he truly is and deal with him accordingly." Lord Vader said testily.

"I wouldn't hold my breath on that." I muttered.

He barked another laugh. "I see your sense of humour was not impaired in this latest incident." He said tartly.

I shrugged. What could I say to that? I just looked at him and for a split second there was a moment when I sensed he wanted to say something more but an incoming comm from the bridge interrupted him.

"What is it Captain?" He growled as the image of a very nervous looking Captain Piett filled the screen.

"My lord, you wished to be notified when the recent batch of probe droids began to transmit their findings. We are receiving the first of these data streams now."

"Very well Captain." Lord Vader replied and waved the view screen off. He paused for a moment and then turned back to me. "I will be on the bridge. Notify me when you have made contact with Fett and when there is time later on I shall expect to see you in the training room, bring your lightsaber. The next time you face off against this rebel nuisance I expect you to kill him and not mess about; he is not a toy for you to play with. Is that clear?" He told me and without further word stalked out of the room to head to the bridge.

In the quiet of my office space, while sipping a cup of tea I began the process of getting in touch with Boba Fett, wondering what it was Lord Vader wanted with him. I knew it wasn't the first time the Empire had requested the bounty hunter's services nor did it surprise me. Fett was the best at what he did, of that there was no doubt.

Several hours later I rubbed my aching eyes and stifled a yawn. I was considering my third stim'caf and was still getting nowhere with the task at hand. This was not unexpected. The pathways to get a hold of Boba Fett were lengthy and varied. He was not an easy man to find, to get in contact with and above all, speak to in person. Still, I had a few tricks up my sleeve and I knew the system better than most, eventually I got what I wanted.

Boba Fett's Image shimmered in the small desk top holo image emitter. He was polite but curt and I matched this tone as I relayed Lord Vader's request. If the bounty hunter was surprised to see me or hear the request, his voice did not show it. It was simply business and I was merely the contact. As I confirmed the information I wondered where exactly he was because the signal was very clear, but I knew better than to ask. Keep it professional, my father had always said. When the transmission ended I felt that I could finally go to bed. As I walked, half asleep back to my quarters I felt the *Executor* shiver as she slid into hyperspace. For a moment I considered contacting Lord Vader to ask where we were headed then realised I didn't care. Suddenly I was exhausted, the travelling coupled with the previous night's lack of rest was catching up with me. All I really wanted was sleep. As soon as my head hit the pillow I was out like a light.

Two hours later my beeping comm woke me up.

"I do not pay you to spend all your time sleeping, girl!" Lord Vader barked before I even had time to open my eyes. I didn't have to be anywhere near him to know that he was in a fine temper.

"No, my lord you do not." I stifled a yawn and got up. "What can I do for you?"

"My chambers, immediately! I have work that needs to be attended to." He barked and then disconnected.

I pulled on my robe and trotted down the hallway to his chambers, getting dressed was too time consuming and he didn't care what I wore anyway.

"My lord?" I asked as I slipped into the dimly lit room. He was pacing the floor.

"We will be entering the Hoth system when we come out of hyperspace. Research it and give me the data before we reach our destination."

I stared at him for a moment and then nodded. It wasn't as if he did not have access to the same data that I did and could sit down and browse through it at his own leisure. He just liked to get the *Daily Digest* version of it. Over my years of working with and for him I had become pretty adept at figuring out what it was he really wanted to hear and what information was a waste of his time and would earn me a verbal dressing down or worse.

"Oh and arrange for the chef to change the consistency of the food he has been preparing for me, it is disagreeable."

"Yes, my lord."

"And you may have to cancel all appointments I had for the next week as well as this one. I do not wish to be distracted while on this campaign. They can all be rescheduled at a later date."

"If some of them cannot be rescheduled, shall I keep the appointment as is?" I asked.

"No cancel it and explain to the person, who cannot find time in their lives to accommodate me, the error of their ways. I do not wish to be distracted until after I find out if my hunch is correct. There is nothing more important than ending this ridiculous rebellion." He growled.

I stared at him even more, my eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

"I believe the rebel base is in the Hoth system, if that is the case I shall be far too busy to deal with these petty annoyances. It is your job to sort that out. Now, don't you have work to do? Or do you enjoy wasting my time?"

"Yes I do, my lord, and no, of course not." I said.

"Then I suggest you get to it unless you wish to spend yet more time in a bacta tank." He snapped

"Right away my lord." I said and scurried out of his chambers as fast as I could before he decided to make good on his threat, so much for getting some sleep.

The Hoth system, it looked like a perfectly miserable place to visit, I thought as I sat and read through all the information the computer was spitting out at me.

Located in the Granita Cluster, out on the Outer Rim, it was mostly uninhabited. The system had a total of six planets which all revolved around a blue-white star. The six planets, Shron, Biosh, Nushk, jhas, Ordaj, and Hoth were for the most part wastelands and then after Hoth, the planet which had the outer most orbit, lay the Hoth Asteroid field.

Nushk was a methane ocean planet and had four moons which orbited it. It was a large planet that appeared the most gorgeous colour of deep green-blue from a distance. I wondered what it would be like to visit, if that would have been possible, because I imagined it would be very beautiful in a very alien way. The planet that had the most moons of the system was actually a gas giant called Jhas, seconded only by Ordaj, also a gas giant but with only seventeen moons.

The last planet in the system, the one in the sixth elliptical orbit was Hoth. The planet the system was named after. It was an ice planet that was considered mostly uninhabitable despite the breathable atmosphere for most oxygen breathing beings. As I studied the planet's stats I could not but help think of Navaari. It was exactly the sort of planet he would have loved to play on. Its oceans were frozen despite the molten metallic core. There was a great deal of volcanic and seismic activity mostly caused by the incredible pull caused by Hoth's three moons, Isla, Eru and Iseri.

It was a planet most beings would shun given half the chance but despite the extreme cold temperatures, powerful winds and blizzards there was life on Hoth. According to the surveys that had been made by a company hired by the Imperials looking at the possibilities of mining the planet, life included the Wampa creature, a predator with fairly vicious tendencies, tauntauns, which when I saw an image of one, looked an awful lot like Cu-pas, bipedal animals that were omnivorous and often used as mounts. They were ornery creatures but loyal and smart. There were also creatures called Hoth hogs, a variety of rodents, ice worms and lichens. I wondered if the ice worms were anything like the ones that produced the rare silk the Chiss and the Dantassi were so fond of.

From time to time smugglers had set up on the planet trying to find a way to get lumini spice out of the planet's frozen core but were to the best of all records unsuccessful.

Reading about the system and its planets made me think about Navaari and the Dantassi. I had wanted to talk to Thrawn about what had happened on Hjal but every time I had tried to bring the subject up he had deftly side stepped the questions, changing to direction of the conversation and not answering anything I had actually asked. He also told me not to worry about not hearing anything from Navaari because that was normal. He assured me that Navaari would be well aware of where I was and how I was doing. When I asked him how that was possible he had just given me that annoying raised eyebrow look and changed the subject again. Sometimes that man annoyed me more than anyone else in the entire galaxy.

I gathered all the data I had found on the system of Hoth and placed it in a single data chip then went to find Lord Vader. He was in the middle of destroying the practice battle droids in his personal training room when I entered. I never tired of watching him practice. His ability to focus never ceased to astound me and rather than interrupt him I crept along the wall and sat down on the floor. He moved like a cross between a dancer, fluid and graceful and a machine, fast and powerful. Only when the floor lay littered with the charred remains of the high tech combat droids did he turn off his lightsaber and look at me.

"You have something for me?" He asked.

I nodded and went to show him the datachip but before I could get to my feet he had used the force to snatch it from my hand.

"What did you learn?" He asked, motioning for me to get up.

I began to tell him all that I had read about the Hoth system and its planets while he barked at a very scared looking young soldier to clean up the mess in the training room. I trotted at his side as he swept down the hallways to his chambers, passing on the information he had asked me to gather. Once in his chambers he stopped moving and stared at me thoughtfully, then turned to the terminal and plugged in the data chip. He watched as the Hoth system displayed and then returned to staring at me.

"So tell me girl, considering all you have learned, if you were a rebel which planet would you hide a base on?"

"Well, I would have to guess, Hoth itself." I said.

"Why?"

"Because it is the most inhabitable of all the six planets and it is also the only one with a breathable atmosphere. Shron is too volcanically active to sustain life or be a

possible base. Biosh is a lifeless rock; there is no atmosphere to speak of. No one would build a base on a frozen methane planet or the two gas giants, so Hoth is the logical choice." I said.

"Why not the moons of the planets orbiting the gas giants?" He asked as he studied the data on the screen more closely.

"The moons are easy to scan, if there were human activity on any of them the probe droids would have picked up on this easily." I answered promptly. "Hoth's conditions make long range scanning it incredibly difficult and there are deep caverns left by smugglers, easy to hide in difficult to find."

Lord Vader nodded. "What about Fett?"

"I was able to contact him. He has agreed to your request."

Vader laughed. "Agreed to my request? Girl, you do have a sense of humour."

I didn't answer that instead I asked. "How long until we arrive at our destination?"

"We should be coming out of hyperspace outside of the system in less than twelve hours." He said absently.

"Then what happens?"

"If the base is there, as I suspect it is, then we will destroy it along with all those who inhabit it." He growled making a fist with his hand. "This insurrection must be crushed."

I sighed. The grand posturing got a bit tedious on two hours of sleep.

He turned to look at me and handed me another data chip. "I wish you to deal with these issues. Grand Admiral Zaarin is heading up a project and I wish an update on his progress, see that this happens. Also, the Emperor recently gave Grand Vizier Sate Pestage more responsibility in the day to day running of the Empire. You will write a polite letter stressing to him the importance of keeping a good relationship with me. He has been reticent about dealing with me and I will not tolerate this."

"Why would the Emperor do that, give up some of his control?" I blurted out disregarding decorum. I was completely surprised by this.

"He wishes to pursue his studies of the Force. There is much to learn about the Dark side and he feels that his time would be better spent concentrating on these studies than dealing with the day to day issues of Empire administration." He told me. "This was a recent change and not announced publicly." His tone of voice indicated he wasn't going to say anything more on the subject and if I was smart I wouldn't either.

I nodded. "Will there be anything else?"

"You will meet me in the training room in three hours to practice your lightsaber and combat techniques. Do not think I had forgotten about your recent failure to subdue this pest. Your incompetence is annoying. "

"Yes, my lord." I nodded with a sinking feeling inside. I had not had a good work out for a while and I was certain that he wasn't going to go easy on me at all.

"Now go away and stop bothering me." He flapped his hand at me. "I have much to plan."

I bobbed my head and did as he asked. At least I thought ruefully as I made my way back to my quarters, I had three hours before Lord Vader turned my world upside down again.

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We shuddered out of hyperspace and I did not even need to be anywhere near Lord Vader to know he was angry. I was already on my way to his chambers when he summoned me on my comm. I nearly crashed into General Veers who was just leaving and the look on his face told me that he was grateful to have gotten out of Lord Vader's presence in one piece and still able to breathe.



"I would wait a moment before entering, Miss." He said quietly.

"Oh." I said. I understood what that meant and it usually wasn't good.

He nodded at me and then hurried down the corridor. I took his advice and waited a couple of heartbeats, watching him vanish into the turbo lift.

Maximillian Veers was an interesting man. Born of a middle class working family he had escaped the mundane life of his parents by joining the Imperial Academy and finishing top of his class. He became even more successful in his military career when he became commander of the Emperor's personal AT-AT legion as well as becoming an instructor at the academy on Carida. When Thrawn met him, Veers was serving as a commander for the garrison stationed there. Recognising Veers's brilliance and loyalty, Thrawn had recommended him to Lord Vader and Lord Vader had listened. He had taken Veers on and gave him command of the Death Squadron's ground forces.

From conversations with Thrawn, I knew that Lord Vader had an unusual amount of respect for Veers and I also knew that they had worked together on the AT-AT project in the past. I had met Veers formally only once at a small reception and our conversation had been minimal and polite. He didn't seem to be a very outgoing man and he kept himself to himself. Like most men under Lord Vader's command he kept his distance from me. I was almost certain that the general rule of thumb was *'if we don't talk to her she doesn't actually exist'*. Women, some people thought, were bad luck on board of a ship and anyone who worked as closely with Lord Vader as I did could not be good for anyone's health.

I drew a deep breath and then I opened the door to Lord Vader's chambers in time to see him ending his conversation with Captain Pielt via the video feed. I was grateful to have missed the actual conversation but I could not take my eyes off the dying Admiral Ozzel clawing at his throat in the background. The force flowed around Vader like a sand storm. He was furious. His anger coloured the air and made it seem thick and difficult to breathe. For a moment the entire galaxy stopped moving and then Lord Vader got up from where he was seated, put on his long cloak and stalked around the room.

"You wished to see me, my lord?" I asked breaking the awful silence.

"Xizor has been pestering me on my private comm channel. You will inform his office that he is to cease and desist this practice. If he wishes to speak with me then he must first do so through you. I do not understand why he cannot follow simple protocol." He growled. "He will no doubt complain about this but I do not care."

"Yes, my lord." I said quietly trying not to dwell too much on what I had just seen. While Admiral Ozzel's death did not surprise me, in fact I was more surprised that it had not happened sooner, it was still an unpleasant thing to witness. I was fighting the urge to either scream or throw up. I wondered if I would ever get used to seeing Lord Vader's trademark punishment in action.

Lord Vader looked at me sensing my emotions. "Ozzel was an arrogant fool, girl. He paid for his lack of vision with his life. Do not mourn his death. The Empire does not have time or space for idiots who only wish to feel self important." He chided. "I tolerated his stupidity for as long as possible. This time he went too far. I told him not to come out of hyperspace too close to the Hoth system as surprise was tantamount to our strategy for a quick campaign. Now the rebels are alerted to our presence and we have to punch through their defence grid. That idiot will have cost us time and man power which, had we had the element of surprise, would not be the case." He spat. "He refused to follow my orders and despite the fact that I and my officers had a battle plan worked out Ozzel has insisted that we follow his even though I am ultimately in charge. This has led us to the current situation where the rebels have the upper hand and were warned of our approach. They will no doubt have an escape plan in place and be willing to sacrifice many lives for this plan. Ozzel was an utter moron and had absolutely no finesse. Admiral Thrawn would not have made such a stupid error, yet despite my requests to have him permanently posted

under my command the Emperor insists on wasting that man's talents in the Unknown Regions."

"No, I am certain Admiral Thrawn would not have made such an error." I said agreeing on the first part of his statement but not the last.

"Now I must prepare for a ground assault." He said angrily.

I paused for a moment then blurted out the message I originally had to deliver. "I have word from Boba Fett. He wishes to meet with you at your earliest convenience.

"Fett? I thought you had already arranged my meeting with him." Vader asked.

"What does he want?"

"Yes. My lord but apparently he was already in the area. I received a comm message moments after we came out of hyperspace. He wished to inform you about Solo's presence here."

"I see." He said carefully. "Well, he will have to wait until this current issue is sorted out. Seeing as how he is a *friend* of yours, you can inform him that he may wait on board and I will meet with him as soon as I am able to." He told me nastily. "He may wait in your office and you will see to his needs."

I nodded. I didn't argue with his use of the word friend, although it wasn't a description I would have used in conjunction to my relationship with Boba Fett.

"If he wishes to remain onboard his ship he is free to do so, but the fleet may have to shift quickly and I expect a fire fight now that the rebels know we are here. Remind him that he should stay out of the way."

"Yes, my lord."

Lord Vader's comm beeped and he did not bother to look at it. "We have engaged the enemy. You have work to do, see to it." He said as he swept out of the room.

I returned to my office, contacted Fett and then left terse messages with Prince Xizor's haughty assistant. When the ship around me rocked I knew the fighting had begun. I stood in my quarters with the lights turned off, gazing out of the windows in astonishment at the fiery battle that blasted its way about the *Executor*. The ship which had become my home shuddered as something blasted against its shields and I had to resist the temptation to get a hold of Jorae on the comm to find out what was going on. I could see rebel transports fleeing while ion canons on the surface of the icy planet blasted the space around them to try and protect them from the Star Destroyers. I was glad I was not down on that planet. After a while I got bored watching the fireworks outside and went to make myself a cup of tea. Some time afterwards Jorae popped into the office. He looked tired.

"Hey, I thought you might want an update." He said flopping down on the nearest comfy chair.

"Rough watch?" I asked as he rubbed his eyes and yawned.

He nodded. "The whole ship is on battle alert but I have been pulling back to back shifts so I have to go off duty now. Six hours of rest. Did you hear about Ozzel?"

"I got to see the play by play." I told him. "Vader doesn't like it when his men mess up."

Jorae shook his head. "Nope, wouldn't want to be in Piett's shoes though. You know what they say about working for Vader, *quick promotions, quick deaths.*"

"How many sayings along those lines are there for this ship?" I asked.

He grinned. "Who knows? I lost count ages ago."

"Have you been watching the battle?" he asked as a brilliant flash illuminated the window.

"Yeah. Watching how well Imperial Captains can avoid being struck by cannon fire. It's like some sort of bizarre dance. Was that Captain Needa's ship that got clobbered?"

"Oh, you should have heard the comm chatter on that one. The rebs shoot like one armed blind men and we were all like will they hit it, will they hit it and then they did. The *Avenger* was not destroyed but ended up being disabled and drifted off into deep space. Hell, I could steer better than that I tell you!" He said making steering motions.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that making a ship as large as an ISD turn to avoid anything was about as easy as breathing in space without a suit on. The ISDs had enormous fire power and amazing defensive capabilities but they steered like fat drunken banthas on spice.

He gave me another grin.

I shrugged. "So who's winning?"

Jorae snorted. "We are of course! Even with one ISD out of commission. Vader and the Fist are on planet as we speak. I wouldn't want to be a reb right now I can tell you that for nothing. You should have heard the cheers in the comm room when Veers sent the message that this shield generator was down." He said accepting the cup of tea I handed him.

"Do we know the losses yet?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Too early to tell." He replied. "But Blizzard Force is on the ground and the walkers do a lot of damage. I sure wish I could see them in action."

I sighed and sipped my tea. "No thanks, I am perfectly happy to be up here where it's nice and warm."

He laughed. "That's because you are a sand rat." He said getting up. "I'll let you know how things go if there are any major developments."

I nodded and waved to him as he left, just as my comm went off.

"Miss, you wished to be notified when Boba Fett arrived on board." said a bored sounding voice. "He is being escorted to your office as requested."

"Thank you." I said but I was already speaking to dead air. I finished my tea and made sure I didn't look too wretched then went to meet Boba Fett.

The two young men who had been assigned to stand guard outside my office during Fett's visit stiffened to attention when I approached. I was never sure why they did this since I was not military but it always made me smile and I always said the same thing every single time.

"At ease gentlemen." And as usual they ignored me.

I keyed in the pass-code and entered the room. Boba Fett was seated, well actually it was more like he was lounging on the couch with his feet up on the table and his folded across his chest, his head still covered by the helmet. He didn't move when I entered but I could feel his eyes follow me closely.

"Master Fett. It is good to see you again and gracious of you to be so accommodating." When in doubt fall back on formality and being polite.

"I was wondering if you would show up." He replied and took his feet off the table. "Nice place, you have here."

"Lord Vader apologises for keeping you waiting, he's a little busy at the moment. He's asked me to make sure that your needs were taken care of." I said. "I work here, it's my office."

There was a moment's silence and then to my surprise he laughed. "Look at you, little lady, all grown up. Last time I saw you, you were running around Jabba's Palace wearing next to nothing trying to be something you're not."

"That was a few years ago." I said embarrassed, hating the blush that crept into my cheeks.

"So it was." He agreed. "Your father told me you were doing well and now I see that is the case." He said. "So how long is this little skirmish of Vader's going to take?"

"In truth I don't know." I said. "I suspect at least several more hours. Lord Vader told me to make sure that you were made comfortable so if there is anything that I can do for you, let me know."

"Well in that case I suppose I might as well make myself at home then." He said and he removed his helmet.

I looked at his face for a moment and smiled. He looked older than I remembered and a little tired but he had not changed much at all.

"That's better isn't it?" He said with a half grin, rubbing his hand through his hair. "Now, you mentioned something about attending to my needs?"

I nodded.

"I'd like a hot meal and a decent cup of spice 'caf, as I recall your father knew how to make a good cup, I expect you do as well." He said nodding to the counter where my 'caf carafe sat.

"That can be arranged. Will there be anything else?"

"Yeah, you can keep me company till the Old Man gets back. I've heard some stories about you. I'd like to know if they're true or not."

I had not been kidding when I had told Thrawn that I had known Boba Fett for most of my life, although I wasn't sure the word *known* really applied. I really knew very little about him personally when I actually thought about it, but that never really bothered me. My father had always treated the bounty hunter with cordiality and respect. The two men had always spoken to each other more like old work colleagues than anything else but I had never really noticed or thought about it until now. He had always been a peripheral part of my life.

I sat across the small table from Fett and played with the small salad I had brought along with his meal. I wasn't particularly hungry but letting him eat alone seemed rude. He did not converse while he ate and if he enjoyed the food, he didn't say but I guessed that he was hungry because he finished it all. Once the plates were cleared away I poured spiced 'caf from the carafe and he sipped it with a relish that reminded me of my uncle's jaxes when they were given a fish treat.

"I see the ability to make decent mek'kefa runs in your family." He commented, using the traditional name for the drink. I just smiled and cradled my warm glass in my hands. I tried not to stare at his face but I couldn't help it. The last time I had seen him I had not known about my birth parents, now I did and this man wore the face of my biological father. It was unnerving and strange.

"Do I have something on my chin?" He asked after a long moment's silence.

I shook my head. "No. I was just wondering how it was you were able to make this meeting so quickly."

"I was in the neighbourhood, I told you that."

"So you did, in all the excitement of seeing you again, I forgot." My words were tart to cover up the fact that I had been staring at his face.

Boba smiled, that terrible, beguiling smile that always made me a little bit nervous and a little bit curious both at the same time. "I had work here and then you all dropped out of hyperspace right on top of me."

"Lord Vader's timing is usually better than this." I said. "Work? I suppose that would be Han Solo." I said remembering the rumours I'd heard. "Haven't you been after him for a while now?"

He shrugged his shoulder slightly. "The man leads a charmed life but Jabba wants him badly enough to make it worth my while." This wasn't a lie but he was more annoyed than he let on. It didn't sit well with his reputation that Solo kept slipping through his fingers.

"I would venture to say that Lord Vader wants him even more so." I told him.

He smiled grimly. "Don't suppose you have any more details on that, do you?"

I shook my head. "I do a lot of things for Lord Vader but actually making his business deals for him isn't one of them. He wants to talk with you directly, but you would know how this works better than I would, you've done this for him before, right?"

"Vader and I have crossed paths many times, so yeah, you might say I know the drill. Usually though he makes me wait on board my ship. This royal treatment is unusual so I can only assume I have you to thank for that or he wants something more than I would be willing to give."

"I don't know," I shrugged. "He just asked if I knew you and then left instructions."

He looked at me for a moment and I felt as though his dark eyes could see clear through to my soul. "Well, lucky me then." He said breaking the awkward silence.

I toyed with my glass and smiled a little. It felt strange to sit across from him, and I didn't know what else to say but I felt I had to speak because the silence was overwhelming.

"You said you'd heard stories about me?" I asked, breaking the silence which was making the air claustrophobic.

Fett's smile was slow and predatory. "I heard you have a little bit of a pest problem."

"Jyrki Andando," I sighed. "Did papa tell you?"

"He mentioned it to me when I last saw him, but I knew about it before, word gets around and you seem to be a hot topic for Galactic News and HoloNet gossip." He said.

I rolled my eyes. "Doesn't this galaxy have anything better to do?"

Fett laughed. "Apparently not. So, it's true then? You are being stalked by that black haired mechanic you had a crush on?"

I made a face. "Yes, it's true."

Fett frowned. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I am not really sure. When Jyrki heard I was working for the Empire and for Lord Vader he went ballistic. He's convinced he has to save me but his methods are a bit unconventional."

"As I heard it, his methods almost got you killed."

I nodded glumly and at his urging told him what Jyrki had been up to. When I was done he sat back on the couch and stared at me. The set of his mouth told me he wasn't overly impressed with the whole goings on.

"I can deal with him for you." He said flatly, coldly after a lengthy pause.

"No." The word was out of my mouth before I could even think to take it back. My answer earned me a raised eyebrow. So I tried to explain. "It's complicated and someone is already dealing with it."

"Ahhh, let me guess, Vahlek Akosh." He said with some distaste.

Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

"Your father mentioned the Tze'yusha'Jin was looking into it but I got the distinct feeling there was more to the story than he was letting on."

"Like I said, it's complicated."

"Families usually are, little lady, but this guy is hunting you and no one seems to be doing anything about it." He told me curtly. "I can."

"Well then..., if Uncle Vahlek can't deal with Jyrki will the offer still stand?" I asked after thinking about it.

Fett smiled slightly. "It will," He paused then added, "as long as I am still alive."

I nodded, sighed and regarded him for a long moment. "Why would you do this for me?" I asked finally.

"You remind me of my daughter and I owe your father a large favour." He said after a very long pause.

I had to work at keeping my jaw from hitting the floor. "You have a daughter?" I asked. He could not have shocked me more if he had said he was really a Jedi knight in disguise on a mission to kill Darth Vader.

He nodded, sipped his 'caf and drew a deep breath. "Yes, a long time ago I was married for a brief time. It didn't work out but I have a daughter from the union. Ailyn would be about six or seven years younger than you I guess, I have not seen her in a very long time."

I was so surprised I didn't know what to say.

He smiled in a way that softened his face. "Not exactly the hardened bounty hunter image you had in your mind?"

"I just never pictured you as a family man." I said.

"Well, apparently I'm not." He said sharply and I regretted my words immediately.

"I'm sorry, I mean no offence."

He leaned forward. "Look, I have known you since you were an annoying, precocious child who thought I was some sort of super being. You followed me around like a little love sick bantha pestering me with all manner of questions until I had to beg your father to get you out of my hair." He smiled slightly at the memory he had of me. "Your dad and I go back a ways, long before he ever got married and settled down actually, though I bet he's never told you that. I owe him, which I don't like. You are his daughter; I've known you a long time. Now I hear you are being stalked and hurt by a guy you used to adore for taking a government job. That doesn't sit too well with me especially since I can do something about it for you, clear up my debt to your dad and not have to see the worry on his face every time I ask how you're doing when I get my ship fixed. I want him concentrating on my boat not on his kid! I don't want to have to find a different docking bay just because I find it disturbing to hear you are being hunted. That would piss off your dad and annoy the hell out of me, which trust me, you don't want."

I just stared at him. It was one of the longest speeches I had ever heard him give and it completely took me by surprise.

"Is there any more mek'kefa?" He asked when I found myself with nothing to say.

I poured him another glass. I still could not wrap my head around the revelation that he had a family. It made me wonder just how much he really knew about me and my crazy family. How much my father had really told him. I had always known that there was a sort of strange friendship between Boba Fett and my father but I had not realised that they had known each other before my father was married. I sighed. My father's murky past was something he never discussed. It was as much a secret as who uncle Vahlek really was. It seemed to me that my family was full of dark secrets which tended to involve shady characters from the wrong side of town.

"Working for Vader seems to agree with you." Fett said after a long silence.

I nodded. "I like my job, despite its hazards." I told him, "And I am good at it, it seems."

That earned me a smile. "Well my guess would be if you weren't you wouldn't be here."

"It sure beats working at the palace." I retorted.

"Different location, same story." He replied airily. "Last I heard you were embroiled in a big scandal with a disgraced officer."

"Well, don't believe all you hear." I shot back.

"So you aren't involved with a high ranking Imperial Officer who was recently publicly disgraced and sent packing to the nether regions of space?" he asked with a sly smile.

"I didn't say that." I didn't want to get into this conversation at all.

He laughed. "You have this uncanny ability to get yourself mixed in with all the wrong people."

"Since we are being so personal, can I ask you a question about your family?" I asked suddenly annoyed enough to cross this line.

"You may ask."

"I heard from a reliable source that your father was the man who was the template for the clone soldiers who fought in the Clone wars. Is this true?"

A shiver of emotion passed across Fett's face and I wasn't certain he would answer me but he did. "Yes that is true. His name was Jango Fett."

"I also heard that you are not actually his natural born son but a naturally matured clone of his." I was pressing my luck and I could feel him fight against some emotion I couldn't place.

"Yes, that is also true."

I sat back and bit my lip, staring at his face. He met my stare evenly, his dark eyes hard and angry, but the anger wasn't directed at me.

"Why do you want to know this?"

"How much about me do you really know?" I countered.

"Not enough to know why you are asking these particular questions."

"Then I guess papa never mentioned to you that I am actually adopted and not his or my mother's biological child, did he?"

Fett shook his head. "No, he failed to mention that."

"It was kept a secret. I didn't know until shortly before I left to work for Lord Vader and not so long ago I found out who my biological parents were." I paused to look at his face but his expression gave nothing away. I continued. "My biological mother was a Jedi and the man who sired me was the Arc Clone commander she worked alongside, who would eventually hunt her down and kill her. He never knew he had a child, she hid me away to save my life and paid for that with her own. When I look at your face I am looking at the face of my biological father and the man who executed the woman who gave birth to me. So, how do they call the offspring of clones in relation to other clones? What does this make you to me, a brother? An uncle? A cousin? What?" My words tumbled out, rapid and cross. The silence in the room after I had nothing left to say was heavy and awkward. We started at each other for a moment then he broke the deadlock.

"You must get your looks from your mother because I don't see much of my father in you at all." He commented dryly.

I got up from the table and paced the room. I was angry, hurt and confused all of a sudden and I didn't understand any of this or how to deal with it.

"Merlyn, what is it that you want from me?" He asked. "You told me this for a reason, so what is it?"

"I don't want anything from you. I just wanted you to know."

"I have nothing to give you." He said.

"I am not asking for anything from you!" I snapped, and then backed down a bit. "Maybe I just needed to know as well."

"So you just wanted to add to your already complicated family with yet another complicated member?"

I stood still, ignoring his question and regarded him for a long moment. I wondered if he was right and all I really wanted was some sort of connection to people who had actually given me life. I stared at his face, searching for something that was familiar in myself. I shifted my weight and folded my arms across my chest, making a face as I did so.

He surprised me with a throaty chuckle. "Now, *that* stance and *that* expression I do recognize." He said. Then he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, with a slight smile, he added. "I don't know what you want me to say. Family is a complicated thing for

me as well. I grew up with my father more often gone from home than he was there, leaving me to be raised by the Kaminoans and droids. I was ten years old when I watched the Jedi Master, Mace Windu, decapitate him ruthlessly on Geonosis. I didn't exactly have a stellar childhood and I have no idea how families are supposed to function. I suppose that's the reason my own marriage didn't work out." He drew a deep breath. "Your biological father would probably have been an Alpha Class Recon Commando. They were clones who were unaltered in any way to allow for independent thought. I am a little surprised to hear he fulfilled Order sixty-six. Many of the Alphas didn't."

"Order sixty-six?" I had heard of this but the details were sketchy.

Fett sighed. "It was an order that was encoded and trained into each and every clone to recognise the Jedi as traitors to the republic at a time of the command being given."

"Why?"

"You'd have to ask Palpatine that, he was the one who arranged for it to happen, of course no one knew that at the time."

"The Emperor?"

Fett nodded.

I frowned. "So what you are telling me is that the Jedi purge had been planned for even before the Clone War started?"

"It would appear so." He said.

I let out the deep breath I had been holding. "Then it was inevitable that my birth mother would die?"

"Perhaps. Who can say what is meant to be or not." He said with a shrug. "Destiny is something only the fortunate believe in."

"But the Emperor planned it?"

He stared at me for a long moment and nodded slowly once. "Yes, it would appear he did."

The slow anger that ate its way up through my being must have shown on my face because Fett's expression changed from indifference to curious. He went to say something but before he could my comm beeped. I answered it tersely then shoved the ache of fury that was trying to consume me down as deep into my gut as it could go. There was just not enough hatred in the galaxy for Palpatine.

"Lord Vader has returned and will see you now." I said, almost relieved that this entire conversation was over.

Fett nodded and stood up. "Time to get this show on the road." He said as he picked up his helmet. I bit my lip as I watched him. I didn't really know what to think of the conversation we had just had. The entire thing had had a very surreal quality to it. He regarded me for a moment then asked. "Tell me something, does Vader know about your birth parents?" he asked.

"Yes." I said.

Fett smiled, it was a nasty, cold smile. "That man has a vile sense of humour." He said to himself.

I didn't back up when he stepped over to stand in front of me. I didn't pull away when he curled a finger under my chin and raised my face upward. I didn't look away from his gaze when he stared into my eyes.

"You may not physically resemble my side of the family, such as it is, but now that I know it's there, I see him in your expressions." He said. "You have his tenacity and I imagine a bit of his temperament. I don't know what one would call the relationship between us either so why don't you just call me a friend and we'll leave it at that. I wouldn't go around bragging about it though, if I were you, not everyone loves me, you know." He cautioned with a grin. Then he let go of my chin and put his helmet on. "So... are you taking me to Vader or do I have to go and find him myself?"



"I'll take you." I said.

"Then lead on, little lady." He said. "But think about my offer. Seeing as you're family, I'll be pissed if this moron kills you."

"I'll keep that in mind." I said as we left the room.

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I sat in the small mess eating what I had been told was Targ stew but looked a lot like something a Ronto would yak up, still it tasted good enough. For a quick lunch it was fine and since I hadn't eaten anything else, I was hungry.

"Mind if I join you?" asked a familiar voice.

I grinned. "Hullo stranger."

CJ sat down across from me. "How can you eat that?" He asked.

"Pretty easily with a fork." I told him cheekily. "Besides, you're one to talk." I eyeballed his tray and gave him a look. "When did you get back?"

"I've actually been on board since before the fleet jumped to the Hoth system but I was on duty, and we went to battle alert so I couldn't really be sociable, you know? I came back in on the last troop transport with a bunch of new guys fresh out of the academy, what fun ride that was, let me tell you." He waved his fork at me and changed the subject. "I heard you had some excitement on Coruscant recently."

I raised my eyebrows in question because I had a mouthful of stew.

"One of my colleagues at the Palace told me you ended up in a bacta tank."

"Buggery sandrats news travels fast."

"It does when what you do hauls a high ranking officer out of a meeting full of VIPs and you end up in Vader's private care facility. So what happened?"

I shrugged as I gave him the *Daily Digest* version of Jyrki's surprise attack.

"An Anzat blade, wow, did you get to keep it? Those things are worth a small fortune." He asked when I had finished.

"No, Thrawn gave it to Intel."

"Pity. How is the Admiral doing anyway?"

"He's fine. I expect he's busy discovering the wonders of the Unknown Regions."

"Ah yes I heard about that."

"About what?"

"Just that he's off conquering the vast Unknown Regions of space and fighting some evil warlord."

"An evil warlord? You've been reading too many trashy holo-novels."

He laughed, "It's true."

"Uh huh. Does this evil warlord have a name?" I asked wondering who CJ was talking about.

He shrugged, "If he does I haven't heard it, the rumour is just that some alien warlord has been making things difficult for your guy. You should ask him about it not me."

"You're full of useless gossip then aren't you?"

"Well here's a tidbit you'll like then, I heard a rumour that he's up for a promotion soon." CJ said sitting back in his chair.

"Oh?"

"I'll tell you over some of that special 'caf you make so well." He said with a grin. This was CJ speak for *too many ears in this room, let's talk in private*.

My office had become a sort of unofficial hangout. CJ sprawled himself on the corner comfy chair and put his feet up on the small table, watching as I made spiced 'caf.

"So talk." I told him when I handed him a glass of 'caf.

"Word is your man is up for some sort of secret promotion, or maybe actually was given one."

"So you said...if it's so secret how do you know about it?"

He grinned. "Sweetheart, I'm part of the in crowd." He said.

"Uh huh, keep telling yourself that bantha-boy! Anyway, that's not exactly spiced 'caf worthy news. So get to the good stuff."

"Word is that the Emperor upped or will up the number of the council of twelve to thirteen."

That caught my attention. "He's planning to promote Thrawn to the circle of Grand Admirals?"

CJ nodded.

"When?"

"Soon, if it hasn't already happened. It's incredibly hush hush. I only know about it because one of the guys I actually still get along with overheard a conversation between Pestage and Palpatine." He said. "Mös couldn't believe that the Emperor would even consider doing this. I believe his exact words were *'I can't actually wrap my head around the fact that the Emperor would stick an alien in the highest military circle there is. The rest of the white suits will go nova over this.'* He was pretty stunned about what he heard."

"Why is everyone so against the fact that Thrawn isn't human? What difference does that make?" It was always jarring to hear Thrawn referred to as alien because that was not how I saw him at all.

CJ shrugged. "Like I'd know, I think he's a decent guy and since you seem to have a thing for him, my guess is he can't be all that bad of a person underneath his snobby-cool-know-it-all exterior. You're not the type to latch on to just anything in a uniform. You're pretty picky about the male company you keep."

That earned him a raised eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Well, if you weren't, you'd be slumming with Zaarin and anyone else who gave you the eye and showered you with flattery. Everyone knows Zaarin has a thing for you and it pisses him off that you showed him the door."

I laughed. "Zaarin's a pompous ass."

"Yes he is, but he's also a high ranking officer with the brains and the power to back it up. There's lots of girlies at the court who would sell their mothers just to spend a night with a man like him." CJ said thoughtfully. "He doesn't hear the words 'bugger off' all that often. The guys talk about that. You raise a lot of eyebrows."

"The *guys* talk about me? What guys?"

"Uh, well... you know... the guys." He shrugged then smiled. "How many females do you see working for the Empire, especially in the upper echelon? Of course you get talked about but you aren't the only one though so don't get all Holo-starlet diva on me."

"So what do these *guys* say?" I asked with a bit of bite in my voice.

CJ shook his head vehemently. "Oh no, trust me you don't want to know the locker room chat. Suffice to say some of it is complimentary and the rest of it is testosterone driven, practically pornographic and liable to make you hate men forever. I will tell you this though; you get favourably compared to Mara Jade a lot."

"Who the hell is that?"

CJ just stared at me for a moment. "You don't know her? I though you did some work with her a while back, a babysitting job. She's the pretty bit with reddish gold hair and bad attitude that hangs out on the Emperor's arm a lot."

"You mean Lianna, the dancer - courtesan?"

CJ laughed so hard I thought he would choke. "Dancer? Courtesan? You mean no one ever told you who she really is? You ferried her about on some mission and you thought she was just a dancer?" He could not keep the incredulity from his voice.

"That's what I was told by the Emperor. I don't tend to question him a lot you know?" I replied angrily. "I knew there was something more about her but when the Emperor says do something I do it and I don't ask who or why."

He made a face. "Wow, where to start? You know about the Hands, right?" I just blinked at him.

"How is it you know so much about some stuff and nothing about others? I would have thought Vader would have at least told you about the Emperor's Hands."

"I vaguely remember something being mentioned about some super secret group called that, though I think it was Thrawn who told me but no specifics. I don't care about that crap anyway. That stuff is Intel's department not mine. I'm an office girl, CJ, not a super agent!"

"Yeah, right." He said giving me that *as if I believe you at all* look.

"I honestly didn't know her real name. I didn't want to if you must know. I knew there was a whole lot more to her than meets the eye but she isn't exactly a big fan of mine if you get my meaning. I think she thought I was going to steal her place by the Emperor's side or something. I flew her to a job and then I brought her home. The job went a bit south, I helped out and I didn't ask too many questions."

"Well, her real name is Mara Jade. She's one of the Emperor's Hands, his super secret agents, assassins and all round nasties. He apparently found her as a child, raised her and trained her himself. It is said she can hear him anywhere in the galaxy through the force. But like you, most people don't know who or what she is. The concubine-dancer-palace- fluff thing is just a ruse. That woman is as deadly as she is gorgeous. She'd kill a man twice her size with her pinkie and not break a nail."

"Are you serious, raised by the Emperor?" I asked trying to picture of the woman I had flown to Rothana, the same woman I occasionally talked to at palace functions with this woman that CJ was telling me about. Navaari's words about her echoed in my head...*she's not a dancer she's a predator*.... I had known she was something more but never really exactly what. I hadn't wanted to know. No wonder she had given me the evil eye when the Emperor had made a fuss over me.

He nodded. "Very serious, though it would be good if you never repeated this to anyone since I could get knee deep and high for telling you. But honestly, I thought you knew."

"So the guys *talk* about her as well?" I asked.

"Of course, she's damned hot. Hell, Merly we talk about everyone. The barracks are like gossip central. It's a huge myth that men don't indulge in that sort of thing. We're worse than women, if you really want to know." He said with a grin. "But she's like the ice princess so everyone knows she's unattainable, you on the other hand actually make friends and occasionally chat to us lowly men of the Imperial world. You have the reputation for being nice but odd. That you are still alive even though you work with Vader really raises eyebrows. People have speculated the weirdest theories about that you know. What you think no one finds that unusual or discussion worthy? You're the best thing that ever happened to the gossip corner. Every time you end up on Coruscant something really crazy happens to you. Now the guys have a pool about what will happen next. Of course you broke a few hearts when you decided to date Thrawn, there are a few hangers on who believe you might get fed up of being with an older man who isn't human but I told them to give it up. I've seen how your face lights up when you speak his name. "

"Are you kidding me?" I just stared at him.

He shook his head and chuckled, thoroughly enjoying himself. "Nope, you are very entertaining." He said. "Besides you can't tell me that when you and your pal Shiv get together you don't do the same thing. Everyone gossips it's part of palace life!"

"It never occurred to me to consider that I would be such a huge topic of interest, to be honest. It really is just an office job, a very odd office job but in the end... that's what it is"

"Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart and one day you might actually believe it as well!"

"You guys really talk about me?" I was having issues with this.

He laughed. "You are so naïve. How do you manage to maintain that mental state and still work for the Empire?" He shook his head. "Of course we talk about you, like I said, we talk about everyone. You just happen to be great gossip fodder. You get into a lot of mind bogglingly bizarre situations, the Emperor thinks you are worthy of note and Vader seems to like having you around. You're the odd girl out playing with the in crowd so you stand out. Don't sell yourself short; you make for great locker room chit chat!"

I opened my mouth to say something then shut it again. I had no idea how to respond to this so I decided to change the topic. "So, why would the Emperor promote Thrawn to Grand Admiral in secret?"

CJ sighed. "Good question. I can only speculate that he doesn't trust the rest of the bunch as much as he trusts Thrawn." He said. "You know the Admiral better than most wouldn't you say he's pretty good at strategic planning and managing to survive Palpatine's whims?"

I nodded. "Just a bit."

"Well, I expect they're planning something. Something the Emperor doesn't want anyone else to know, something that might disrupt the power balance. Or maybe that is the reason, having an odd number on the council means no stalemates. Making Thrawn a Grand Admiral does give him a lot more power." CJ shrugged. "I have no idea what the Emperor actually does anymore. He's becoming more and more reclusive, and with the new Death Star project underway things have been more tense than usual."

I drew a deep breath. "So where have you been? I haven't seen you in ages."

"I got called back for small mission. Can't discuss it, so don't ask. And then I had some debriefing to go through. Technically I am still in trooper rotation so I had to return to finish it off, besides how could I not come back to see your pretty face and weasel your fabulous spiced 'caf recipe from you?"

"Ha very ha." Was all I could think of as a reply, ignoring his easy flirtation with me. "So was he promoted or hasn't that actually happened yet?"

"I don't actually know. You'll have to ask the Admiral yourself. When you find out, I'd love to know though."

"You think I'd actually tell you? CJ, you've just told me you're the biggest gossip I know."

He laughed. "Only with you sweetheart, only with you." It was an easy lie and he told it well.

"Flirting will get you nowhere, I'm spoken for." I told him firmly. He was so easy to like and I enjoyed his attentions in a way that could be dangerous. He was so different from Thrawn in so many ways and I knew I could easily be attracted to him but the part of me that was drawn to CJ also knew that an affair with him would end very badly. I squashed all hints of the small attraction I felt.

"That's what makes it all the more fun." He grinned. "Any more 'caf?"

I poured him another glass and for a moment we were quiet, the scent of mek'kefa filling the air, the silence between us comfortable. The thing I liked best about CJ was that while he was ambitious and hard assed he was also unpretentious and spoke his mind. I knew where I stood with him.

"So were you with Blizzard Force?" I asked after a few minutes.

He nodded. "Yep. What a campaign, classic recruitment stuff...join the Imperial Army and have tons of exciting fun romping around in freezing temperatures and snow, chase down misguided rebels and use them as target practice." His voice had a cold, sarcastic edge to it.

"So what happened?"

"What you mean to tell me your boys in the spook room didn't give you the play by play?"

"They're not my boys and I want to hear an eye witness version." I said.

He sighed. "It was a slaughter if you really want to know. They put up a good fight but they were out gunned and outnumbered. I have trained for a ton of things but I have to tell you fighting in subzero weather sucks. No matter what the quartermaster says, snowtrooper outfits are not as warm as you think."

I shook my head. "No, the warmest clothing for subzero is animal fur. The Dantassi use the skins and furs of the Tavta elch, a huge migratory animal that lives on cold planets, because the hair is long and hollow and traps the heat, it's also very matted at the base makes it wind proof. It's the warmest clothing you can wear."

"You sound quite the expert." He said giving me that speculative look. "There's a story in there somewhere."

"Maybe, but not today." I said. "So what happened on Hoth?"

"You really want all the gory details?" He asked in a voice that told me he really didn't want to talk about it.

I made a face. "How about the sixty second holonet version?"

"We landed, we killed them, we got out. It wasn't exactly the most challenging thing I have ever done." He said flatly. "The AT-ATs were a big blow to the rebel ground troops except for the walkers the air speeders took down with the leg lasso. Damned clever trick actually, so kudos to what ever bright spark thought that up. It was all over when General Veers took out the shield generator." He rubbed his forehead and suddenly he looked tired. "When the actual fighting was done, we were shipped back on board. They left a crew on Hoth and the next thing I knew was we were flying through asteroids. Don't suppose you can clue me in about that little bit of fun."

"Actually I can, that was Lord Vader's idea of a wild bantha hunt. He was after a smuggler named Solo. He believes that Solo has gotten himself involved with the rebellion and was ferrying the Empire's most wanted. And, like most things, when Lord Vader wants something he is fairly bound and determined to get it. We ended up going through the asteroid field after the *Millennium Falcon*."

"Why the hell did this Solo go into the asteroid belt in the first place?"

"Because he is a lunatic?" I said. "I don't know." I shrugged. "I can tell you that Solo is one of the best pilots I have ever seen, so I guess he figured he could waltz with the dancing rocks and live to tell about it. Lord Vader, being an even better pilot than Solo, decided the rewards outweighed the risks. "

"Bloody hell."

I nodded. "We lost one ISD and two others were badly damaged, including the *Avenger*. ISDs are not made for flying through asteroid fields. We lost a few TIEs as well."

CJ shrugged. "What's a few lost TIEs when chasing down the galaxies most wanted?" he said sarcastically. "So, did we catch him?"

"No, not yet. The *Executor* pulled out of the chase when the Emperor needed to contact Lord Vader." I told him. "I'm not sure where we are right now. After being up for nearly twenty hours straight, I went to bed."

"Do you have a clue as to why Vader was so intent on putting his fleet at risk for the sake of a single smuggler?"

I shook my head. "I haven't heard anything since. Lord Vader is incommunicado at the moment. I suppose he has a lot on his mind right now." I said with a shrug. "It's not like he tells me everything that's going on and usually if I ask when he's in one of his moods I get told to mind my own business or worse."

"I see he still treats you with the standard Vader respect and dignity then?"

"You just have to know how to be with him is all. He has his moments and he has a lot on his shoulders." I said.

"Says you. I don't know anyone else who would agree with this though. He's as bad tempered as he is brilliant and he stomps on anything or anyone that gets in his way. You know that he's the ultimate example of ruthlessness for the Royal Guards. It's not like he treats you with kindness and respect. He beats the crap out of you under the label training when he's pissed off and I am pretty sure that's just half of it. He's abusive and brutal."

"You sound like Thrawn." I growled.

"Does that mean you'll like me better then?" He teased but he also took the hint and dropped the subject.

"I like you just fine. I don't want to date you."

"You don't know what you're missing, sweetheart." He smirked. "And word has it you aren't just dating the Admiral you're ...."

"Okay okay!!! I give in you win! I don't know what I am missing and I don't want to know!" I shut him up before he got crude.

"See, you missed me." He said with a satisfied grin.

"My aim is terrible." I told him. "

He laughed in a good way. I didn't have that many friends but he counted as one of them. He was easy to be with. "Speaking of aim, when do I get to kick your cute ass next?" He asked.

I grinned. I had learned a few tricks since the last time we had sparred and now I was itching to try them out. I opened my mouth to say something smart when my comm beeped. I made a face and sighed.

"Let me guess..." CJ said and cupped his nose and mouth with a hand then made heavy breathing sounds.

I couldn't help but laugh at his parody of Lord Vader. "Duty calls." I said, making *get out of my office* shooing motions with my hand.

He nodded, getting up. "You know where to find me if you want some fun!"

I just smirked at him. "Yes, but I get to define the fun because your version will get me into knee deep bantha poodoo! See you later." and went to find out what Lord Vader wanted.

I was in such a hurry to reach Lord Vader that I very nearly crashed into him as he strode through the corridor on his way to his private chambers. I was certain the pirouette I did to avoid bashing into him and then the fancy footwork I had to do to keep up with him would have made my dance teacher proud. My dress swirled about me the way Vader's cloak flowed about him and for a moment it was an odd blend of deep blues and night black. For a split second it reminded me of a ballet I had once seen but these thoughts were quickly cut short my Lord Vader's brusque reproach.

"I don't pay you to dawdle, child!" He snapped, not breaking his stride. I trotted to keep up with him.

I blew the stray hair from my forehead. "You wanted to see me?"

"I need all the information you can find on Bepin and Lando Calrissian!" Lord Vader barked as he swept down the hallway.

"Yes, my Lord!" I said, and then asked. "Is Calrissian involved in the rebellion?"

"Do you *know* him?" His tone of voice was dark and annoyed.

"Uh, no, not personally but I have heard of him. His name gets bandied about in smuggler's circles."

"So finding information on him should be easy then?"

I looked up at him, exasperated. "Have I ever let you down let?"

"Do you actually expect an answer?" He replied archly, glancing down at me. "And be prepared to pilot my shuttle, my regular pilot is out with the Corellian flu." He added. "You know my routines so you can do the job in his stead."

This surprised me. "Uhm... wouldn't it be better if one of your more experienced officers did that?"

He stopped mid-stride and rounded on me, I had to swiftly back up a step so as not to smack into his chest plate. The last time I had walked into him, it had earned me a painful cuff across the head. "Are you refusing?" He growled.

"Uh... no, not exactly, but may I remind you I am a civilian and this is a military operation so it's not exactly proper protocol." I said quickly.

"I decide what is proper protocol not you!" He leaned over me. His voice was laced with sarcasm. "I thought you *wanted* to fly Lambda class shuttles, I thought you *enjoyed* the experience and I thought you *welcomed* the opportunity to fly with me in a lambda class shuttle." He was being mean. Before I could answer he added nastily, "You don't protest about flying Admiral Thrawn about or is that becau...."

I cut him off before it got too personal. "I do like flying with you, but not in the middle of a battle. I am not a bloody combat pilot!" I argued back. "And as I recall I did protest about piloting for the Admiral."

He ignored my last statement. "What battle? Oh for Sarlacc's sake, girl, you call that little skirmish back at Hoth a battle?" He shook his head in disgust then went back to stomping down the hallway. "You should have seen the fight over Coruscant when Grievous kidnapped Palpatine, now that was worthy of the title 'battle'. These little annoyances the Rebel Alliance seems to enjoy engaging in are not battles, not by a long shot!"

"That thing at Hoth was more than just a little skirmish!" I told him crossly. "I lost count how many TIE pilots died! Never mind the ground crew or the damage done during our wild bantha chase through the asteroid field."

"Pah, bad pilots die every day, as well they should!" He shot back. "You will do as I ask and fly my shuttle because it is what I have told you to do! You will cease in this useless arguing with me and you will get me the information I requested now! Have I made myself understood or do you need a reminder to be obedient?" He said, looking back over his shoulder at me.

I backed down because all the hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stood up on end. "A reminder will not be necessary, my lord."

"Good, because your insolence while occasionally amusing, tries my patience!"

"Yes, my lord, my apologies." I said meekly. I turned to leave and get on the task assigned but he grabbed my arm painfully yanking me back and continued speaking. My squeak of surprise and pain made the heads of the two guards just down the hall turn. They glanced my way then quickly went back to pretending they had neither seen nor heard anything. There was a certain line of thought which said that if one did not look at the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord would not notice said person.

"While you're at it, I want you to put in an order for a new cloak, two more pairs of boots and two pairs of gloves and make sure they use the best materials and follow the standards they are supposed to because the last pair of boots they sent did not last as long as they should have and the hem of the cloak frayed." He paused for a second then added. "And I want an update on the newest personal combat droids I asked for last week." He

stopped and waved his finger in my face in that annoying manner which always reminded me of a nasty teacher I had once had.

"Yes, my lord." We had come to the door of his chambers. I waited a moment to see if there was more.

"What are you waiting for, girl? I expect your report on Calrissian in an hour! You have already annoyed me today do not test my patience further!" He said with more than a hint of threat in his voice. I nodded quickly and scurried off to do what he had asked, happy to get out of his line of fire.

My office was a place of quiet and calm. P2B4 had made me tea and a sandwich. I was grateful but I didn't really taste it as I ate. My mind was on other things. I sat at my terminal and began a system wide search. I stared at the data coming across my screen, sighed and began to assimilate the information I was reading sipping my tea absently. An hour later I found myself back in the presence of Lord Vader while he sat in his meditation chamber which was open.

"Yes, girl, what is it?" He snapped as his seat rotated around to face me.

"You asked for my report on Calrissian?"

"And what did you find that was of use?" He asked. This was Vader speak for *just get to the important points I can't be bothered to read all the nonsense you've managed to dig up!*

"Well..." I began, "He's running a mining operation above the gas giant Bespin."

"Mining what, exactly?"

"Tibanna gas." I answered.

"That is most interesting, why have I not heard of him or this place before now? Tibanna Gas is used as a hyperdrive coolant. The Empire should have knowledge of this." He said thoughtfully.

"I found no records of any tax payments to the Empire and there is no listing on any of the smaller mining guilds of the operation. I can only assume he is working covertly and selling on the black market." I said. "The mine must be quite lucrative though, there are close to five and a half million beings inhabiting Cloud City."

"And what about Calrissian?"

"He's a Socorran. He calls himself an entrepreneur and a business man but when I looked back through the records it seems to me he's a cross between a smuggler and a gambler. Most of his business dealings are shady to say the least. He's been arrested a couple of times by local authorities but there are currently no outstanding warrants on file for him. He gained some sort of notoriety at Taanab." I paused for breath and added. "Judging by his file, I'd be willing to bet he'd rather deal with the Empire than fight against it."

Lord Vader was quiet for a long moment. "Are there any technical read-outs for the city's facilities?"

I nodded and handed him the data chip I had brought in case he had asked. He got up and slipped in into the reader, studying the plans carefully.

"Why would Solo go there?" He asked.

"They know each other." I told him. "The story I heard was that there had been an attack on the Hutts, some slavery and spice operation near Ylesia. It turned out to be a set up by a rebel named Bria Tharen. Solo hired Calrissian as a pilot for the job. It didn't go so well."

"Are they friends?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. At least I wouldn't use the word friend to describe their relationship. When I worked at the palace the rumour was that they were not on good terms. Seems Solo couldn't pay the people he'd hired for the Ylesia operation because Tharen took all the spoils for herself to help the rebel cause. I know they worked



together one more time after that but I don't think they get along that well. Rumour was they squabbled all the time."

"So Calrissian won't be likely to protect Solo then?"

"Probably not if it meant saving his own interests and investments." I remarked.

"But," I added, "This is speculation on my part I don't actually know how much of this is gossip to make the outside world think they don't get along and how much is actually true. The smugglers don't tend to advertise their friendships much, it makes them look weak."

He nodded and continued studying the city's layout. "I see they have a carbon freezing facility."

"Yes, they use it as a stable method for transporting the Tibanna gas."

"That will be useful. Prepare my shuttle for immediate departure as soon as we come out of hyperspace. I will deal with Calrissian myself." He said after a few moments. "I look forward to seeing how much your piloting skills have improved since the last time you flew for me."

"Yes, my lord." I said with a sigh. Boba Fett was right; Lord Vader had a vile sense of humour.

Then, as if he could read my mind Lord Vader said, "Inform Fett that he is to remain out of sight on Cloud City until I arrive. I do not want him interfering with what I have planned. I will meet with him at the appropriate time."

"Yes, my lord." When he turned his back to me I knew I had been dismissed and could return to my office. This time getting a hold of Fett was easier. The small holo image shimmered on my desk and while I could not see his face which was hidden by his helmet, when I relayed the message to him, I could feel his grin.

"Worried about his kill count, is he?" Fett asked after I had finished passing on Lord Vader's request.

I shrugged and rolled my eyes, "Whatever."

He chuckled. "Okay, little lady, but you can tell the boss man I expect to be compensated for my time if this doesn't go the way it's supposed to. I'm not at his beck and call!"

I opened my mouth to answer that but Fett's holo image made a *don't bother* gesture. "Give my regards to your old man when you talk to him next." He said.

"I will do."

"And remember what I said about your ex- flame."

I nodded. "But you should know that killing Jyrki would piss off my uncle."

"I'll take that into consideration but the Tze'yusha'Jin don't scare me. You can tell Akosh if he doesn't sort this out for you, I will." He said and with a little two fingered salute he signed off before I could reply to his threat.

I sat back in my chair and sighed. I was tired and the tension level on the ship was high. I looked at the chrono and decided that I should probably try to get some rest before we came out of hyperspace. I wasn't sure what Lord Vader had in mind but I was pretty certain that it would be a good idea if I was at least half way awake if I was to play pilot for him.

The young man who sat in the co-pilot's seat watched me nervously. No one had told him that instead of the usual pilot he was getting me instead and he didn't know how to react. It wasn't the first time this had happened, it wouldn't be the last but every time the young imperials who had been assigned as co pilot looked at me as though I had sprung five heads and smelled bad. I didn't see any point in trying to put him at ease or explain why I was sitting in the pilot's seat and not the usual pilot. It wasn't as if I actually knew the answer to that question anyway and telling these young men that it was just Lord Vader's way of showing affection didn't go over well. Imperial men didn't have much of a

sense of humour. I ignored his dirty looks as I started my pre-flight warm up and made him go through the secondary check list twice, just because I could.

I was being crabby and my mood wasn't improved when Vader, a compliment of stormtroopers and two more stone faced officers arrived. It was a full house. Lord Vader appeared in the cockpit and told the flustered young co pilot abruptly that he was not needed. The young man seemed more than relieved than scared as he evacuated the cockpit as fast as was humanly possible. I watched the entire discussion without comment. I was silently fuming inside but there wasn't much I could do about it. Lord Vader wasn't known for his kindness or his understanding when it came to refusing a direct order and complaining about it was not a smart thing to do, even for someone who had a little amount of leeway with him, like me.

My headset crackled as flight control radioed me. "Shuttle *Dark Blade* you are cleared for departure."

"Roger that, *Executor*." I said looking at Lord Vader.

"What are you waiting for girl, get on with it!" He growled as he sat down.

I didn't answer him; instead I answered Flight control and styled the shuttle to swing her out of the landing bay. My initial annoyance at the task I had been assigned vanished the moment the shuttle listed off the flight deck. He was right though, despite my protests, I loved flying the L-class shuttles and I even, for the most part, enjoyed flying with him at my side because every time this happened I usually learned something new.

This time, however, the trip was different. Lord Vader was pensive and quiet, brooding on the up and coming task he had set for himself and his men. I could feel that he had something heavy on his mind and that he didn't want to talk about it. He had shut himself off from me and it was a little like sitting next to a black hole. He had been distant and withdrawn ever since Hoth. I couldn't begin to understand what he might have been thinking but I was certain it had to do with Luke Skywalker. That didn't really bode well for the Skywalker kid, especially if the Emperor was also interested in him, as I suspected he was.

It was just before day break when we hit Bespin space. The shuttle shuddered as atmosphere and gravity began their work. Cloud city's lights glittered in the lightening sky and it hung above the gas giant like a tiny floating jewel in the slender belt of breathable air. The skies around us were just beginning to bloom in the brilliant colours of pre dawn. It would have been idyllic had we not been so rudely accosted by Cloud City air security.

I spoke with the local air traffic control who was utterly unimpressed with our arrival. When me being polite didn't work I tried to get official this didn't work either so Lord Vader snatched at the headset I was still wearing yanking it, along with my head, closer to him and threatened the man on the other end with a very nasty death if he didn't call off the dogs and let us land. For a few shaky seconds my control on the shuttle wavered because I could not see what I was doing.

"Watch where you are going, girl!" He said crossly as I narrowly avoided a brush with a tall building.

"Let go of my headset then!" I snapped back. "I can't see to fly and be your damn comm device at the same time!"

He flicked my head away with an annoyed, "Pah!" and the rest of the scenic trip in and around Cloud city was uneventful. The two ships that had guided us to the landing pad veered off at the last minute. I stuck my tongue out at them as they flew off then I brought the shuttle down on the designated landing pad gently, to make up for the bumpy ride. I was going to get a reputation for reckless flying despite my best efforts not to. As I shut down the engines and watched as Lord Vader got up filling the cockpit with his presence. "You will remain on board and await my return." He said waving a finger in my face.

"How long will you be?" I asked.

"As long as it takes, do not leave the shuttle and do not disobey me or the punishment will be severe!" He replied. "I want this ship on ready to go standby with no messing about. Is that clear?"

"Crystal." I said and was incredibly glad I had thought to bring a book along with me. I resisted the urge to wave good-bye to him as he left the cockpit and turned to complete my shutdown to standby procedures.

I watched from the side viewport as Lord Vader and the rest of the men he had brought along with him walked along the landing pad walkway to be met by someone I suspected was Lando Calrissian. The dark haired, dark skinned man was impeccably dressed and smiled easily but his body language told me he was nervous but not utterly afraid and after a brief discussion he led Vader and the stormtroopers, as well as the officers into the building we had landed near.

I let out the breath I had been holding and felt the tension in my shoulders ease for the first time in hours. I knew the shuttle was empty and I was on my own. I was more relieved than anything else. With nothing else to do up front I decided to do a walk through the shuttle, then once that was done, I made a cup of tea and settled back down in the pilot's seat to read a book that Thrawn had given me.

My father had once commented that flying was ninety percent boredom and ten percent sheer panic when something actually went wrong. I was fairly certain I had covered both ends of that spectrum in this one trip and wondered if, perhaps, I should have brought along two books instead. I had the feeling that whatever it was Lord Vader had planned was probably going to take a while. I was not wrong.

Hours later, it occurred to me as I stepped back on board *Executor*, that in my wildest dreams I could never have imagined my life as it was now. I was strangely exhausted despite having spent hours doing nothing but sit around and wait yet at the same time I was too wired to sleep. My mind raced, my thoughts were scattered and unfocused and sorting out everything that had happened seemed just as impossible as getting some rest. I considered going to the training room and exercising my demons away by working out but I didn't really want to. After dithering around the living space of my quarters for a few moments I finally settled and did the only thing I could think of that made any sense, I made tea. Once that small chore, which never failed to bring me down to earth, was done, I sat down to write to the one man in the galaxy I missed more than anything and the only person I could talk to about what had been going on.

*Mia e'Tekari,*

*In your last letter you wrote that you hoped life onboard the Executor would be relaxed and quiet. Well, I regret to tell you that things here have been anything but 'relaxed and quiet' in fact things have been completely crazy.*

*Do you remember the arms shipment at Derra IV? Well, just recently, they found the Rebel Base that shipment was supposed to be sent to. One of the new Viper probe droids discovered the secret hide out on Hoth and things got pretty interesting. Probably it would have been an easy mission but Admiral Ozzel, in his infinite wisdom, had the fleet drop out of hyperspace way too close to the system. The rebels figured out that we were on our way and things got messy. As you can guess, Lord Vader wasn't impressed with Ozzel's colossal cock up and dealt with him in the usual abrupt manner. Now Captain Piett is Admiral Piett and the crew have taken started a pool on how long he will survive in this position. The grim humour on board this ship is depressing.*

*It seems the rebels had a pretty good evacuation plan in place because before we even had ground troops on the way they were sending transports off the planet protected by a large ion canon. While the ISDs went after the rebel transports Lord Vader sent General Veers to the planet with Blizzard Force. The rebels were able to disable one of the*

ISDs but in the end, Jorae told me, around seventeen rebel transport ships were destroyed in total. From where we were in space it was just pretty flashes of light. Not much to look at really until you think of all the lives being snuffed out in the blink of that brilliant momentary explosion. It hurts me to be near it all. It seems that so many beings dying at once is painful, at least for me. I have been listening to my mother's diary to see if she says anything about this but so far nothing along those lines has cropped up.

The ground troops had better luck and with the AT-ATs on the surface it wasn't much of a fight. What was interesting was the rumour that the AT-ATs could be stopped by hobbling the walkers' legs with some sort of cable. Bet that caught a few people by surprise. When Lord Vader got to the base most of the rebels had escaped, including Han Solo and he, Lord Vader that is, was not in a good mood about any of it. By the time he was back onboard the Executor the planet had been completely evacuated. The rebels were pretty badly beaten and the losses on the Imperial side were fairly minimal by comparison. Once the ground battle was done the space chase began.

Lord Vader sent the entire fleet after Han Solo's ship the Millennium Falcon, but Solo managed to elude everyone by flying into the Hoth Asteroid Field which caused some serious damage to several ISDs. Do you know that taking an ISD into an asteroid field is a lot like trying to swim in the desert, incredibly pointless and very stupid. I wasn't able to see the actual chase, I was not allowed near the bridge, so all I saw from the windows in my office were a bunch of asteroids alarmingly up close and personal. It was pretty hairy.

Jorae told me the comm chatter between the ships in the fleet was insane. I got to listen in for a bit and it sounded more like some crazy-assed pod race commentary than anything else. I must admit to a few panicky moments when some of the larger asteroids smashed against the shields and the ship rocked a bit, but for the most part it was the smaller ISDs that took the brunt of the damage not Executor. The hunt went on for several hours and the only reason the Executor was not damaged more is due to the Emperor demanding to speak with Lord Vader. You can't get a clear signal in an asteroid field so we headed up in free space. I have never been so happy in my life to clear away from a bunch of bouncing stones. I have to tell you, it was just about craziest thing I have ever seen done in a space ship yet, particularly one as large as the Executor.

The Falcon had been tucked away in a cave or sink hole on one of the larger asteroids, according to the TIE Bomber chatter Jorae heard, but despite the searches and the bombing raids they didn't flush the Falcon out. One of the pilots said it was a giant space worm that spat the Falcon from its huge mouth back into space. This news raised a few eyebrows in the spook room, let me tell you. Despite my best efforts to convince Jorae that Space slugs are not a myth, he wasn't having any of it. He let me listen in on the com chatter. You should have heard the guys; they were all a twitter about it. It was almost funny!

Once the Falcon was back in open space, the chase started all over again but somehow they missed catching her despite the fact that her hyperdrive was obviously not functioning. Captain Needa, whose ship had lost track of the Falcon, was summarily executed in Vader's standard manner after he had come on board Executor to apologise. I was awfully glad not to have been there when that happened. A couple of the guys who ended up having to deal with the Captain's body were pretty down about the whole episode. A high speed chase through a field of dancing rocks is one thing but executing Needa was overkill.

Lord Vader decided that Solo must have taken the Falcon into hyperspace and deployed the fleet to try and figure out where the smuggler had gone. Not surprisingly, it was Boba Fett who tracked Solo down to a place called Cloud City, Bespin, which is where things really got weird.

*I know you are sitting there asking yourself, how could it get any weirder...well, get comfortable and I'll tell you.*

*Firstly, it began weird when Lord Vader requested me as his shuttle pilot. Okay so that's not so out of the ordinary, but it was really annoying considering we were still in state of battle alert. It didn't make anyone else happy either. I don't know if it is because I am a girl or because I don't wear a uniform, but me at the helm seems to make everyone except Lord Vader very uncomfortable. It's not even as if I am a bad pilot or anything but it does feel odd to be ferrying around the Emperor's Iron Fist, along with a small platoon of stormtroopers and a couple of officers when there is an entire ship full of qualified pilots who could do the job. Lord Vader wasn't too impressed with my protests and I figured it was better to do as he asked than end up like Captain Needa. He was even less impressed when I almost flew us into a building because he decided to use the headset comm I was wearing to yell at Cloud City Air control without taking the head set off my head first. Once the excitement of trying not to crash was over and we had landed, he and his men disembarked and I was told to stay put. Sometimes I feel like a well trained slash hound when I am around him. Yip, yip, yip yes master...most of the time I don't mind but occasionally it gets tedious.*

*I don't know if you have ever been to this system, but Cloud city is an impressive place. It hovers in the oxygen layer, what the locals call the 'life Zone', above the gas giant Bepin. The planet itself is incredibly beautiful. Its reddish coloured gases move lazily about the surface and lower atmosphere making it seem as though it is wearing a swirling red dress, veiled in delicate lace of golds and oranges. There are almost six million people living in this place which just floats here like a giant sail barge. I wished I had been able to fly around the city to get a really good look at it, but Lord Vader was in one of his "don't piss me off moods" so I wasn't about to try my luck. As he outlined some of his plans, I just felt sorry for the rebels he was chasing.*

*He planned on using Skywalker's friends to lure him into Cloud City and making use of the carbon freezing facility to trap him. He seemed pretty confident that Skywalker would not only come to rescue his friends but try to engage Lord Vader in a fight. It doesn't sound like this kid is really all that smart to me, you know?*

*It isn't often that Lord Vader will speak about his son but something odd happened a while back that made me ask about him. We had been in the middle of a meeting when there was a sudden ripple in the force. It felt as if a cold hand had brushed the back of my neck. I had started to ask Lord Vader what it was but he had waved his hand at me to shut up. For the longest moment he stood statue still, as though he were listening to a sound only he could hear. The conversation that followed went something like this...*

*"Skywalker is powerful in the force." He had said after what seemed forever.*

*"He is your son." I had countered.*

*"Yes, there is that but he is stronger now. He was well trained."*

*"Who is training him? I thought all the Jedi had been...uhm...dealt with."*

*"My old master managed to avoid capture and gave the boy some help. I dealt with Kenobi on the Death Star but it would appear that Skywalker has taken his lessons to heart." There was a touch of pride underneath the contempt; I could feel it as strongly as I feel your desire when you want me in your bed. (Which, by the way, I miss.) Anyway...*

*I asked him, "What will the Emperor do with Luke if you catch him?"*

*Vader had turned to look at me. "Do you really wish to know?"*

*I hadn't really had to think about my answer. "Uh no, I guess not."*

*He had turned his head to look back out at the stars. "The Emperor will train him in the ways of the Sith."*

*"I thought you said there could be only two..." I did not dare to ask the question which was really on my mind, namely if the Emperor got a hold of Luke to train up as a sith, what did that mean for Lord Vader?*

*Vader had glanced at me. "Perhaps there is hope for you yet." Was his only comment, it had made me shiver. Shortly after this all hell had broken loose because we had dropped out of hyperspace too close to the Hoth system and the fight over the Rebel base began.*

*I'm not sure when he came up with the plan to catch Luke, but I do know that Boba Fett was helping him. Speaking of Fett I had a long chat with him and ended up telling him about my biological father. Talk about a strange conversation. I won't regale you with the details here, that's a conversation to save for face to face with something to drink. It's too surreal to even try and write about.*

*Anyway, I waited on the landing pad for pretty much the whole day. It was probably one of the duller assignments I have ever had but I wasn't about to argue with Lord Vader given the mood he was in. There is enough work on a shuttle, if you look for it, and I had a book with me, one that you had given me. However, even I have my limits and once I finished the book, cleaned the engine and done all the rest of the keep Merly occupied tricks I knew, I decided to take a short nap in the cockpit, you know how easily I can sleep in the pilot's chair, (no jokes please). The most annoying thing about the entire day was that I could not leave the shuttle to explore the city. I must have had a good nap because the next thing I knew I was being barked at by Lord Vader to let the Executor know he was on his way back and the sun was setting.*

*I didn't need to be force sensitive to figure out that things had not gone so well and considering that only half the men he had arrived with left with him I guess it was good for me that I got to stay with the shuttle. The trip back to the Executor was pretty quiet from my side of things and I was grateful not to be sitting with him in the back. He was in a don't disturb me if you want to live sort of mood and I decided not to ask him about the wound on his arm.*

*Later on I pestered him about what had happened; he told me had been in a lightsaber fight with Luke Skywalker. He didn't really want to talk to me about what exactly had happened even after I inquired about the damage to his shoulder. He did fill me in on what had happened to Han Solo, though. Well actually, I had to bug him about that as well, mostly because I was curious about how that particular part of the story ended. It turns out that Solo had been easily captured, betrayed by Lando Calrissian. Vader used Solo as a test subject for the carbon freeze facility and then once he was placed into carbonite, Boba Fett was allowed to take him back to Jabba the Hutt. Fett has been after Solo for years so I am betting that this will be a bit of a relief for him and Jabba will be thrilled. I can't imagine what he'll do with a Solo encased in carbonite though, but I have to tell you he'd make a great wall decoration. Jabba was so ticked when Solo dumped his spice cargo. I don't recall ever seeing the Hutt so annoyed with one of his smugglers or so vengeful before.*

*Calrissian must have had a change of heart after watching his sometime friend get put into carbon freeze because shortly after I got notification we'd be bringing prisoners back to the Executor all hell broke loose on Cloud City. I think some sort of evacuation order had been given because people suddenly began streaming from the buildings and fleeing. The people he had wanted to capture escaped on the Millennium Falcon and I sometimes think this ship has a charmed life all of its own. Once Lord Vader was back on board the Executor he gave the order to chase the Falcon and capture her along with her crew. Vader had his men disable the hyperdrive on the Millennium Falcon but I guess something went a little wrong there because they managed to engage their hyperdrive anyway and she escaped with all hands on board, except Solo, that is. I guess Lord Vader*

*was really distracted by the fight he had had with his son because he let Admiral Pielt live despite the fact that the Millennium Falcon slipped away from right under everyone's noses. The whole ship has been buzzing about it ever since. I didn't need to be on the bridge to know that Lord Vader was furious but he also had his mind on other things.*

*Lord Vader is now utterly wrapped up in finding his son. It has become his obsession and even though he hides it, I know. It doesn't help that the Emperor nags him about it. If were to tell you I don't know how I feel about this would it seem odd to you? Would it be even odder if I told you that I even though I have never met Luke Skywalker I already don't like him? Part of me is jealous and part of me is annoyed and part of me wonders why I even care? It doesn't make much sense but I don't have anyone else to talk to about it.*

*Once I got the shuttle back on board, I was off duty. It was a long tedious day and I should be sleeping but here I am back in my quarters and I can't shut my brain up so guess what...you get this letter! I had thought that we would be heading back to the core at some point, as soon as Lord Vader concluded what ever business he still has left here but as I look out of my window I can still see Bespin and we are in a holding orbit, so I guess we are not done here yet.*

*I have to be honest with you, despite the fact that Shiv and the crew will be there, I don't much look forward to returning to the Core. With you gone it will be hard to be back there and even harder to rattle about in that stunning flat of yours all alone, which is my round-about way of telling you that I miss you but I suspect you already know this.*

*I should also tell you that the last book you gave me, you know the one you handed me before vanishing off into the Unknown Regions again, completely caught me off guard. I had taken it with me when I flew Lord Vader to Cloud City figuring there might be a bit of a wait in there but I wasn't expecting it to be so... well... arousing, for lack of a better word. It made me shiver and not in the way that happens when one is cold. I had no idea the Chiss had authors capable of such passionate wording or intensity. You always give me the impression that your people are quite cool and dispassionate with you being an exception, of course.*

*You might want to warn me the next time you give me a book like that to read. Telling me it is considered a classic somehow doesn't really give me any clues as to its true nature. Mostly, it made me miss you so needless to say by the time Lord Vader returned to the shuttle neither of us was in a particularly cheery mood. You were right though, I loved the story and how it was written. It was racy and breathtaking plus it made me cry at the end which you knew would happen. I was incredibly happy that I was alone when I was reading it. So, to answer the question you asked before you left, yes I would certainly love to read more of his work, although I'd prefer to do that when you are closer at hand. You might want to let me know when you will be around next because I have plans. Speaking of plans...what is this I hear about you having a possible change of rank? And who is this new evil warlord you are supposedly doing battle with in the Unknown Regions? Curious minds want to know.*

*Now, I need to get in touch with Jarack so that he can deliver this to you. Take care of yourself.*

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,  
Merlyn*

I folded the letter and slipped it into an envelope. An hour later, while I was in the middle of watching the HoloNet news cast my door chime rang. The surprise on my face made Jarack grin and the stormtroopers at his side tense slightly. He smirked as he walked in, waving his escort away, they ignored him despite the Imperial symbols on his flight suit sleeves.

"Thank-you gentlemen, I'll be fine." I told them. There was a moment's hesitation and then an imperceptible shrug and the stormtroopers left, the door closing quietly after.

"I wasn't expecting to see you." I said. "In fact I was going to try and get in touch with you to pick up a letter."

"Does this mean I surpassed your expectation with my exceptional service?" he asked with a smirk.

"The next time I see Thrawn I'll be sure to tell him how wonderful you are." I teased and gestured to the couch.

"I heard you had some excitement." He said as he sat down.

"Are you talking about Hoth or Bespin?"

"Both actually." He answered.

"Yes, well actually I think the most exciting part of the whole event was watching the bridge crew trying to navigate an SSD through an asteroid field. Well, I didn't actually get to see them but I saw the results."

Jarack raised both eyebrows in silent question.

I just shrugged, what was there to say about it? "So, what brings you to my neck of the galaxy?"

"I have something for you." And he drew out a large sealed package from his satchel and handed it to me. As I smiled he grinned. "See, that's the reason I do this job." He said.

"Oh?" I asked trying not to hug the courier package to my chest. "Do you want something to drink?"

He shook his head and said. "The Admiral inferred it was of great importance that this get to you today so here I am, but I can't stay."

"Hang on a sec then, I have something for you to return to him with." And I handed him the envelope. "So, you just happened to come all the way out here just to deliver mail?"

He gave me a little shrug. "Actually, this was a side trip. I was on a little mission for the Admiral, nothing spectacular and now that I am done I must return to rendezvous with him as soon as possible." His tone of voice told me he wouldn't elaborate.

I just shook my head. "Keep your secrets, then. Will you tell the Admiral I said hullo?"

"I always do, Miss." Jarack waved my letter to Thrawn and then tucked it in his satchel. "I am sure this will keep him entertained for a bit, maybe I can even catch a few hours sleep. Take care of yourself, Miss Gabriel, you look tired."

"As you so aptly put it, we've had a bit of excitement here, it does throw a bit of a hyper-wrench into my sleeping routines."

"You mean Vader actually lets you sleep?" He asked cheekily getting up and heading to the door.

I made a 'Pssht' noise at him and waved him out of my quarters. "I guess I'll see you next time."

He nodded and I watched as he left. It was late, I was exhausted and suddenly the only place I wanted to be was in bed. I was about to turn in when the door chime rang again. I thought it was Jarack, that maybe he had forgotten to tell me something but when I opened the door to my surprise it was the young man who took care of the mail. He surprised me even more by handing me a pile of small packages.

"These came in on the last delivery but we were told not to give them to you until today." He said. "I guess it must be a special day or something. I hope it was a good one, Miss."

I took the mail from his hands and merely nodded. Special day? Nothing came to mind but mail was always welcome. I thanked him and closed the door, puzzling over what made this particular day different from any other.



In all the excitement and madness I had completely forgotten that it was my birthday, the actual day I had been born and not the day my family had always celebrated. I didn't consider this day particularly special, it was an unfamiliar date to me and I had insisted that everyone in my family just ignore it. My birthday had always been celebrated on the day that I had been found and not born and I had seen no reason to change that. For the second year in a row, despite my requests to not recognise this day, everyone had utterly disregarded me on this matter. It seemed my family and friends liked having any excuse to celebrate and nothing I said or did would change that. I had to admit a little part of me was pleased.

Although my instinct was to read Thrawn's letter right away, it was the package from my family that I opened first. I slid the little recording into my player. I knew instantly that Bedi had been the instigator despite the fact that it was my father who had made the holo. My father's image shimmered into place, he looked a little uncomfortable and I knew that just out of the holo-emitter's range, Bedi was urging him to speak. My father usually wrote to me on a datacard.

*"Well...erm... as you can see, Merly we've totally ignored your wishes again. Actually it was Bel and Bedi's idea but we all agreed this is a special day and it should be treated as such. So you will be the one person in this family who gets to celebrate two birthdays instead of one. Mostly everyone here just misses you and this was a decent excuse to send you a small care package from home. But since your real birthday, your found day is still the main event we just sent little, silly things this time."*

He stopped for a moment and his holo image shimmered.

*"Anyway, I hope that you are safe and well. Vahlek said that when he left Coruscant you looked much better and your last letter confirmed that you were still among the land of the living. I do worry about you...oh Bedi is poking me to tell you that Rys got a job as a backup singer and she dropped by last week to see how you were doing. There is a data chip in this parcel somewhere with her address on it. Apart from that, honey, there is nothing new to tell you and mostly we all wanted to wish you a happy birthday. Vahl said he'd send you something separate, he's off world right now doing goodness knows what."*

Suddenly everyone was trying to crowd into the capture and I laughed as Bedi and Bel shoved in by my father. The holo-capture platform at the docking bay was small.

*"We love you and miss you! Take care of yourself, love."* My father said and was then drowned out as the other two yelled birthday wishes. I guessed they had over loaded the holo recorder because it shut off suddenly.

I unwrapped the small gifts which had been carefully mailed to me and smiled, Tatooine salt sweets, a large packet of my favourite blend of mek'kefa beans, a small holo capture of everyone I could put on a shelf and a little bottle of my father's self made alcoholic poison. It was a small piece of home and it made me long to go back. I missed them all. I also sometimes missed my life there and how it had been before I had come to work for the Empire but given the chance, I wouldn't change how things had turned out. The next thing I opened came from Shiv who, unlike my father, had no problems with making a hologram for me.

*"Hey Rim Girl!*

*I know you said not to fuss but hell, it's your real birthday so we all decided to ignore you! Birthdays should be celebrated. And don't shake your head at me!*

*I heard that you guys were off battling the rebels somewhere but the HoloNet news is sketchy right now so how about sending some details? It would be nice to know that you are still in one piece.*

*Here on Coruscant, it is the same old same old. There was no big move to Naboo this year though. The Emperor has withdrawn a lot from the public eye and Sate Pestage isn't interested in the usual change over so everyone stayed put. I can't say that I am sorry. The move was always a big pain in the rear to co ordinate. Besides I have other more pressing things to deal with at the moment.*

*Pestage is a strange man, downright creepy actually but I guess that should not be too surprising seeing as whose footsteps he's following in. He's on really chummy terms with Ysanne Isard so I guess things, from an Intel point of view, will get tighter. Isard is a real piece of work and lately she has been digging her claws into a lot of things. I can't talk about them here but I'll fill you in when you get back. Ever since Tygs's arrest the atmosphere at court amongst us lowly Palace workers is tense to say the least.*

*Anyway I didn't start this holo to whine at you, I can do that when you come back, you are coming back at some point aren't you or did that manic ex-flame of yours scare you off Coruscant for life? I hope not, I miss you, you know. So have a happy day. The little gift is from Me, Ynyth, Bobbyn and Cati, yes I told her. I know it's not the birthday you really celebrate but we have something else planned for that. Still you were born on this day so we decided to make it a big deal, deal with it! Oh Cati says not to get blown up or anything, that would be a bad way to celebrate! Love you lots!"*

Shiv ended the holo with a kiss kiss motion. I opened the little package and grinned. They had sent me a set of holo-dramas, the first two seasons of my favourite show. A gripping drama set during the Clone War times called *Lost Brotherhood*. I had complained because I kept missing episodes due to various incidents, accidents and being hauled off planet with Lord Vader. Now I had something to watch aside from the boring junk that was transmitted over the ship's internal entertainment channel.

My uncle had written me a letter, instead of his usual datacard messages. His handwriting was slanted, old fashioned and surprisingly neat.

*Lei'lei,*

*I know you will be making 'that face' but a day of birth should be celebrated. Your father told me that they are mailing you something from home and asked if I wanted to be included but I had already made some plans so I begged off this time. I would have recorded a datachip but the damn recorder is broken, so I am doing this the old fashioned way.*

*I am currently on Anzat. Earlier today I met with someone who might be able to help me understand where Jyrki got a hold of the Scha'ad'uk. I once trained under this man, who is as ancient as he is wise, and I thought that he would have some answers for me. Unfortunately he was unable to help as much as I had hoped.*

*There are a number of the Scha'ad'uk unaccounted for, worth a huge amount of money in the collectors circles. He was very distressed to hear what had happened. It is an offence to misuse the assassin's blade in this manner. I could tell you the tradition of the knives but that would take me a day's worth of writing and I think that's a tale better told in person. He was able to point in me in the right direction as to how Jyrki may have gotten a hold of the blade though, so we will see what information that turns up. I am grateful for your patience in this matter with Jyrki; I know it has not been easy for you. I promise you I will deal with him.*

*Now on to other things, I was on Nar Shaddaa a week ago and happened on a small shop that specializes in custom holograms of all kinds. I know that despite your gregariousness and ability to make friends you still get a bit lonely especially when you are in space with Vader so I had this made for you. It is a mini holo-pet. They were able to take one of the images I had of Kahvi and turn her into one of these holo-pets. They*

*come in all sorts of sizes including life size, but the holo-transmitter for the life-size was too big to post. I also thought that the mini-pet would be something that you could sit on your desk, a little bit of whimsy for you.*

*I hope that you are well and fully recovered and that you are having a glorious day. Will see you soon enough I imagine. Stay out of trouble.*

*All my love,  
Zte'sa Vahlek*

I took the little holo transmitter which was as large as the palm of my hand and set it on the table in front of the couch, then turned it on. Much to my utter delight suddenly a small blue-glowing bearded jax hologram popped up and began to run around the table doing all the things that bearded jaxes do. I briefly skimmed through the instruction manual that had come with it and was delighted to find out that I could name my holo-pet and get it to do tricks. It was the perfect thing and I loved my uncle for it. I sat and looked at the gifts and the messages. Despite what I had told everyone about not celebrating this day I was grateful no one ever listened to me. Before I opened Thrawn's parcel I got up and made a cup of tea, saving and savouring the best for last.

*A mia' Tekari,*

*The Chiss have a saying; Sweetest is the fruit that is just out of reach. And, indeed, this is how you are for me at this very moment. Here, in the deep black of these Unknown Regions so far away, I am forced to come to terms with the fact that there is someone in my life for whom I care deeply, despite my initial desire to avoid all attachments of any sort. Have I learned how to tell you that I miss you with the appropriate language yet? I think so. If you are smiling as you read this then I have already achieved part of my goal.*

*I distinctly recall you mentioning that this was the date of your birth, although not the day you celebrate it on and no doubt you told everyone in your family and small circle of close friends to ignore it again. I am also absolutely certain everyone important in your life has disregarded this request. As you can see, I am no exception.*

*I once told you, on my home world we celebrate birthdays with a mixture of solemnity and quiet reflection. The idea being to look back over the year that has passed and see where improvements could be made, what mistakes were made and what was good, well done and praiseworthy. When I first experienced how humans celebrated a birthday I was horrified at the crassness of it, the sheer madness of the partying and the gayety of it all.*

*To me, as a Chiss, this was not a worthy way of marking the passage of one's life. The birthday celebrations I observed at the Academy on Carida were raucous, loud affairs that usually involved a great deal of alcohol and tended to end badly with fist fights and an over abundance of testosterone induced emotion. Still, these events were rites of passage and as I observed more of them I began to see that human birthday traditions such as parties, the giving of gifts and mementos were not so much about being boorish or self centered but rather just a very different way of recognizing the span of a life time. Humans, I have come to understand, do not need a specific or special day to reflect up on their lives, they have a tendency to do this whenever the moment suits them.*

*Were I with you on Coruscant and had time permitted I would have taken you out to dinner at that lovely little bistro you like so much. I am certain that you have the perfect designer dress from Cati for such an occasion somewhere in your closet, something pretty and flattering to show off your beauty as well as be seductive enough to make me want to utterly misbehave.*

*Dinner would be a delicious, flirtatious affair throughout which I am sure you would tease me to distraction using your feminine wiles and your delightful force talent.*

*While, I would do my best to maintain my cool in public, I would be forced to devise my plan of retaliation. I, too, can be subtle as you well know. I am certain you can imagine the things I am capable of and I can picture the blush on your cheeks as you read this. You have no idea how much that thought pleases me.*

*In-between all of these games of seduction, we would talk about everything and anything, as we always do, and I would learn a multitude of new things about you that I had never known before.*

*After dinner, I believe that going dancing at Geddy's or taking in a show at the Opera House would be in order, here I would do my very best to seduce you with delicate caresses and warm whispers so that by the time we returned home you would not be able to resist my nefarious plans for the rest of the night.*

*Once home, we might step out onto the balcony with a night cap of brandy but chances are greater that I would simply whisk you off to bed and celebrate the day that you were born to the absolute best of my ability for as long as my stamina and your desire hold up. Perhaps it would not be the loud, drunken and often wild revels which I have observed in the past, but I assure you it would be an evening neither you nor I would forget.*

*Sadly, my dear, we are not afforded this luxury so you will have to make do with my words, your imagination and this small gift I am sending which I have had in my possession for some time now.*

*I bought it from a small shop on Corellia, a place called Vosteo's. I had thought about presenting it to you while we were on Coruscant, an early celebration of this day, but circumstances brought on by your friend Jyrki prevented that. I had then hoped a quick meeting that had been planned with Lord Vader might provide the opportunity to give it to you in person but this meeting was cancelled. The rebels Lord Vader is intent on chasing took precedence over the strategic planning session. So as a last resort I have once again abused Jarack's good nature and asked him to deliver it to you while he is on a mission for me, hopefully in time for your birthday.*

*Now, I am afraid I must end this if it is to reach you in time. I know that this letter will be bittersweet. The mixture of longing and desire, tied up with distance is difficult. Believe me when I say that you are not alone in feeling this. You are in my thoughts, Tekari, and as distracting as this is it is also a comfort. Be well.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'ia,*

*Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I sat with trembling fingers and unwrapped the perfectly folded paper that covered Thrawn's gift. I was careful not to tear it because it was beautiful, elegant and had been handmade, hand painted so that I wondered if it was from Csilla. Hidden by the exquisite wrapping was a small, round box made from what at first glance looked like bone. The little box which sat in the palm of my hand was lovely and delicate. Both box and lid were decorated with intricate and beautiful carvings that were of a style familiar to me. I smiled when I recognised cracker-berry flowers. I cupped both hands around it and closed my eyes to see if it would give up any memories.

*It was Navaari I saw, sitting someplace cold. He was carefully putting the finishing touches into the bone box he had made. There was a smile on his face, he was speaking with someone but I couldn't see who. I couldn't tell what he had said but there was laughter.*

The image faded quickly but it had been enough. I lifted the lid to the box and my heart skipped a beat. The pendant dangled from its chain as I lifted it from its little nest. The setting was of a simple design made from Corellian silver. It showed off the oval stone which was about the same size as the top of my thumb without over shadowing it.

I played with it in my fingers. I didn't have to look hard to find the stone's inner fire. It was one of the most exquisite examples of milky ma'arilite, as well as one of the largest that I had ever seen in my life. I didn't dare to think what a piece such as this was worth as I unclasped the pendant I always wore and fastened the new one around my neck. The blue-green fire that danced in the stone was astonishing in its brilliance and was as vibrant as the little round one I usually wore was subtle. I curled my hand around the stone and listened for any of its memories but the only thing that came to me was a strong sense of longing mixed with great affection. Underneath the pendant was a short letter, folded up neatly to fit into the box.

*Sj'iu' Tekari,*

*You will never know how sorry I am that I cannot place this piece around your neck myself and see the look in your eyes when the stone shows itself to you. As you have surmised by now, it was Kirja'navaar'inkjerii that carved the small box. I had spoken to him some time ago about your familial discovery including your date of birth. The Dantassi believe greatly in honouring the day of one's birth so, on arrangement, we met not too long ago and he showed me what he had done to commemorate your birthday. It was the perfect container for the pendant I had found on Corellia.*

*Kirja'navaar'inkjerii joked about my lack of imagination, saying that you already had a ma'arilite pendant. I told him of your love and fascination for the stone and he shared with me the story of how he showed you Hjallian sky fire. A small part of me wished I could have been there to share this moment with you but of course given the circumstances at that time perhaps it is a good thing I wasn't there at all. He remarked that the piece I found resonates with the same colours you saw that night. Indeed, it is one of the most brilliant examples of this stone that I have ever seen.*

*The Mon Calamari I purchased the pendant from told me that setting is new but that the actual stone is quite old. He mentioned that it had been in private collection for a very long time and the only reason it was now on sale was that the owner had passed away and his estate had been sold off. I do not know if there will be any unpleasant memories in the piece, I hope not.*

*In difference to the small pendant I gave you so long ago, this one is neither subtle nor secret. It is vibrant and dances with colour. Yet, true to form if you hold it up to the light you can see the translucent nature of the stone. It is a beautiful piece meant to be worn by a beautiful woman not tucked away in some collection drawer never to be seen.*

*I hope that for a small pocket of time on this one day you have found peace and joy. I also hope that despite your pleas that this day to go unrecognized this was not the case. You are a bright spark in what is more often than not a dark galaxy. So, with that I wish you a happy birthday.*

*A'mera*

*Za'ar*

I re-read Thrawn's letter and decided that his eloquence was a form of Chiss torture. His words created an ache and a longing in me that I had not thought possible. *Bittersweet* he had written and he had summed up my emotions so well that not for the first time did I wonder if he had me under constant surveillance.

With a deep sigh I sat back and absently played with the new pendant that hung around my neck, staring at the reminders that I was not alone in spite of how I sometimes felt. With these thoughts in my head I went to bed. I was exhausted and I had expected to sleep like a stone but that was not the case, instead I dreamt.

*I was standing in the sunlit Gallery Hall of the Jedi Temple. In the dream I wondered how I had gotten here because the temple I knew was dark and spooky. At my*

side was a tall man in Jedi robes of browns, he had his arms folded across his chest and like me he stared out through the open columns to the bustling city below. I turned my head to look up at him and realised it was Qui Gon Jinn, at the very same time I realised that it was not me in the dream looking at the Jedi Master but my mother. I was seeing through her eyes, a passive viewer on events that had already happened.

"You seem troubled A'kali." Qui Gon said.

She nodded but said nothing.

"The disturbances in the Force trouble you?" he asked.

"Yes master." She answered. "Master Tane tells me it is normal for one my age to feel ...anxious but I sense something more than simple angst."

"Walk with me." Qui Gon told her and they made their way slowly through the corridor to one of the small gardens. She raised her head to the sun's warmth and breathed in deeply. I could smell the scent of green grass and rich loamy soil. He led the way to a garden bench and they both sat down. For a long moment they were silent.

"You miss your master while he is away, do you not?" he asked.

She nodded. "I have grown fond of him, maybe too fond. When he leaves I feel a sense of loss I cannot explain. This is what Master Yoda means by attachment isn't it?"

Qui Gon smiled. "Attachment is hard to overcome, it is a normal human emotion." He said gently with a smile. "But I sense this is not what troubles you, young Padawan."

She shook her head. "I have doubts, Master," She said, "about the path that has been chosen for me."

He cocked his head to one side and looked at her, waiting for her to continue. Qui Gon Jinn was a patient man, he would wait until she found the right words to explain what she was troubled over.

"I want to have children." She said suddenly.

"That particular activity is not encouraged amongst the Jedi." He said gently almost jokingly.

"I know and that is why I now question everything that I have been taught. I work with the babies that come to the Temple and every day I find myself longing for a child of my own more and more."

"Longings can be overridden, A'kali. Part of your training teaches you how to do this and Master Tane excels as a teacher. You have chosen to take the path of a Jedi, you have been a most diligent and dedicated student. Why the sudden change?"

She was silent for what seemed a very long time before she found the courage to answer. "I had a dream, or perhaps a vision of the future. I saw myself with child. A baby girl. It was so real that when I woke up and found myself in my own bed alone I was heartbroken." She told him, her voice trembling at the memory of her dream.

"A vision of the future?" he asked. A catch in his voice made her look up into his blue eyes.

She nodded.

"The future is fluid, A'kali. It is always in motion and difficult to see or predict. Perhaps you are seeing a possibility from a future that would have happened had you not been taken to the Temple and trained." His words were logical but she sensed the underlying concern in his voice.

"Yes Master Qui Gon." She said, and then burst out. "But it was so real! I was still a Jedi, I saw my lightsaber and I knew the ways of the force! I was using the baby training techniques on her, on my baby and worst of all I was terrified for her. And there was something else. Something awful was happening in the galaxy. I have never felt such fear before."

"Do you know what you were afraid of?"

*She shook her head. "It was just a shadow, something dark which clouded everything else. I woke up or the vision stopped after this, but it left me ... very afraid for my daughter."*

*"You do not have a daughter." He told her.*

*"But I will." She said firmly. There was no mistaking the worry in his eyes then.*

*He went to say something else but was interrupted by a young man, another Padawan slightly older than A'kali.*

*"Master, I am sorry to intrude," he said shyly. "Hullo 'kali."*

*"Hi, Obi Wan." She said, blushing.*

*"Yes, Obi Wan, what is it?" Qui Gon asked without any note of annoyance in his voice.*

*"The council has asked to see you, Master. There is trouble on Naboo and they have requested help. The Chancellor has asked for negotiators."*

*Qui Gon Jinn sighed. "Very well, go ahead and I will be there momentarily." He told his apprentice. He waited until Obi Wan was out of sight then turned back to the young woman who sat troubled at his side.*

*"A'kali, when master Tane returns you must speak of these matters with him and if you cannot wait then perhaps one of the others can help you? Perhaps Master Tholme, I know that you and his apprentice, Quinlan, have spent time together so perhaps you would feel more comfortable speaking with his master about such matters if you are too intimidated by Master Yoda or Master Windu. I see how these thoughts trouble you, it would not be wise to keep them bottled up inside."*

*"Yes Master Qui Gon, thank you. I appreciate the time you have taken for me today."*

*"It is part of the job of being a master. In the end, A'kali, time is really the only true gift we have to pass on to others. It is a precious commodity, and sharing it with a thoughtful and delightful student such as you makes every moment worthwhile. Do not trouble yourself so much with things that have not and may never happen. Concentrate on the here and now, be mindful of the living force and it will guide you." He smiled and got up. She did the same, bowing her respect to him then watched as he left the garden. While she did not know it at the time, she would never see him alive again.*

*The dream shifted and moved, the scene faded to the desert where I found myself back in my own body once again, staring at the snaking sands, the aftermath of a desert storm. The man who stood at my side had been dead for longer than I had been alive but I felt as though he is a part of my soul anyway.*

*"You face great trials in this time of darkness, daughter of A'kali L'uanna. The darkness that has stretched its hand across the galaxy is powerful." He said.*

*"What am I to do?" I asked.*

*"Center on the living force and trust your instincts. You have a bright spirit and your mother's strength of will. Be strong when you are tested and do not let the darkness devour your soul as it has Anakin. We were wrong about so many things and arrogance was our greatest failing, do not let it become yours." He turned to look at me and his fingers lifted the new pendant that Thrawn had given to me. "Ma'arilite, the stone that holds the soul's light." He said softly to himself. "May it guide you in the worst of times yet to come."*

*As though wrapped in a heat haze, Qui Gon shimmered and vanished. The sand hissed about me as the wind stirred it up. I shivered despite the warmth, scared of what was being foretold and the scene around me changed again.*

*I found myself in the darkness of the bedroom in the flat on Coruscant. I shifted restlessly. Thrawn, at my side, was woken by my movement. He reached over and caressed my skin with the tips of his fingers. The fear that had swept me up in the desert*

was swiftly replaced by desire. Wordlessly I moved to his touch, my eyes closed so that the sensations he created were heightened.

"Sj'iu' Tekari, kej e'mai vamarae ..." He whispered in my ear, his breath warm and moist upon my neck.

I whimpered as the ache he created deep within me became overwhelming. His lips found my skin and burned where they touched. Somewhere deep in the back of my mind I knew I was dreaming but I didn't care. I needed him and I wanted him so badly that I was willing to sleep forever to have him.

"Peyla'mer a'mal'yn." He whispered. You are mine, he had said.

"Zav'niaask nen kahden." I whispered back. Forever and always.

"Of course you are, child." I heard him begin to chuckle but the voice was not that of Thrawn.

I opened my eyes and found myself staring into a face that was horribly familiar to me. The Emperor laughed then. I struggled to get away from him, fought to untangle myself from the bed sheets which had wound themselves around my legs. His gaze burned through to my soul and the pain it caused was fierce. I tried to push back from him as he cackled in a glee which bordered on manic. From somewhere in the distance I heard an alarm sound, the constant peeping becoming louder and louder, melding with the terrible sounds of the Emperor's voice until I could no longer tell them apart.

I woke up screaming.

What had been an alarm in my dream was in reality my comm. Sweat soaked and pumped up on adrenaline I answered it rudely. Lord Vader's reply was equally impolite. After giving me his latest set of orders he disconnected without further word, leaving me with about an hour to get myself ready to ferry him to his meeting with the Emperor. He had not sounded happy about it.

I untangled myself from the bed sheets which had trapped my limbs and got up. I sat with my head buried in my hands on the edge of the bed trying to make sense of the nightmare I had just escaped from. It could not be a coincidence that I had a dream where Qui Gon had warned me about some terrible thing yet to come just as Lord Vader was called to meet with the Emperor and dragging me along. With a sigh I got up and went to shower. At least, I thought ruefully, I would go to what ever doom awaited me clean.

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I was in the middle of the pre flight check when I watched Lord Vader approach the shuttle. He was carrying a box in his arms the way a new mother would carry her first born child and he was anxious. I could feel the tension coming off him in waves. Whatever it was that was making him uneasy, I didn't want to know, I turned my attention back to the job at hand.

I knew Lord Vader had settled on board when his mind brushed mine with a ripple that said '*Get on with it, girl.*' He would not be sitting with me in the cockpit because this was his personal shuttle, not just a standard transport shuttle. It was designed to especially for him and it was designed to be private. I also knew that he was not alone back there either. His two Noghri body guards had managed, as they always did, to come on board without detection. I was used to him being terse but ever since the meeting with his son on Cloud City several days ago, he had been closed off and dangerously on edge. When he had assigned me the job of flying him to meet the Emperor I had not dared to disagree, nightmare or no nightmare.

I piloted the shuttle out of the *Executor's* docking bay into open space, enjoying the one thing in my life that was uncomplicated. Flying was freedom, especially when I was alone in the cockpit. I added the course data to the ship's nav computer which I had been



given and watched the stars distort as we slid into the hyperspace lane. I had no idea exactly where we were heading, the co ordinates had gone from the datachip to the Nav computer but wherever it was, the Emperor was already there waiting for Lord Vader, waiting for what ever it was in the box that Lord Vader carried. I got the distinct feeling that this was not going to be a happy meeting. Despite the success at Hoth, Lord Vader had failed to capture Luke Skywalker and the Emperor did not look kindly on failure, not even from his second in command or perhaps it would be better to say especially not from his sith apprentice.

The trip was long and tedious. I was glad when the nav computer peeped that we were coming out of hyperspace. Before long a lush green planet appeared in my window. It was a gorgeous looking place and I wondered what it was about this world that had drawn the Emperor to it. It didn't seem like the sort of place he would have much use for.

*"The docking bay is on the south side of the mountain."* Lord Vader's voice in my head shattered my small moment of peace.

*"Yes, my lord."* I answered.

What he hadn't told me was that the docking bay was quite literally carved into the mountain.

*"Watch the dorsal wing when you bring her in, this docking bay roof is much lower than it looks."*

I silently rolled my eyes but he was right, the mountain docking bay roof was indeed lower than it looked. The shuttle's wings folded up, and I guided her in carefully. The ship touched down gently and I shut the engines off

*"Shall I wait here for you?"* I asked mentally as I unbuckled my straps and made my way back into the main body of the shuttle to meet him.

"No, you will accompany me. The Emperor has expressed the desire to see you after my meeting with him." He said as I almost bumped into him.

"As you wish, my lord." I said, not liking the sound of that at all. "How long will we be here?" I asked trying not to look at the transport box he held in his hands.

"For as long as my Master requires it." he replied waspishly. "Come along, child, the Emperor does not like to be kept waiting."

I glanced at the two shadows lurking in the background and let Lord Vader lead the way out of the ship. My mouth had gone dry and my hands trembled. It had been a good while since I had come face to face with the Emperor and I was scared. I could not imagine what he would want with me but fragments of my nightmare flashed through my mind. I shut them down, choosing instead to concentrate on the image I had memorised of Qui Gon Jinn. My jitters eased a little.

The strange facility, Lord Vader had called Mount Tantiss, was a pretty out of the way place and the labyrinth inside of it was even twistier and difficult to get to. Lord Vader stalked down the shuttle's ramp and brushed past the small welcoming party that had waited for him nervously. I did not see the Noghri disembark, they had other less conventional means to leave the ship. Unlike Rukh, they did not even bother to acknowledge my presence, let alone speak to me. I could sense them though and I took a certain amount of comfort from their stealth.

It was a gloomy and depressing place filled with great evil and haunted by ghosts I could sense but did not understand. I shuddered as I followed Lord Vader through the dimly lit halls. I wondered briefly what the Emperor did with such a dismal, out of the way place but I wasn't going to ask. It felt as though we had walked for kilometres but I knew that was not the case. The dark, narrow paths made it impossible for me to know exactly where we were or how deeply into the mountain we had gone. When the corridors finally opened up into what looked like a foyer and became brighter, Lord Vader stopped, turned and looked at me.

"You will wait here and not go wandering off. My master values his privacy." Lord Vader growled.

I nodded my understanding and watched as he swept off to his meeting with the Emperor, the box that bothered him so much in his hands and the two Noghri in tow.

"Miss Gabriel, please follow me." A rough voice came from out of the shadows, making me jump with fright.

I looked around me and found myself staring into the pit dark eyes of one of the Emperor's lesser advisors. The man was almost as creepy as the Emperor himself. He was dressed in the heavy, dark coloured robes of his office and he moved with a silence that was just plain disturbing. I did as he asked and followed him to a suite of rooms that did nothing to ease my growing nervousness. I had to work hard at quelling the sandjiggers in my stomach. I felt claustrophobic, being deep inside of a mountain was not comforting nor did it help to calm me down.

"The guest area is fully equipped and you will find refreshments and beverages in there." He said gesturing to the small room I supposed was some sort of kitchenette. "I am to request that you remain in this area, the rest of the facility is off limits to civilians and guests. You will be executed on sight should you decide to leave these rooms unless it is by the Emperor's request and under escort, is this understood?" He said with the same tone of voice he had used to tell me where the refreshments were.

I knew he was not lying and if I were to even poke my nose outside of the guest suit's doors I would be shot. While I had not seen them, this place was filled with members of the secretive Royal Guard. I wondered if CJ had ever been here. I made a mental note to ask him about this place the next time we chatted.

"Miss Gabriel, do you understand what I have said?" He interjected into my thoughts.

"Yes." I told him and tried not to let the shiver of fear that cascaded up and down my spine show.

He nodded and left silently, the door shutting behind him with a dull thud.

The small suit of rooms was sparsely furnished but it had the Emperor's distinctive taste, darkly elegant and expensive. I wandered about the main sitting room area and marvelled at the bookshelves and the art work hanging on the walls. The paintings were from a variety of artists including Venthan Chassu. I was stunned to see one painting in particular and as I stood beneath the large work of art, I had to suppress the urge to run and hide. It was Chassu's grimmest work from his darkest time, the last piece he ever painted and the absolute crown of the collection in the room. *Palpatine Triumphant*, the painting Thrawn had once told me about, chilled me to the bone. I didn't think, in my life, that I had ever seen a more frightening work of art. Chassu had captured the evil in the Emperor perfectly.

The painting was of medium size and had been rendered with Chassu's astounding eye for colour and beautiful technique. You had to lean in closely to see where he had touched brush to canvas and under the right lighting you could see the huge range of colours that he used. It would have been beautiful had it not been for the subject matter.

Chassu had depicted Palpatine seated upon a throne that looked, on first glance, as though it were carved from Nubian alastra stone but on closer inspection I could see that the throne was actually created out of the broken bones and skulls of variety of beings, humans included. It was like watching a bad shuttle wreck, it both repelled and attracted at the same time. It wasn't the morbid throne that bothered me, however, it was the look that Chassu had painted in Palpatine's eyes. There was a glitter of unbridled malevolence in them. The smile on his face was not one of a man who loved his subjects or cared about his Empire, it was the smile of a man who knew he had won everything. It was the smile of a man who not only had power but used it in every single way he could. I stood and stared

into the darkness that were his eyes and felt my heart stop. Here, in this room staring at this painting, I knew a fear that I had never actually acknowledged before.

This Emperor Palpatine terrified me to the very depth of my soul and this was the first time that I had truly realised it and for a moment I felt sheer panic. Ice cold sweat ran down my back, my heart began to pound so fiercely I was certain the entire mountain could hear it and I had to fight against the sudden nausea that swelled up in my belly. It was like drowning, I couldn't breathe. I bent over putting my head between my knees until the sensation of dying passed. When my heart had slowed down enough I stood up straight and concentrated on breathing in and out. Whatever the reason for my being here, it was not going to be fun. I decided that what I needed the most was a hefty shot of brandy but since that was not an option I went to explore the small kitchenette. I had no appetite but I hoped that a cup of tea might calm me down a little.

I assumed that the meeting between Lord Vader and his master would have taken many hours, as was so often the case, but it was surprisingly short. I was browsing through the books when the pinch faced man who had escorted me here came to take me to meet with the Emperor. The ride in the turbo lift was short and tense. I had to fight against the desire to run and struggled to maintain my composure. When the lift stopped and the door opened I couldn't seem to breathe. Rooted to the spot, I didn't move and barely felt the hand on my shoulder that nudged me out of the turbo lift onto the long, wide walkway which led to where the Emperor sat. The audience hall was quiet and oppressive. I tried to quell my rising anxiety because this was exactly what this chamber was designed for. This room was all about instilling terror, all about intimidation and it worked incredibly well.

"Come closer child." Palpatine's soft voice rippled through the room like a cold caress.

"Yes Excellency." I whispered like a frightened child and did as he asked.

He sat on a raised platform, slunk in a chair which seemed to swallow him up. It was not a throne made from shattered skeletons of but a seat made from a dark ore that almost moulded itself to his body. He slouched back against it, his arms draped flaccidly over the armrests. I stopped within that acceptable circle of space and knelt down on the floor.

"Rise girl, and come closer so that I can see you. I will not bite." He purred.

I swallowed back my panic, tried to calm my pounding heart and came to stand in the light which illuminated the area around throne. The Royal Guards that normally flanked his throne had melted back into the shadows. I was not a threat.

He leaned forward slightly and looked down at me. "I see you have recovered well from the latest incident with the renegade Jyrki Andando." He smiled as he reached out and caressed the side of my face with fingers that were dry and cold, before I could answer he continued. "Admiral Thrawn was most concerned when he received the message that you had been attacked, you are so very lucky to have such a *friend*." His voice sent shivers down my spine. I had to fight not to jerk away from his touch. I just nodded because my mouth was so dry I wasn't sure that words would come out right.

"I hope the next time you are assaulted by this man you will take care of the problem yourself, you are more than capable. After all, you were able to kill Riori Griff easily enough and you were badly injured when you did it. It would be unfortunate if I had to continue to waste resources on training that was not being used and assign someone else to deal with him." He told me. I was not sure of the exact nature of the threat behind his words was but I knew I didn't like it.

"I understand, Excellency." I said even though I was not so certain I did.

The Emperor sat back in his chair again; the shadows of his hooded cloak mostly shrouded his face. I watched carefully as he smiled slowly, his left hand moving slightly to something which lay on the small table beside him. The transport box looked familiar and

with a jolt I realised it was the same box that Lord Vader had carried so carefully with him. The silence in the room was oppressive and when the Emperor spoke it only seemed to add to the weight.

He caressed the box with the backs of his fingers. The action was obscenely familiar to me, only it was Thrawn's fingers and my skin. I shuddered. "Ah yes, Lord Vader's gift to me." When he spoke it was almost a lover's sigh. "I sense your curiosity..." He said. "Come closer."

I did as he requested but I didn't know how to react. I wasn't sure what he wanted from me. I only knew that I was scared, more scared than I had ever been of anyone in my life. Even though he had never done me any harm, even though he had never hurt me or given me any reason to be afraid of him, he terrified me. He opened the box carefully and drew out something but it was in the shadows so I couldn't tell what it was.

"Here, child, tell me what you think of this." He said leaning even closer to hand me what he had taken from the box. I didn't think to hesitate I took it without considering the consequences. Wrapped in a cloth was a hard cylindrical object, I stepped back and opened it trying not to show my surprise when I uncovered a lightsaber.

"Excellency...?" I swallowed. This was what Lord Vader had carried so carefully, so gingerly? A lightsaber? For a fleeting moment I wondered if it was actually my mother's and Palpatine had someone how discovered the truth, somehow found out where it was, taken it from my uncle but on closer inspection I understood this was not the case.

"Lord Vader has mentioned that he has begun instructing you on how to use a weapon such as this. Go on, touch it, child, I am most curious to see what you think of its craftsmanship." He said gently, once again sinking back into the throne, into the shadows.

I did as he asked, picking up the lightsaber despite the fact that every instinct in my body was shouting at me not to. I should have listened to that little voice but the Emperor's will was far more powerful. I sucked in air. This lightsaber had a history, a long and terrible story. The instant I held it in my hand it told me its tale with images so crystal clear, so incredibly violent that I wasn't at all certain I had not actually been swept back in time. I did not even realise that I had dropped to the cold stone floor or that I had screamed. The pain that engulfed me was bewildering. I curled up into the tiniest ball I could and rode out the storm of memories as best I could.

A book or a Holo Drama unfolds its tale one page at a time. The reader is drawn backwards and forwards through lives, through time, through entire galaxies without ever having to leave the comfort of their own homes. For me, objects unfolded their stories like frantic lovers trying to share an entire lifetimes in a single moment, jumbled and chaotic. The visions ran through my body and my brain like a herd of banthas fleeing a fire. The experience was excruciatingly painful but I didn't let go of the lightsaber because like most people watching a Holo Drama, no matter how awful it was, how scary or how suspenseful, I wanted to know the ending.

In the space of a few moments I had learned more about the history of the object I held than any storyteller could have told me. I had also learned much more about the man I worked for, more than he would ever have wished me to know. I doubled over in agony as the phantom pain of limbs lost, love lost and every betrayal it was possible to experience shot through me. It was a misery which was never mine yet I felt it, fresh and raw. I heard someone cry out from far away. It might have been me but I would never be sure.

The first thing I became aware of when the images slowly receded was laughter, soft and malevolent. The second thing I realised was that I was huddled on the cold stone floor, curled over, gasping for breath, clutching the lightsaber with my hands to my chest so tightly that my knuckles ached. I moved slowly, looking upwards until my eyes met those of the Emperor's. I wondered if he could read the hatred I felt for him in my stare. For a split second I considered igniting the weapon I held in my hands and killing him but from

somewhere deep in my mind another voice, a voice that often came to me in my dreams, whispered me back into sanity, a lullaby of calm, and slowly the rage receded. I drew a deep shuddering breath.

"I see that rumours of this gift of yours were more than just idle gossip." The Emperor murmured.

I could think of no answer and just worked on breathing in and out. I blinked the tears that had welled in my eyes away and ignored them as they rolled down my cheeks.

"Well, child, tell me what you saw." He said. His voice was gentle, almost avuncular but there was no mistaking the hardness behind it. This was not a request I could refuse.

"This was Anakin's. He built it." *This weapon is your life...* words Anakin had heard more times than I could ever have counted echoed in my head. "He used it during the Clone wars." I said when I finally found my voice. "He used it when he fought against his mentor, Obi Wan Kenobi on a planet filled with fire." There was so much more to this story, so much more history which I knew but I could never have been able to sum up the lifetime's worth of pictures in a few sentences. This was the lightsaber that had cut down the children in the Jedi Temple, the same weapon that had slaughtered the separatists who were awaiting word from their master on Mustafar. Its memories held so much rage and sorrow that I did not think there was enough space in the galaxy to contain them all. No wonder Lord Vader was the way he was. I did not know how he lived with these memories on a daily basis.

"What happened at Mustafar?" the Emperor prompted.

"There was a battle." I said slowly. "Between Kenobi and Anakin," The terrible emotions I felt threatened to overwhelm me and I had to fight to steady my voice. "There was so much anger and so much hatred. Anakin thought that Kenobi had betrayed him...betrayed you and everything that he believed in. He was so angry, so confused, and so afraid... he lost his mind..." I could not put what I had been shown into any coherent story. Anakin had not known what to do. He had been twisted into something he didn't know how to cope with so he slipped into the dark abyss. He could not reconcile what he had done with what had been done to him or with what he had seen so he had simply given into it and had lost his soul to the man who would become Emperor.

"Yes," The Emperor sighed lovingly. "Continue."

"Kenobi beat Anakin. Anakin thought he could win but he let his arrogance get in the way and Kenobi... Kenobi severed Anakin's arms and legs..." My voice caught, I had felt the pain flash through me as though it were my limbs that Kenobi's lightsaber had sliced through flesh in a move so graceful it was like a dance. The agony was unbearable.

The Emperor said nothing. He was a surprisingly patient man who knew when and how to wait. I found my voice and continued. "Then he took the weapon, he kept it for many years safe and secret. He gave it to the boy named Luke and showed him how to use it." I closed my eyes. There were so many images I didn't know yet how to unravel them. What I did not tell the Emperor was how Kenobi would take the lightsaber out of the box he had hidden it in every now and then to look at it and weep for the one who had once owned it. He had felt responsible for what had happened to Anakin. He had not known how deep the betrayal had gone until the very end and it had shocked him to his very core. He had loved Anakin as a brother and a part of him had died when Anakin had turned. So many lives had been shattered all because of Palpatine. It was bewildering that one man could wreck so much havoc.

The Emperor nodded as if this news was not unknown to him already. "Tell me what happened on Cloud city."

"Lord Vader and Luke, they fought." I told him. "Luke came to Cloud city because he wanted to rescue his friends from Lord Vader but he didn't know it was a trap. Lord Vader wanted to seduce him into falling into the carbon freeze unit but Luke was able to escape

this fate. Lord Vader wanted to bring him back to you, as a gift, alive but encased in carbonite." My voice sounded flat. Vader's voice, a remnant of the lightsaber's memory, echoed in my ears...*The force is with you young Skywalker...but you are not a Jedi yet...* Luke had been so scared but so determined as well. He did not know that he was facing his father. "The fight was so one sided. Vader played with him, tried to seduce him into failing. Luke had no chance but he landed a lucky blow which caught Lord Vader on the shoulder. In retaliation, Lord Vader cut off Luke's hand." I said quietly. "I do not know what happened after this. That's where the memories end."

"You sense no deception in Lord Vader? No desire to save or protect this boy? No desire to tell this boy of his heritage?"

I shook my head. "No Excellency. This weapon holds no memory of Luke knowing who his father is. Lord Vader only wished to please you. He lives to serve you."

"Do you truly believe that, my dear?"

"Yes." I said with as much conviction as I could muster.

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence as the Emperor weighed my words, sifted to find a lie. But I had told the truth and the visions that had assaulted me were, for the most part, from Anakin's time with this weapon not Luke's. I let him probe because there had been nothing to hide. Satisfied that I had not been withholding anything he wanted to hear, the Emperor chuckled. It wasn't a very good sound.

"Your loyalty to my apprentice is delightfully touching. What has he done to deserve such admiration, child? He is a man who has done despicable things. He slaughters without thought of mercy or second chances; he is ruthless and full of hate. He would kill you in an instant if you were not of use to him in some way or under my protection, yet you come to his defence without hesitation." He asked as he leaned forward to take the lightsaber back out of my shaking hand.

I did not know what to say. I had no answers for this question because I did not understand myself what it was that bound me to a man so consumed by regret, hatred and anger it was devouring him up from the inside out. Perhaps a part of me believed that somewhere deep inside of Lord Vader a piece of the man he had once been still remained, because I knew he had once loved someone so much he was willing to risk everything for her, or maybe it was because he had given me a place and a purpose. I simply didn't know. I covered my mouth with my hands and shook my head.

"No matter, my dear." The Emperor said when I didn't answer him. "Lord Vader knows his place as will you, soon enough." He drew a deep breath. "I was not aware you had such a valuable gift until quite recently but given how it seems to affect you I can understand why you choose to keep it hidden." He gracefully placed the lightsaber back in its box and sealed it.

From my place on the floor, I looked up at him wondering if I was now to be punished for keeping it a secret.

"You must have Kiffar blood in you. Psychometry is their particular gift." He mused. "It would be of interest to try and trace your bloodline. I am quite certain we would find Jedi blood in there somewhere, would we not?"

I didn't answer and for what seemed to me to be an eternity he stared into my face, into my eyes, as though he were looking as deep into my soul as he could but I had learned how to mask some of my feelings. I had learned how to hide what I thought and what I felt. Perhaps not all of it and certainly had he dug hard enough the Emperor, with his power, would have broken through my walls but I had learned and it had been Lord Vader who had taught me. I just stared back, waiting. I wasn't sure if his question was rhetorical, if he already knew the answer and just wanted to hear me confirm it or because he really had no idea about my family. Either way I wasn't answering.

He smiled at me and a part of me felt as though it had died because I realised, as I knelt on the floor, that it did not matter if I could hide some of what I felt from this man or not. It did not matter if he knew who my birth parents really were. He knew what I could do, he had learned of my gift, the only one that was not a force talent but was simply enhanced by the force and the one gift that was the most useful to him and most terrifying to me.

He touched something on the arm of his throne as he spoke to me, his voice now laced with disinterest. "You may leave. Lord Vader does not like to be kept waiting. Aloo will show you out." He said and waved me away.

His throne turned around and as it did I watched him caress the box which held Luke's lightsaber along with the boy's severed hand, a grisly memento of the task Lord Vader had failed to complete. I stood up slowly, my legs were still shaky and politely curtsied although the Emperor had his back to me and could not see it. No matter what I felt, no matter what occurred, courtesy needed to be observed. Numbly I walked to the turbo lift where the Emperor's aide was waiting for me. I was calm and collected as I glanced at him but on the inside I wanted to run away as fast as I could and never look back. The last memory I would have of that dreadful room was the Emperor's soft laughter.

Lord Vader stood with his hands behind his back, staring at the Chassu painting. I reached out to him with the force but he blocked it. "You will pilot me back to the *Executor* and then we will be heading back to the Core." He said coldly without turning to look at me.

He had not known why the Emperor had wished to see me but he had suspected and now he was unsure of where I stood, uncertain of what I had told the Emperor and whether or not he could trust me. It was at that moment I understood he thought I had betrayed him and I did not know how to tell him this was not the case.

"Hurry up, girl!" He snapped.

I nodded and followed him, his Noghri slipping into the shadows behind me and we went back to the shuttle the same way we had come. As gravity lost its grip on the small ship and the planet receded into the distance I felt an enormous sense of relief. I did not know what usually went on down on Wayland, or what terrible secrets the mountain hideaway held but I knew for certain that I never wanted to set foot there ever again.

The return to the *Executor* from Wayland was difficult. I had been badly shaken by what the Emperor's little gift from lord Vader had shown me. It had been work just to concentrate on piloting the shuttle without mistakes. We were about half way back to the *Executor* when Lord Vader had joined me in the cockpit. I guessed that his curiosity had gotten the better of him but for a long time neither of us spoke. Eventually it was me that broke the silence.

"Did you tell him? Did you tell him about my gifts, about what I can do?" I asked suddenly, angrily. He did not turn his head to look at me. He sat still in the co pilot's chair and stared straight ahead out into space. I waited for him to answer; I only needed to ask the question once.

"No." he answered finally. "What did he want from you?"

"He gave me your... I mean Luke's lightsaber to hold." I told him flatly.

There was a terrible silence and then he asked. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing he did not already know." I said coldly. "If he did not find out about my psychometric talent from you, then how did he find out?"

"Perhaps you should pose this question to the man whose bed you share." He said, glancing at me.

"Why? Thrawn would have no reason to tell the Emperor about what I can do." I snapped. I did not want to even hear that sort of suggestion but the seed of doubt had been planted. I had never actually asked Thrawn not to speak of it. I had just assumed he would

not betray my trust. I had assumed that he understood how awful this particular talent was for me and the consequences, should the Emperor find out what I could do, would be terrible. I shook my head, as if I could shake the doubts away. "No, he would never do that."

Lord Vader shook his head. "Are you really so naïve?" He asked.

I looked at him, waiting for him to explain. I was getting tired of hearing that word.

He sighed, or came as close to sighing as he was physically capable of. "Admiral Thrawn has his own agenda with the Emperor. It would earn him great favour to reveal something of value to my Master about you. This gift you have is very rare and very useful to him."

It was my turn to shake my head. "No, Thrawn cares for me he would not use me as a tool."

"Love is blind and you are stupid." He growled. I guess he knew a thing or two about this particular subject.

I had to take a deep breath to calm down the rising annoyance I felt stir in my gut. I gritted my teeth and concentrated on the hyperspace lane we were flying through.

"What did you tell the Emperor?" Vader asked again, it wouldn't be pretty if he had to ask me a third time so I told him the gist of it. There was no need for details, he knew them all intimately.

Lord Vader was thoughtful as he replied. "So, you were telling me the truth." He mused.

"I don't lie to you." I snapped crossly.

He just chuckled and folded his arms across his chest. "Everybody lies girl, when it suits their purpose."

I gave him a filthy look and sighed. I thought about what we had just talked about. The Emperor had indeed known everything I had told him, none of it had come as a surprise. He had not needed me to confirm these things because he had already known the truth. The one thing he had wanted to know was the one thing I had been unable to tell him. So all he had done was test his hunch about me in the in the most brutal possible way. I was certain that Thrawn had not spoken to Palpatine about my talents, I had betrayed myself.

While I had learned so much about the force and how to use it over the past few years I had never learned how to control the ability to read the memories from objects and this talent was growing in strength. Now my head was filled with bits and pieces of the nightmare that Lord Vader lived with every day.

In my life I had never known such violence or anger. Anakin had chosen his path because he had desperately wanted to save his wife. The death of his mother had scarred him deeply and he had feared losing another person that he loved so much. But I had a hard time understanding how he could have gone so far. How he could have believed that Darth Sidious, who was actually Palpatine, could save his wife with the Force was beyond me. It was because of this belief this lie that Palpatine had told that Anakin had gone on to brutally murder the younglings at the Temple. With this action, Anakin's fall from grace was utterly complete.

I wondered, as we sat there, if it was ever possible to escape one's past and escape one's destiny. My birth mother had hidden me to protect me, knowing that if I had indeed inherited her talents I would be a target, yet in the end I had ended up in the exact place with the exact people she had tried to protect me from. It didn't feel good, especially in light of all I now knew. The Emperor's question came back to nag at me. I glanced at Lord Vader and wondered what A'kali L'uanna would think of me now had she lived?

The answer that wormed up through my gut was not positive. She would have been horrified and who could have blamed her. I had become attached to and admired the man



who had turned against her and all the other Jedi. Anakin was a traitor to his kind. The man, who had, as the Emperor had said, committed more atrocities than one person could even consider. In my small corner of Lord Vader's life I had refused to see these things but the deaths and the savagery seeped its way past my blind-spot.

He had slaughtered children.

Nothing I could think of made that act justifiable, not even saving Padmé's life. I sighed and blinked away tears which threatened to blur my vision, the horror of my experience in Palpatine's chamber receding to a numb sort of shock. My sigh caught Lord Vader's attention and I felt him turn to glance at me but I didn't return his gaze. Instead I turned my head away from him so that I was staring out of the side view port into the weird illumination that was the hyperspace lane we were in. I felt his Force touch, a questioning like itch in the back of my brain, but pushed it away. He was surprised and there was a momentary flash of anger and perhaps even hurt from his side but then he withdrew. He was satisfied that whatever it was he was hiding from his Master had stayed hidden. I was startled to realise that I was deeply angry with him. I wasn't sure I could define the reason why. The mood which permeated the cockpit was oppressive and the rest of the trip back to the *Executor* was uncomfortably silent.

## **Chapter 9**

"Do you have those figures I asked for?" Lord Vader asked as he breezed into my office.

I handed him the data chip. He paused to consider it then continued. "You will contact Xizor's office and tell him I will meet him tomorrow at my personal residence. He may bring his usual entourage if he wishes."

"Yes, my Lord."

"I am waiting for results from the latest test batch of personal combat droids, you will deliver it to me personally when it arrives. Outside of this I am not to be disturbed." He growled.

"As you wish." I said and then an envelope which had arrived in yesterday's post caught my eye. "Oh, this came for you." I handed it to him. It was already opened as he had made it clear I was responsible for dealing with his mail.

"Is it important?" He studied the envelope for a moment then looked at me.

"It's a personal invitation from the Director of the Imperial Opera Company and complimentary tickets to the opening show." I replied.

"What drivel are they spewing out now?" He asked failing to keep the disgust out of his voice.

"It's something called *The Agony of Tarkin*." I told him.

He made a derogatory sound. "They made an opera about that pompous twit?"

I didn't dare answer that. I had never met Moff Tarkin face to face before his unfortunate and rather explosive demise but I was well aware of Lord Vader's opinion of him. I wondered if Tarkin had actually felt any agony at all since the Death Star's explosion and his death were pretty much simultaneous. If the opera company wanted to write about agony they should talk to Vader. Burning to a crisp on a molten planet, sudden limb

amputation and the death of one's soul sounded a whole lot more like agony to me than instantaneous disintegration. I didn't think it would be a show I wanted to see.

He tossed the envelope back onto my desk in disgust. "It is probably hilarious but unfortunately I do not have the time to indulge in such nonsense. If you wish to attend in my stead you may do so. Is there anything else?"

"No, your schedule is up to date, unless you have changes to make to it. The items you asked for will be ready by the end of the week. I expressly requested they be delivered here for security reasons as per your wishes. Janas Schenk has not yet returned with a time estimate for you on the renovations you wanted done on your office and I sent a reminder to him this morning. Also the replacement speeder will be delivered to the garage by this afternoon. And lastly, Grand Admiral Zaarin requested a personal audience with you at your earliest convenience but said that there was no urgency. Something to do with a computer core he has recent acquired, his words not mine."

He nodded. "Very well, set up a meeting time, you know best where you can slot him in but check with me first before you finalise anything." He said. "Oh and there is a possibility I will be heading off world sooner rather than later. You will remain here unless otherwise specified. However," he paused to make sure I got his next point, "should I need you with me I expect you to be prepared to leave at a moment's notice." and with that he left.

I sighed. I always had a travel bag packed in my office ready to go. Over the last few years I had learned my lesson on that front. When Lord Vader said we leave in five minutes he wasn't usually kidding. I glanced at the space where Lord Vader had been and made a face, then began the process of dealing with Xizor's office. I was pleasantly surprised to find that there was little resistance to the meeting place change. Lord Vader often met with Xizor in his castle because there he had full control over the surveillance and he liked to keep a close eye on the prince. Xizor was an obsequious pest but he was a pest that the Emperor seemed to enjoy having around. While Lord Vader loathed the man, he kept his public ranting on the subject to a minimum.

Since returning to the Core, a few days ago, the game of jax and mouse between Vader and Xizor had seemingly become more complicated, more vicious, if that was even possible. Both men were at each other's throats like a couple of wild panthacs. There had even been one attempt on Lord Vader's life that had ended up totalling his favourite speeder, which lucky for him he had not been in at the time. It was not so lucky for his driver, however. He was convinced that Xizor was somehow behind it, never mind that he was not the most popular man in the galaxy and that at any given time on any given day at least a hundred death threats were registered against him with Intel. While it all made for good HoloNet news and *Daily Digest* gossip I personally found the whole thing tedious.

The mail runner stopped by the office and dumped a box full of post on my desk.

"Morning Miss Gabriel." He said with his usual cheer.

"Thanks Remmy, say how's the new baby?"

Remmy smiled. "Well, he's doing just fine, thank-you for asking. My wife was thrilled with the card and the basket. We know you sent it and it was very much appreciated."

I smiled and waved as he left. He had been delivering the office mail for a lot longer than I had been working for Lord Vader so he knew everyone by name but he had told me one day when I had asked what I should call him that most people didn't even see him let alone speak to him by name. Since that day I made a point of saying thank you and asking after his ever expanding family. When his wife gave birth to their fifth child and first son I had made sure that, in Lord Vader's name, they received a large gift basket, flowers and a card, guess they knew who had really sent it. Babies and presents were not really Lord Vader's thing.

I took the green post box off the desk and sat it on my lap, sorting out the junk from the important mail. When I came to a small packet that was addressed to me I stopped to open it.

There was no return address on the padded envelope and the postmark was smudged to the point where it was unreadable. Inside was a small datacard wrapped in a piece of cloth. I got no sudden flash of memory from it when I touched it, but the hair on the back of my neck stood on end anyway. The datacard was an older model and it was dirty. I wasn't sure it would work when I slipped it into the reader.

*Welcome back to Coruscant, Mouse, or should I call it the Imperial city now? Did yer think that just because yer helped to murder Antygra that I would no longer know where ye' are or what ye' are doing? Did you think that simply because he was dead I would leave yer at the hands of that monster?*

*Ye' are mine; yer told me that on Tatooine. Yer told me that yer would always love me. We are bound together for all eternity, Mouse. Yer belong to me and not the Empire. The sooner yer come to realise this, the better for everyone concerned. I know yer didn't mean to hurt Antygra so I won't hold that against yer. Next time we meet yer won't need that body guard of yers, I'll be the one protecting yer.*

My hands trembled as I listened to Jyrki's voice. I had to fight the swell of panic and the barrage of flashbacks that clattered through my mind. What he had done to me on Mattri had changed me forever and no matter how hard I tried I could not seem to forget this, I hadn't forgiven him either. *Just breathe* I told myself over and over until the sensation of drowning passed and the world of darkness his voice brought on receded back into a suppressed memory. I made two copies of the recording before I slipped the datachip out of the reader and back into the envelope it had been mailed in. Once my hands stopped shaking I realised that something he had said had jumped out at me. I sighed as I wrote to Shiv. I knew he was both online and working today.

*>>>Hey, Shiv, what happened to Tygs?<<<*

*>>>He was sent to Kessel for life, why?<<<*

*>>>So he's not dead?<<<*

*>>>Not as far as I know, but Kessel isn't exactly the best place in the galaxy to be, why are you asking?<<<*

*>>>I just got a datacard message from Jyrki and he claims I helped to murder Tygs.<<<*

*>>Send it to INTEL, don't mess about with that, he's on their most wanted list. You could ask your boss about Tygs, I heard he was present at the final sentencing. The official word I got was life in the spice mines, but who knows for sure? Are you okay?<<<*

*>>>I'll be fine.<<<*

I sat back with a sigh. I had been glad that Tygs had been arrested but I hadn't wanted him killed. My computer peeped at me letting me know that a flagged message was coming in, the results from the test droids. I downloaded the information to a data chip and went to deliver it to Lord Vader, as per his instructions. He took the information without bothering to say anything and it was only because I hesitated that he even looked up at me from his own desk.

"What is it, girl?" he asked.

"What happened to Antygra Zyllendel?" I demanded.

"That is none of your concern."

"I'll slice the data files if you don't tell me." My defiance startled even me.

He stared at me for a moment then stood up. I could feel his annoyance slowly becoming anger but he was also curious. "He was arrested, tried for treason against the Empire and he was sentenced accordingly." He said as he paced around behind his desk.

"Was he executed?" I asked point blank.

"Yes."

"Did you execute him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That is how we deal with traitors."

"Then why does the official report say he was sentenced to life on Kessel?"

"Because, apparently, hearing that we execute spies and traitors to the Empire is bad for moral." Lord Vader replied. "Why are you asking? Why do you care?"

I handed him a data chip. "I made you a copy; I thought you would want to at least see hear it. I'll pass the original on to Intel."

"I take it this is from your mechanic friend?"

I nodded.

"Well he is persistent, I'll give him that." He said as he tossed the datachip down on his desk.

"You think this is funny?"

"No, I think *he* is unimportant."

I didn't really know how to answer that so I just turned to leave.

"I can assign a Noghri to you." He said.

I looked at him. "Do you think that will help?"

"I think you need to kill this man yourself. I've trained you better than this. You know how this man thinks, you know more about him than anyone else, yet he terrifies you. Do you think I don't sense your fear of him, sense your conflict?"

"How can I kill someone I loved, someone who was like family to me, who taught me and saved my life?"

"Easily, if you find enough hate." He replied bitterly.

I shivered. He knew what he was talking about. I opened my mouth to say something but realised there was nothing left to say on the matter. I shook my head. "A Noghri bodyguard will not be necessary, but thank you anyway."

He regarded me for a moment and then sat back down. "Don't you have work to do?"

I didn't answer him I just left and returned to my office. I sent the original of Jyrki's latest message to Intel. The other copy I packaged in a secure courier envelope and sent it to my uncle along with a small terse message which said.

*'Zte'sa, your time on this is running out. If he comes near me again, I'll kill him.'*

And then I went back to work as if nothing had happened. I was in the middle of rearranging Lord Vader's schedule for the next day when the inter office messenger blinked at me.

>>> *Hey Rim Girl, you up for going out for a bite tonight? <<<*

>>> *Hey Shiv, not up for going out, but I happen to have an unwatched set of Holloway style holos sitting at home if you feel like ordering in?>>>*

>>> *Sounds great, will swing by your office in half an hour. What do you want to eat? <<<*

>>> *I know a great Zabradi place that delivers... <<<*

>>> *Excellent!!!<<<*

This was something to look forward to at the end of a long and difficult day.

Shiv strolled around the living room admiring the art while I pottered around the kitchen. I didn't feel awkward inviting him into what I still thought of as Thrawn's home because he'd been here once before and been welcomed in. Thrawn had once told me that he was happy that Shiv had chosen to take me under his wing. I was glad too. Shiv was a good friend, one who didn't put up with any silliness from me. He kept me grounded,

which was a necessity considering where and for whom I worked. It would have been easy to let all the glamour and wealth of the Imperial Court lifestyle go to my head. Even though I tried really hard to ignore the silliness, I could still see the negative changes it had on me. I had made Shiv promise me once that if I ever started turning into one of *those* people that he should smack me upside the head. So far, he had taken this request to heart. The results were amusing and occasionally painful.

"He has amazing taste in everything doesn't he? I never get tired of looking at his art collection." Shiv said, looking over his shoulder at me as I walked into the room.

I smiled as I opened a bottle of wine. "Yes he does but that's not a side of him most people ever get to see."

"Well, can you blame him for keeping that part of his life private?"

I shook my head. "Considering how the carrion eaters that dine on gossip seem to turn everything good into everything ugly, I'm glad he's that way."

"Have you heard anything from him lately?"

I shook my head. "No, not since my birthday. I guess I had hoped for a letter when I returned here, he's usually good at keeping track of when I am back on planet, but you know how it is..." I shrugged but I didn't quite keep the whine out of my voice. It was the first time I had worried about him and what he was actually doing, something that when I had really thought about it, I knew very little about.

He smiled. "He's a high ranking Imperial Officer, Merly, he's busy."

I made a face. "I know that, I just get concerned is all!"

"Well being an Admiral in the Imperial Navy isn't exactly a nine to fiver if you know what I mean. As I understand it from the teeny weenie amount of things you will let slip about the two of you, he tries to fit you into his life as best he can. You're a lot luckier than most of the girls I know in your place. He actually gives a damn about you unlike some of the other officers and the girls they sleep with."

"I know, you're right, I'm sorry. I hate that I feel this way but I do. It's driving me crazy." I stopped him from lecturing me further. "But if I can't talk to you about this stuff, then who can I talk to?"

"Cati?" He teased.

I gave him a look. "I adore her but she doesn't want to hear this crap from me, she gets an earful from enough of her other clientele. I don't want to become one of those girls who always whine about everything man related." I retorted.

"Are you really worried about him?" He asked coming back to sit at the breakfast bar, taking the glass of wine I offered.

I thought about it for a moment. "Worried isn't really the right word." I replied. "He can take care of himself and he's incredibly good at what he does but it's still dangerous." I paused for a second to choose my words carefully. "When I first came to work for Lord Vader I actually never gave all this fighting stuff much thought, it's not as if we see a lot of massive space conflicts on Tatooine so I didn't know enough to be concerned but now that's changed. I've been in some of these space battles, albeit relatively safe on the side lines but still, I've stood and watched Imperials die fighting for what they believe in. Lately it seems as though the conflicts between the Empire and the Rebellion have been getting more and more vicious, so yeah, I am concerned. Thrawn's brilliant but he's not omnipotent, there is always the chance that something will go wrong." I shrugged. "And, I miss him."

"Of course you do." He said with a gentleness that made me look up at him. "I'd be worried if you didn't."

We touched glasses and took sipped our wine in silence for a few moments.

I looked at Shiv for a second then asked coyly. "So, just how much do you know about what goes on at the palace these days?"

"Enough to make Isard worry should I ever turn into a rebel sympathiser." he said casually but there was a pain in his voice that made me wince. "Why, what do you want to know?" He asked.

"I heard a rumour about something when I was on the *Executor*."

"There are lots of rumours going around could you be a tad more specific?" he said cagily, watching me from over the rim of his wine glass as he took another sip.

"I heard that a certain Admiral whose home we are currently sitting in is about to be promoted to the highest level attainable."

That made Shiv pause. "How...where did you hear that?" He was genuinely surprised.

"I told you, while I was on *Executor*. Is it true?"

"Did Vader tell you this?"

I shook my head. "No, he's never mentioned it and I haven't asked him about it,"

He drew a deep breath. "Merly, you can't know this."

"Why not?"

"Because in difference to the usual palace gossip, this is seriously top secret. Almost no one knows."

I shook my head. "Can't be that top secret, I found out and you know."

"Yes, and that worries me." He said. "Who told you?"

"How did you know?" I countered.

We stared at each other. He caved first.

"I get told certain things when I need to organise separate venues, particularly when there are high levels of security involved. Despite the *Shiv is a bit of a twit* thing I try to maintain, my job actually entails a lot of security details and I get entrusted with a lot of classified information." He said after a moment. He raised his eyebrows. "Your turn."

"Someone who works closely with the Emperor tipped me off, but in confidence."

"Let me guess, a certain Royal Guard on trooper rotation." It wasn't a question, I had written to Shiv often enough about my friendship with CJ.

I made a face. "I am fairly sure he thought I knew when he told me."

He shook his head. "Listen to me; you need to keep this information really, really quiet." He sighed. "Or have you already told anyone else?"

I shook my head. "No one, I only asked you because you are the best source of news I know."

"If word of this was to get out, if the media gets a hold of it well, bloody hell Merly, it would be messy and really bad. I am not even sure the Council of Twelve knows about this. The last thing you want is to be labelled as a leak or worse."

"I get the message." I said defensively. "What do you mean they don't know?"

He avoided giving me an actual answer. "What about Thrawn, is he aware you know about this?"

"I asked about it loosely in one of my letters but we don't write in basic so it would be hard for someone who didn't speak Cheunh to translate. I haven't heard an answer yet." I told him. "In fact I am still waiting for Jarack to drop by so I can send Thrawn my thank-you for his birthday gift."

"He sent you a gift; you never told me that, what did he give you?" He changed the topic so effortlessly I was momentarily speechless then I pulled my necklace out from under my top and showed him.

"Oh my!" He said as he took the pendant in his fingers to look at. The way he moved the stone back and forth told me that he had found the stone's inner fire. "Is this genuine?"

I nodded.

Shiv shook his head. "Well, this just reaffirms my statement about his taste and how he feels about you." He said letting go of the pendant. "But you should avoid showing that off, or at least telling people who it is from."

"Why?" I asked, and then added. "And just for the record, I don't run around showing off."

"I know you don't do that but I needed to say it anyway. It makes me feel better."

"Okay, so why the warning?"

"While I know that he gives you expensive gifts because he actually likes you, there are some at court who will think he is buying your loyalties or worse buying Vader's by courting you." He said.

We'd talked about this before. "That's ridiculous!"

He gave a little one shoulder shrug. "Is it? Paranoia runs rampant within the Imperial Court especially these days. Thrawn is a major player, despite his supposed fall from grace, and you are the woman who shares his bed. You and Lord Vader have a very good working relationship which has also not gone unnoticed. People will assume the worst not the best."

I sighed. "Why does everything that is good have to turn into something sordid and tainted?"

Shiv shook his head. "It doesn't have to if you don't let it. But the inner circle of the Imperial world is a vicious place. This is a court that does not like unknowns and that's what the two of you are. Thrawn because he is alien who shares nothing of whom or what he is to anyone. He is a huge threat to the men who want the power that he appears to so casually disregard yet so effortlessly gains." He said. "You are an unknown because although you officially have the title of Personal Assistant, the rumours are that that Vader regards you as much, much more than this but no one knows quite what that is. You get special treatment from important people, yet you still wander around the place like a dewy eyed farmer's daughter fresh off the transport. You, my Outer Rim friend, don't add up."

I made a face.

He continued. "Despite the fact that neither of you flaunt your relationship with each other people have still figured it out. It's a little difficult to hide the chemistry between you two actually, even though you try. HoloNet reporters can smell an affair or a scandal a light year away. Plus, what makes it all the more unusual is that from behind the scenes, the Emperor seem to condone your affair, leading people to think there is more to the story than just simple romantic attraction. That very public banishment and innuendo about your involvement was for show, most people in the inner circle suspect that there were ulterior motives behind that event. It would not be the first time that Emperor has played this sort of game. It's natural for the flesh eaters at court to want to strip the bones bare."

I frowned at him as something nasty occurred to me, "So...are you saying that my relationship with Thrawn was set up by the Emperor?"

Shiv shook his head. "No, I don't think that is the case but it could look that way to the outside viewer." He shrugged "I don't know the Admiral nearly as well as you do but I don't think he's the kind of man who would engage in a serious relationship with someone just because it was good for his political career. If that were the case he'd be best pals with the Council of Twelve and you'd see him at the Officer's club being social, or with a HoloNet starlet on his arm instead of keeping himself to himself here with you."

He swirled the remaining wine around in his glass. "You know, when you first came to work for Vader there were pools going on all over the place as to just how long you would last in the job. You've surpassed them all. Then people started to take bets on which of the high ranking officers you would end up with. Thrawn was not on that list but Zaarin was, in fact he was ranked number one. You're not what you appear to be and anyone who spends more than five minutes with soon figures this out." He paused to sip his wine, "Did

you know there's a huge theory saying that you are really Vader's daughter secretly being trained by the Emperor to take his place?"

I nearly choked on my wine. "Are you serious?" I rolled my eyes. I had not heard that one yet.

He nodded. "Merly, you would probably have kittens if you knew half of the stories that fly around the palace about you."

I buried my head in my hands. "I don't think I want to know. I can assure you, though, I am most definitely not Vader's daughter and I am absolutely not being groomed to take his place. I never heard such ronto-rot in all my life." I giggled and then sighed. "I don't understand this obsession the court has with sex, scandals and conspiracy theories."

Shiv replied. "Because while to the outsider courtly life may seem exciting, glamorous and fun, in reality it is mostly boring. People look for anything to make it less dull and give their stupid lives here some meaning." He answered. "I know you don't sleep around and Thrawn would not jeopardise his career by indulging in bedroom politics. That would be beneath him, he has too much integrity and pride for that."

"Pride?" I asked, rising to the bait.

Shiv laughed. "Oh yes, maybe you don't see it but he is proud and arrogant, he just hides it behind that cool blue mask of super intelligence."

I made a face. I did see it and had even called him on it once or twice, but Shiv didn't need to know that.

"Don't put him up on a pedestal, even the best of men cannot live up to that sort of expectation." He chided gently. "He's not perfect you know, if you do that to him you will be disappointed."

"I do know that, but you've got to admit, he's pretty damned close." It was as close to gushing as I ever got. I quickly shut my mouth and refilled our wine glasses.

Shiv rolled his eyes and gave me a huge mock sigh. "Ugh, love really is blind, isn't it?"

I just looked at him then realised how neatly he had veered me off track. "Stop avoiding my initial question and tell me what you can about this possible promotion." I poked his arm.

He took a drink of his wine and sighed. "Okay, you are aware that the dedication for the new wing is coming up soon?"

I nodded, "In two weeks if I read the memo correctly."

"Well," Shiv said with a nod, "If I were you, I'd expect to see a familiar face in attendance at that event."

I let out the breath I had been holding. Grand Admiral was the highest rank that a military officer serving in the Empire could achieve. For Thrawn it would be the pinnacle of his career and it would give him a great deal of power and perhaps even the respect he had earned.

"So it's true and the Emperor is really planning this?"

Shiv raised his eyebrows. "Come on kiddo, use your brains. I can't tell you anything concrete outright and you know that. But let's just say the dedication party will be a really big thing and if a few high ranking people vanish off for a while to hold a private meeting...well." He gave a small shrug.

"Why so secret?" I asked. "It doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't it? Imagine what sort of a message this will send to the Council of Twelve when they find out. It shakes things up. It makes people edgy. It tells the fat rats who think they own it all that they can be replaced by someone who isn't human. Thrawn is one of the Emperor's most valued, most underrated and most useful pieces in what is a very complicated chess like game."

"How do you know that?"



"I have my sources." He said. "Did you know that Thrawn has been demoted about eight times and then the Emperor promptly promoted him again?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he's spoken about some of that, I didn't know how many times though." I said. "The Emperor doesn't like being told he's wrong."

"It is a game the Emperor plays with him or maybe he plays with the Emperor, it's hard to tell some times." He shrugged, "Thrawn is not scared of Palpatine and that makes him unusual in every way possible. Do you know what that must mean to a man like the Emperor who has it all, including the fear of an entire galaxy?"

"Are you saying the Emperor is scared of Thrawn?"

"Of course not! Don't be obtuse!" He snorted "Palpatine doesn't seem to fear anything but he is very intrigued by your Admiral and has been for a very long time. Curiosity, something that actually piques his interest is rare so of course he plays with this toy. Thrawn's brilliance and alien nature are a never ending source of amusement to the Emperor."

I drew a deep breath. "I've never really thought about any of this." I could not imagine what Thrawn must have felt about Palpatine's tricks. Then again, Thrawn was quite adept at playing these games to the best of his advantage. He was a master dejarik player.

"Well, sometimes you can be a little self involved."

His comment stung. "Is that your way of telling me I'm selfish?" I asked.

He shook his head, reached over and ruffled my hair with a smile. "No, not selfish, self involved there is a big difference. It's just that you tend to look inward rather than outward. You still see the world in terms of how it affects you and not a wider circle. It's normal at your age; my sister was like that too. Most people are, but you'll grow out of it."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you ask the right questions." He said knowingly.

I just sighed. "Remind me never to whinge at you again. You make it really hard work."

He laughed. "It's easy to see you grew up an only kid." Then his expression softened, "Look, I know you miss him. It's not as if you have it easy either. Been there done that, but I have to tell you I think you handle his absence way better than some of the officer's wives I know do when their husband's get sent off on some mission for a week. I half expected when you guys started to sleep together that you would moon over him all the time. I guess you're a bit tougher than even I thought."

"Glad I could surprise you, I guess." I said and then added thoughtfully. "I don't think Thrawn would have kept me around if I was the mooning mopey kind."

He grinned. "You're right about that." Then he added, "Listen kiddo, when this event does happen, I am certain you will know about it. You might not get to see it, but you will know."

I toyed with my wine glass, wondering what it was that the Emperor was really up to because if I had learned anything it was that he did nothing without subterfuge. Shiv noticed my expression but read it wrong.

"Don't worry about the Admiral, like you said, he can take care of himself. I'm sure you'll hear from him soon and he'll be back before you know it." Shiv said and before I could correct him the door chime rang, our food was here. We sat and ate in the living room in front of the Holo screen watching a fairly decent Holo version of Schiell Dannett's *The Corellian Curse*. Eating in the living room was something that would have horrified Thrawn who considered it incredibly uncouth to eat dinner anywhere but at the table, oddly enough I delighted in this act, it reminded me of being at home on Tatooine.

I was glad that Shiv was around. He was an excellent friend. Even though Tygs was gone, Jyrki was still out there and he was clever as well as obsessed, not a good

combination. If he really wanted to he'd find a way to get to me which was not a comforting thought. Shiv left after the film was done and he had helped me clean the dishes.

The flat always seemed vast when I was alone in it. I went through the routines of going to bed knowing that if I slept through the night it would be a miracle. Nightmares had become a regular feature in my sleep. In between them were dreams I could not decipher and only half remembered upon waking. They included my birth mother, Qui Gon Jinn among others. I put the dreams down to too much time spent listening to my mother's diary.

It was a strange thing to hear and see the young woman who would give birth to me talk about her daily life, her dreams and her fears. I was learning a lot about the life of a Padawan learner, a Jedi in training but I was not sure if that was what I wanted to know. I wasn't sure what it was I was looking for. I was searching for answers but I wasn't finding any. I suspected this was because I was not certain what my questions were. Even more frustrating was that I still hadn't been able to access the second holocron. It occurred to me that at some point I would probably have to go back to the Jedi Temple but I didn't want to.

I lay in bed, tossing and turning, my thoughts wandering all over the place. I felt as though my life had become a series of oddly placed events surrounded by surreal settings. Lack of a decent night's sleep made me maudlin, edgy and well aware that I not only did I miss Thrawn; I also ached for him, yearned for him. It was a weakness I hated myself for and usually left me reading trashy romance novels as a substitute into the very small hours of the morning. Sleeping had become something I dreaded and the nights stretched out long and unforgiving.

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I was at my desk reading through memos when Jarack knocked on the door. It was late afternoon and he looked tired.

"Miss Gabriel, I feel I must apologise I should have been here at least a week ago but things got a little ... *interesting*." He said by way of explanation before I could even open my mouth.

"Oh?"

He just gave me a weary grin.

"Rough trip?" I asked, getting up.

"I've had worse." He told me.

"When was the last time you ate?" I asked looking at his pale face, which was gaunt and drawn.

He smiled but it never reached his eyes. "Do ration packs count as real food?"

I shook my head. "I can order you some really decent Zabracki food, I know a good place."

"Ugh, no thanks, I hate Zabracki cuisine, no offence, but it's too spicy, gives me heartburn." He grinned. "I'll take a cup of that Tatooine 'caf of yours though, if you have some handy."

"For the man who delivers my letters, I can make mek'kefa. How about a sandwich instead, I have pelekki-fish or hadhiki salad? My droid feels that choice is important." I gestured to the small refrigeration unit under the counter.

"Pelekki fish, man I haven't had that in ages, is it fresh?" He said as he shucked his jacket and sat down wearily on the couch.

"I hope so; they were made for my lunch so yeah, fresh."

"Your lunch? So why didn't you eat them then?"

"Because I had a really late breakfast, I'm still not that hungry."

"Alright for some, I guess." He grinned. I was lying, I hadn't eaten anything, I just wasn't all that hungry these days, especially in the mornings. Lately the only thing I could face without feeling ill was stim'caf, of which I probably drank too much. When I did eat during the day it was usually later rather than earlier. I'd probably end up taking whatever sandwich was left over home with me.

He let out a huge breath and sat back against the couch, rummaged around his satchel and placed a large courier package on the 'caf table, nodding at it. "The Admiral sends apologies for the delay in replying."

"I take it things have been ... busy?" I asked, making spiced 'caf and unwrapping a sandwich for him.

"That's one way of putting it." He said rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"Is everything alright out there?"

He drew a deep breath. "Yes, it's just intense. Not everyone is pleased to see an Imperial presence in the regions of space beyond the Outer Rim. It's been a relatively stressful time." He said. "The last two systems we visited were less than appreciative of our presence."

"So what you are telling me in your roundabout way is that you guys have been having fun?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yes." He said, "Although the Admiral would not be particularly pleased if I were to go into details."

"Is he okay?" I hated myself for asking this question but I needed to hear the answer.

Jarack smiled and this time it made it to his eyes. "He's more than okay. He seems to thrive on these sorts of engagements and problems that we have been having but of course it does mean that he's very busy. "

I felt the weight I had been carrying around with me lift. "Well, busy keeps him out of trouble I guess." I said trying to joke. "I'm glad to hear everyone is okay."

"I guess that depends on your definition of trouble." He grinned taking the glass of spiced 'caf and plate with the sandwich I offered gratefully. "The Admiral enjoys the challenges presented to him." He said.

While he ate and drank I gathered the three letters I had written and put them on the table beside the package waiting for me to open, something I would do when I got home. "But apart from that?"

"Apart from that, things are pretty good actually. The base we have been setting up is growing." He continued as I sat sipping my own glass of Mek'kefa. "We have had a lot of recruits coming from both the Imperial side of things and also from the Admiral's home world but communications between the two are often difficult. The Chiss language is very hard to learn, most of the basic speakers have trouble with even trying. Hell, we can't even pronounce their names right let alone communicate." He paused to take another bite of sandwich then continued. "The Chiss are a strange group of people and they don't really like to mix with humans so you can imagine that this causes some tensions. The Admiral tells me it will pass, given time, training and the right personnel. He's currently considering his options as far as translators and training goes. Right now we rely heavily on the Outer Rim trade languages. It's been a lesson in patience, that's for sure." He stopped and looked at me. "What about you? How are things?" He asked.

"Crazy, as usual." I said. "I suppose you heard all about Hoth, yeah?"

He nodded. "Read some of the Intel reports. Sounded like fun."

"Oh yeah, just buckets of amusement. You know what kids and snow are like." I made a face. "Still, maybe the victory will calm things down a bit."

"You actually believe that?"

I stared at him for a moment. "Uhm, nope... not really."

He finished the last of the sandwich, bobbing his head in agreement. "That's what I thought. The Admiral thinks this defeat will only serve to fuel the rebellion's fire, but you didn't hear that from me." He said draining the last of the mek'kefa and smiling. "Now, I am afraid I have to get going." He got up, picked up the letters, tucked them in a courier envelope and then made me sign for everything. "I appreciate the pocket of calm though, the hot drink and lunch. It will tide me over till the next rations packet."

"You really should eat better." I admonished. I sounded like Bel, or worse, Shiv.

He gave me a look, "You're one to talk." He retorted giving me the once up and down.

I just made a face. I knew what he was seeing. Since the meeting with the Emperor on Wayland I had neither slept nor eaten properly. I was well aware of the dark circles under my eyes and that I had lost some weight. I figured it was just an adjustment phase and I'd get back to normal soon enough, provided I could figure out what normal actually was.

"You need to take care of yourself, Miss. When the Admiral returns to find you looking like a refugee from a war zone he won't be all that happy, especially with me since I tell him you're fine when he asks."

I raised an eyebrow. "Don't suppose you can give me a time frame on the 'when he returns bit' can you?"

"That would spoil the surprise." He said lightly.

I just cocked my head to one side and saw him to the door. "So it would. Take care of yourself."

"Take your own advice." He shot back with a cheerful grin and vanished out of the office.

As I cleaned up I thought about what he had said concerning the base on Nirauan. I knew how tricky Cheunh was to learn and I found it amusing to imagine a base full of stiff Imperials trying their best to learn it. What was even more amusing was the image of a frosty group of Chiss trying to decipher basic from a bunch of stuffy Imperials who didn't really like aliens to begin with. I wasn't sure this combination would work, but if anyone could pull it off Thrawn could. These thoughts made me smile. Once I was done, with Thrawn's latest mail in hand, I shut the lights off to my office, locked the door and went home.

I had been living in Thrawn's flat, away from the palace pretty much since the unveiling of the *Executor*. While, for appearances sake I still kept some clothes and some basic belongings at my palace apartment I was rarely ever there unless I absolutely had to be. The palace, despite all the security no longer felt safe to me. Leaving it was sometimes the best part of my day.

When I got home I was always grateful when I could close the door and walk inside to the one place on this busy, noisy planet where I truly felt at ease. Despite the fact that Thrawn hadn't been on Coruscant in a while, the flat still held a vague hint of his scent. I put this down to his soap and shower gel which I sometimes used. It was comforting in an odd way.

Once indoors I made my way to the bedroom, stripped off my work clothes and changed into more comfortable things. I decided to order in from the local Corellian take out place. While I was waiting for my food, I opened a bottle of wine, poured a glass, went into the living room, lit candles and sat down to finally open my mail.

The package contained one letter and two books. The books held memories, quick flashes of images, one of Thrawn buying them from a bookseller in an antique shop filled with shelves of books and some of the people who had read them before he had found them. Each reader had fallen in love with the books. They were warm memories that filled in the loneliness of the evening and they made me smile.

I put the books down and opened his letter; it was bulky which meant it was long. With a sip of wine and a smile I settled down to read.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*I know this reply comes late and for that I apologise. It has been a busy time for us. As you can imagine, not everyone we meet out here in the Unknown Regions is sympathetic to our cause and sometimes a show of force is a necessity. As of late I have found myself engaged in several small conflicts which have had to be dealt with quickly and efficiently. No need to worry though these particular skirmishes were minor and the results were in our favour.*

*I found your 'Daily Digest' version of the events at Hoth most amusing, especially as I was also privy to the official reports shortly after the events took place, and before you ask, I have my sources. I was satisfied to read that the victory was swift and without great losses for the Imperials but I am also certain, that like most fanatics this defeat will only help to fuel the Rebellion's fervour. Those who died will be revered as martyrs to their great crusade, held up as heroes and only serve to persuade others to join in the cause for which they have died, rather than act as a deterrent.*

*It did not surprise me to read of Admiral Ozzel's error in judgement, nor of Vader's swift and final punishment. While brutal and unyielding in many respects, Vader is, in his own right, a brilliant tactician. It must have infuriated him to have his plans overridden by an admiral who was never known for his brilliance in battle strategy.*

*It was your account of what took place at Bespin that was of more interest to me because there was no official report made about these actions. It does not surprise me that events which concern the capture of Luke Skywalker are kept quiet. Aside from the fact that he is the offspring of the man who is now known as Lord Vader, he is also a focal point of the Rebellion. He is their hero, the kid from the Rim who turned into their saviour at the last minute just when it counted the most and thus, their inspiration. If a young, somewhat uneducated farmer from Tatooine can succeed then anyone can. It stands to reason that any attempt to capture this very important figure will be kept as secret as possible. The rebels are surprisingly well informed, which leads me to believe there are leaks coming from within the Imperial ranks that should be dealt with swiftly.*

*Does it really surprise you that the son of Lord Vader would be sought after as prize by the Emperor? If the father's force powers are a thing to be reckoned with then would it also not stand to reason that so are the son's? You are living proof that a Jedi's offspring often carry on that particular family trait. Lord Vader's plan to trap the young Skywalker boy was ambitious but once again, it would appear that he has underestimated both his son's strengths and the will of the boy's friends to survive. Desperate people who feel they have nothing to lose are often capable of the most astounding feats.*

*Your description of Bespin made it sound lovely and to answer your question no, I have never seen it. Your comment about being able to sleep in the pilot's chair made me smile, and trust me, I am well aware of everything you are capable of in a ship, probably more so than anyone else, especially in the engine room where, if I recall correctly, you are quite good dealing with heated situations. And before you complain, yes you did say 'no jokes', but you did not mention anything about innuendos so I will take full advantage of the situation and the opening you have left for me. While I do so enjoy these verbal skirmishes I should return to the topic at hand, there will be time enough to tease you later on.*

*I cannot imagine what must have been so valuable that Vader would risk the entire fleet including its flag ship to go tearing through an asteroid field just to capture one smuggler's ship. I must confess, my dear, there are moments when even I do not*

understand his thought process. Just as an aside, I can attest that space slugs are real. The Vengeance was all but destroyed by one near Ithor, but they are a rare sight and for most denizens of the galaxy as much myth and legend as the Dantassi so that you had difficulty convincing your young friend of their existence is of no surprise.

Speaking of the Dantassi I assume that you were able to use your talents and figure out that it was Kirja'navaar'inkjerii who made the small box which housed the pendant I sent for your birthday. I am not sure how much you were able to read from the box so I shall tell you a little more about it here.

He carved your gift from a tooth of the great crystal worm which is a species native to the planet Mygeeto. The great worms burrow and bore their way through the planet's frozen surface using rings of large teeth with which they chew through the ice, warm it up to liquid within their bodies, digest the nutrients and minerals they need, then secrete the waste as water which subsequently freezes behind them. You can tell where the worms have travelled because the when the waste-water they leave behind freezes again it is not the packed white glacial ice standard to such a climate but a clear ice that appears as the most astounding colour of blue one has ever seen. This ice is mined and used for drinking water as it is quite pure and clean. It is also said to have magical properties, but of that there is no proof.

A Crystal Worm's teeth are highly prized for their strength and their beauty. They are usually carved into a variety of things ranging from weapons to jewellery. The average size of a crystal worm's tooth will have the approximate diameter close to the width of your hand and will be as long as the length of mine, so you can imagine, given the size of their teeth, how large the creatures themselves are. While these worms are elusive and rarely seen they are formidable fighters when hunted and renowned for their viciousness and cunning.

The Dantassi consider hunting the Crystal Worms an enormous challenge and such a hunt is usually done only as a rite of passage. The difficulty of tracking and then actually killing one of these creatures is barely balanced by the wealth of its meat, teeth and skin. As you well know, the Dantassi do not hunt for pleasure, it is a part of their culture. They do not kill for the sake of killing and use as much of whatever they have hunted so that there is no waste, nor do they take more than they need, thus they maintain the balance between them and nature.

When Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was a young boy on the brink of manhood he was taken on such a hunt. Young Dantassi males are given the right to choose the creature that will mark their passage into manhood. He requested the most difficult creature of all. As you can guess, he was successful. The tooth he carved your gift from came from the worm he killed. As the one who made the kill he had the privilege of keeping the worm's teeth. The tale of this hunt is gripping and it is often told, as is tradition. Despite the fact that I have heard it many times, it never loses its magic. One day I hope that you will get to hear it first hand from Kirja'navaar'inkjerii, it is not my story to tell and I would never be able to do it justice.

He often speaks of you when we are fortunate enough to meet up and while I do my best to keep him apprised of your whereabouts and adventures he is none the less concerned that I am not doing my duty as your Ta'kasta'cariad. The next time you meet with him, be prepared to be interrogated heavily on my participation in your life.

He was also most concerned about the continual harassment of Jyrki Andando and mentioned something about hunting this individual himself. I felt it important to inform him of the involvement of the Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh and his facial expression told me that they do indeed know each other. He would not, however, elaborate and I know Kirja'navaar'inkjerii well enough to know when not to push. I could not get a sense of whether or not the relationship between the two men was one of good terms or not,

*Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is notoriously difficult to read when he wants to be and has what you would call an amazing sabacc face.*

*Speaking of faces, I can picture the expression on yours and the question that you are bursting to ask, namely, how is Kirja'navaar'inkjerii doing, just as clearly as I can see you sitting at home, probably curled up in your favourite chair in the living room, with candles lit, and a glass of wine, most likely the dry Veronian. So before you explode with curiosity I will tell you that he is well. When I last saw him we were on our way to Ilum, an ice planet in the Unknown Regions known for its rare Adegan crystals as well as its inhospitable climate. There was a pirate base there which was used by Imperials at one point, but due to its fairly isolated location in relation to the rest of the galaxy was left abandoned some time ago, sporadically used by opportunists. I thought, given its prime location in the Unknown Regions it might be of use to revive it as a small outpost and we now have a working garrison stationed there.*

*I had contacted Kirja'navaar'inkjerii to aid us in navigating the planet's surface, as you know there are no better trackers than the Dantassi and as a Jhal'kai, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is among the best this galaxy has to offer. We two, along with a small detachment of snow troopers, explored and secured the base and I was pleasantly surprised to find it mostly intact. Once that task was completed I was able to spend some private time with him and catch up. While most of what we discussed will not be of particular interest to you, I can tell you that he recently spent time with his daughter and her husband on Csilla, citing you as the catalyst for trying to repair his relationship with her. From what he said, it was not unsuccessful and he seemed more at peace with this subject than I have seen in many years. He informed me that he would like you to come and spend time with him and the enclave on Hjal, to learn the Dantassi ways and to join him on a hunt or two. I think that behind this request is a desire to make sure that you are safely out of Mr. Andando's way. I told him that I had already discussed securing you to a desk under the guard of a garrison of stormtroopers and he was as unimpressed with this suggestion as you were.*

*I do not say this lightly, he is concerned for you and the negative attentions you are receiving at the hands of your mechanic friend. I don't believe that respect or fear, if that is even the case, of Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh will prevent him from making it a personal mission to hunt down Andando and eliminate him as a threat should that situation not find resolution soon. Jyrki's use of the Anzati weapon in your last encounter made Kirja'navaar'inkjerii angrier than I have seen him in a very long time and while he is a man of great patience, it is not infinite. I would not be too surprised if he seeks you out at some point to see for himself that you are, indeed, in one piece and doing well. Don't say that I did not warn you if he should show up unannounced.*

*You spoke of the book by Aude'luan'tyvan that I gave you and I must admit, my dear, I felt a great sense of satisfaction hearing that you enjoyed it in the way that you did. Perhaps it will dissuade you from continuing to read the terrible rubbish that passes for Romance writing which Bel seems to love so much. While I understand, to a certain extent, the need for such reading material in her life, I am not so understanding when it comes to why you would wish to continue to have it in yours. From my point of view I can only say it gives men a terrible reputation and a very strange viewpoint on what love, relationships and romance even sexuality is all about. Or am I missing the point entirely?*

*While Aude'luan'tyvan's novel is considered a classic it is also regarded as a break-through in the genre of romantic, passionate bordering on erotic writing something the Chiss are not at all known for. When it was first published some two hundred years ago the scandal it caused was enormous. Thankfully this did not deter him from continuing to write and now, more enlightened that we are, my people see his*

works as an important part of our evolution as higher educated beings who have come to understand that devotion to a more logical side of thinking and behaviour does not preclude tapping into the more sensual aspect of our psyche.

I have sent you two more books which I think you might enjoy, one is by the same author as the previous one and one is written by an author called Chia'mylee'stranjeri who is a newcomer to the genre but very good at her craft. I thought that it might be of interest to you to get both a female and male perspective.

What I enjoyed the most about reading these books was the authors' abilities to express the erotic without actually expressing anything in a truly graphic manner. One can buy such graphic reading material in any dive on Coruscant, but I would hardly call it literature in any sense of the word. Perhaps I simply feel, from my somewhat snobbish point of view, that literature ought to have all elements of plot, character development and good use of language not just an extended how-to of the act of sexual union and a barrage of monotonous descriptions of what two or more beings engaged in the act of mating looks like. Of course Bel's romance books are less like that and more along the lines of long winded explanations of how the virginal heroine winds up in bed with the local buffed up bad boy, amusing to be sure, but hardly great literature.

As I said before, I had hoped that you would feel the same way I do about the book I sent and I gratified to see you do. You can, if you wish, wait until I have returned to the core to read the two books I have sent but would it not be more enjoyable to spend our free time together in other more productive, more communicative ways?

Sj'iu' Tekari, you are a creature of extraordinary depth and passion despite what you may think. It did not surprise me to read that you experienced the writings of Aude'luan'tyvan so keenly. Your rather unique ability to not only sense emotion but shower it back at others is one that I have been privy to on more than one occasion but I swear will never quite get used to it. I do not envy you the powers that you have but sometimes I am grateful to be on the receiving end of that one in particular. It is good to know that you miss sharing my bed with me and believe me when I say, this feeling is mutual.

I am certain that you know me well enough by now to know that I do not sit in the dark brooding nor do I have the tendency to be maudlin and morose but suffice to say, sometimes in the quiet moments of my down time, you are on my mind. Every now and then, I am certain that I catch a hint of your perfume and hear your voice whispering in my ear but these are merely tricks of memory, and never as good as the real thing. My dear, should I describe to you how you come to me in dreams sometimes? That occasionally I wake up, the lingering sensation of your fingers still upon my skin? Perhaps these are conversations better left for face to face, when I can augment my words with kiss and caress. You, of all people, know that some things are worth waiting for.

Lastly, you caught me very much by surprise with your last question. I was not aware that any information about my possible change of rank had been made public, or is it that you have better sources than I give you credit for? Perhaps it is simply impossible for anything that is supposed to be secret to remain that way within the sphere of the Imperial Court. Of course, you do have access to more classified information than most, still this particular tidbit was supposed to be, how shall we say, unattainable. I can neither confirm nor deny these rumours but if I were to mention that we shall be seeing each other soon enough, would that answer your questions? I would also beg of you not to speak of this publicly, there would be serious repercussions if word of this got out. I would prefer it did not come from you.

On that note my dear, I must end this missive so that I can give it to Jarack before he leaves the ship. Take care of yourself and try not to isolate yourself too much when you



*return to the core, take advantage of all the Imperial City's culture and sparkle while you can. Despite your feelings for the planet, Coruscant has much to offer and you are in the fortunate position to enjoy it without impediment. And, for goodness sake, stay out of trouble I do not wish to return only to find you recuperating in a med-lab. I, too, have plans which mostly involve you being healthy and whole.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia*

*Mith'raw'nuruodo*

I had just finished reading when the door chime rang to let me know that my food had arrived. I let the delivery guy up and cheerfully took the food box he handed to me. I must have been beaming because he gave me a beautiful smile back.

"Looks like someone had a good day." He said with a grin.

"It was. I hope yours was too." I paid him and gave him a healthy tip. His grin broadened, he gave me a polite nod and left.

There was nothing like a letter from Thrawn, good wine, decent food which I didn't have to cook, and a delivery man who smiled like he meant it to make the day's end perfect.

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I was grateful that things around the Palace were mostly quiet. With Thrawn away and Lord Vader in and out, I was left to my own devices which meant I could actually work to a decent schedule. I was glad of this because of meant I could return to training with Master Kjestyll on a more or less regular basis. However not all my lessons with him went as well as I liked. In difference to what he usually did when I was wound up and unmanageable, this time he surprised me. Instead of trying to bend me to change, he changed the environment.

The wind whispered through the trees, rustling the leaves gently. The constant hum of the Coruscanti traffic had faded into the background. The air was sweet here, filled with the scent of the flowers which bloomed in the well groomed beds and the grass which was perfectly manicured. This was a small pocket of calm in a city which never stopped moving, never slept and never knew peace.

I was both exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, something that came with hours of exercise and concentration. It was a state I was rarely able to reach but when I did, I knew a sort of peace which, these days, was hard to come by. I sat cross legged with my eyes closed, breathing in and out as though there was nothing else in the universe that mattered. Seated across from me was Master Kjestyll. For the first time in a long time I felt a sense of satisfaction radiate from him.

Dragging me out of the training room we usually used to this small private garden well away from the palace had been an idea I was opposed to but in the end, as usual, he had been right.

He had known the moment he had seen me, for the first time since I returned to the core, that something was terribly wrong. He was not a man who pried, as a rule. He had been hired to train me in the Bunduki arts not act as a counsellor but sometimes a teacher had to be both, especially when the weight I carried around on my shoulders interfered with what he was trying to teach me.

"The burden of your fears constricts the ease of your movements." He had said without reproach or annoyance when I could not seem to perform the particular move he had asked me to.

This was an old issue, one that I could not seem to overcome and it frustrated me. The more frustrated I had gotten the less I was able to do as he instructed. His words had provoked an immediate and unwanted flash of both anger and sorrow. I had had to turn

away from him then because I had wanted to lash out and cry all at the same time. He had considered this for a moment then without explanation or further discussion he had told me to follow him. I had done so without question.

He had led me out of the palace, along the common walk ways until, after well over an hour I found myself in a part of the city I had never been to before standing before a wall with a locked door. He had unlocked the door and ushered me inside. I was surprised at what I saw. It was a garden of extraordinary beauty. The moment I entered and the door closed behind us, it was as if the rest of the galaxy no longer existed. I sighed, letting go of a breath I was not even aware that I had been holding and Master Kjestyll had smiled.

He had not spoken a word but I knew by the look on his face and his body language that now the real work would start. Warmed up from the brisk walk to this place we began to train, to spar without words. For the first time in a long time I felt uncluttered and free. Hours passed like moments. When he felt that I had done enough we went through the process of stretching to cool my body down and then he had insisted I close my eyes and find my center. I did as he asked and time slipped by like a whisper. With a deep, deep breath I ended the meditation and opened my eyes. I found myself staring into the eyes of my Bunduki Master. He had been watching me the entire time.

"How do you feel?" He asked.

"Light headed." I told him honestly, "As though the world suddenly got brighter, easier to carry."

He smiled. "You trained well today." He nodded.

Compliments from him were rare. "Thank you, Master."

"Now, perhaps in this place away from prying eyes and hidden ears you will tell me of what it is that troubles you."

In difference to how I usually reacted when someone asked me this question, I didn't make a face. Instead I considered my words carefully. It was not that I didn't want to tell Master Kjestyll what was eating me up from the inside out, it was more about finding the right way to do it. He was patient and he waited. As I sat, bathed in the warmth of the sun's light, caressed by the soft breezes which made the leaves in on the trees shiver, I searched for the right words. In the end I began my explanation by telling him about what had happened at Wayland. I didn't need to go into details; I suspected he knew far more about such things than most people could ever imagine, I just told him what had occurred. I told him about the nightmares that had plagued me since and about the nagging sense of wrongness I had been feeling recently with everything that had to do with the Emperor and all that he touched. Master Kjestyll listened without interruption or comment.

"Do you sympathise with the people who fight against the Empire?" He asked after a very long silence. It was not the question I had expected from him.

I shook my head. "No." my answer was honest and immediate. "I understand why they fight but I don't think they are right."

"Why?" He asked.

"These conflicts are cyclical." I replied. He cocked his head to one side in question; he had not expected this answer. I continued. "I have been reading about the wars the galaxy has gone through in the past. It seems to me that there is always someone at some point who decides the government needs to change. One side dictates the rules and another side decides they don't like it. The galaxy is in constant turmoil, it is only the size of these battles that really changes. Sometimes it's on a planetary scale and sometimes it's on a galactic scale but it's always happening." I said. "At any given time in the galaxy someone is in some sort of conflict."

"This is true, but do you not feel you should take a side?"

I shook my head. "If I had remained on Tatooine I would not be an active part of this conflict currently happening. It would have been words on a news cast, something

happening someplace else. It's only because I work so closely within the government that I know so much about what is going on. Are we all really so oppressed by the Empire? Is it really that terrible? I don't see a difference between how the Hutts run things and how the Empire runs things. What happens if these rebels win? What will they replace the current government with? How do I know that won't be worse?" I drew a deep breath. "From everything I have ever read it always seems to me that when there is a revolution to overthrow a government that is unpopular whatever replaces it eventually makes the same mistakes. It goes around in a huge circle."

My master watched me carefully, his steel grey eyes thoughtful and a little surprised. "That is a cynical answer for someone whose spirit is not usually so dark."

I shrugged. "It is what it is." I told him flatly wondering what he knew about my spirit.

He regarded me for a moment then asked. "So what is it that you are afraid of?"

There was a moment's pause then unbidden and without thinking I blurted out, "I am scared of being swallowed up by the darkness all around me." I was surprised by this, he was not. This was the answer he had wanted but would not have gotten had this been his first question.

"This is the weight you carry around with you." He said gently. "This fear clouds your judgement and your ability to move. You know what it is you fear, but do you know why?"

I shrugged and shook my head. "I can think of many reasons, all of them valid but none of them strong enough to be the answer that makes perfect sense."

"You look for perfection in an imperfect galaxy. No such thing exists." He chided.

"Then what do I do?" I asked, for the first time understanding I was lost.

"Let go of your fear." He said.

"That is easier said than done."

"Yes, it is." He nodded.

I studied my nails for a moment, avoiding his steady gaze. I sighed. "I feel as though I am at war with myself. It feels like I imagine having brain parasites or some similar infection must be like." I said finally. "It's an itch in my head I can't seem to scratch, a buzzing. It just feels wrong. Like a ship's engine with something out of synch." I paused. "I feel as though I am being pushed down a path I am not sure I want to take."

He nodded. "That is a perceptive description of the Dark side of the Force." He said thoughtfully.

"How do you know about the dark side of the Force?" I asked.

"When you have lived for as long as I have you tend to learn a thing or two about many topics and many systems of belief."

"Are you a force user?" I dared to ask him.

His smile was slow. "Do you sense the force in me, Ke'ashj Merlyn?"

I drew a deep breath and dropped all my guards. I opened myself up to him, to the living world around me. I could feel the ebb and flow of the garden, I could sense the city that lay beyond the walls vaguely, as though the high duracrete walls kept most of that white noise at bay but of Master Kjestyll there was no sense at all. In the force he was just a shadow. This was unusual. Even beings who were head blind, like Thrawn, shone in the force like a beacon to me. The more I pushed to find master Kjestyll in the swirling dance that was the Force of all things, the more vague his image became. If I kept this up I would give myself a headache. I withdrew.

"No, not the way I would if you could use it, I've met other force sensitive's. They leave a ripple. You don't." I said. "But my talent isn't very strong." I added.

He regarded me for a moment. "Perhaps not, but you are."

I shivered a little as a cloud passed across the sky, blocking the sun's warmth for a moment. I looked at him, waiting for him to clarify. He folded his hands together to rest in his lap, a motion I found disarmingly delicate.

"I have trained many at the palace during my time under Palpatine's rule, seen many students, some of which were touched by the force and many more who were not. It is not often that a student comes to me as old as you were when I first began your training. Usually when this is the case, that person's will had already been bent in a certain direction. You were not like that. Despite the directions that certain people wish to pull you in, you resist. You are strong which is why, in spite of the fact that you are difficult to teach, I continue to do so."

I looked at him for a while. Trying to figure out what it was he was trying to tell me without actually saying anything. He held my gaze until I dropped my eyes to study my hands.

"Child, look at me." His voice was quiet, reminding me of my uncle's. I did as he asked. He smiled a little. "The palace is full of negative energy, that you cannot settle there never surprises me." He said.

"Why do you teach me?" I asked suddenly.

"Because I was asked to do so." He answered. It was not a lie, but it was not the whole truth either.

"Why did you bring me here?" I glanced, indicating the garden we sat in.

He smiled. "So you might know peace."

I just stared at him for a moment, weighing the merits of further questions. His expression never changed. There was something about him, about his manner that told me he was more than just one of the Emperor's Bunduki masters. This had always been the case but up until now I had ignored it because he worked for the Emperor and the Emperor always had an agenda no matter what. I assumed this agenda continued on with the people who worked under him, but now, in this garden I was not so sure this was the case.

I sighed and looked up into his grey eyes. "You are not what you seem to be, are you?"

His unblinking stare never wavered as he answered. "None of us are."

It was the only answer he could have given but all of a sudden it stirred up more curiosity than it had quelled. I opened my mouth to ask something but he waved at me with one hand.

"No more questions today." He said firmly. "Clear your mind. In this place the stillness you seek to become is easier to find. Take advantage of this."

I nodded and closed my eyes. Despite the fact there was only one sun, its light warmed my skin. I leaned back against the tree behind me and listened to the wind. I wasn't sure if I would ever be shown this place again and I wasn't ready to leave its quiet just yet.

Slipping back into that meditative state was easier than usual. Finding that quiet centered space where everything and nothing seemed to meet and become one was a little like coming home. It was a comforting and familiar greyness that held neither promise nor threat; it simply was so when the vision began, at first, I was very confused.

*I opened my eyes but instead of seeing my master I saw vast forest that went on for kilometres. I had no idea where I was or, for that matter, when. I looked around but I was alone except for the lambda class shuttle that sat on the plateau a short way from where I stood. Off in the distance I could see smoke and I could hear the faint sounds of blaster fire. I shivered with a deep sense of inexplicable sorrow, there were tears streaming down my cheeks. I had not bothered to wipe them away. I looked up just in time to see something massive burst apart with such force that I expected I, too, would be wiped out by the shock wave that must surely follow but no such thing happened. I*

*watched as billions of tiny fragments, meteors burned up in the atmosphere. A wind rippled through the forests and I thought I heard it whisper my name. I turned around as a shiver crossed my spine. Behind me shimmered a ghost like figure, a young man with long shaggy hair and a scar across his right eye. His face was familiar to me but I couldn't quite place it.*

*"You should go now." The ghostly figure said.*

*A blaster shot, much closer than before broke the moment and I turned to see where it had come from, when I turned back the ghost was gone. The sense of loss was overwhelming and I had no idea where to go or what to do next. As I stood on the precipice hesitating, one word echoed in the air... 'Go!'*

The touch of a hand, warm and strong upon my own brought me back to the here and now. This time when I opened my eyes I found myself looking into Master Kjestyll's. He was concerned. The disorientation I felt was disarming. It took me a few seconds to realise that there was no forest, no explosion and no ghost. There was just me and him in a garden somewhere on Coruscant. It did nothing to explain my tears.

"What did you see?" he asked.

I told him. It did not occur to me to question how he even knew I had seen something, anything.

"I have known Jedi who were able to see backwards and forwards through time." He said. "A powerful skill but not one I ever envied. The force sometimes sends its users visions of the past, of the future." He commented. "A Jedi master I once knew told me that time is always fluid and in motion. Visions are fleeting glimpses of what may be, and what has passed."

I struggled to shake off the terrible sense of sadness which lingered. "I don't know what this was, the future, the past, I have no idea." I told him. "I get dreams all the time but visions like this are rare. Why do they happen? What does it all mean?"

He shrugged ever so slightly. "For the answer to that you would have to consult a Jedi master or perhaps a Sith master." He replied. "But perhaps they are sent as warnings or as guides."

"I thought all of the Jedi were killed. How would I be able to ask them if they are all dead?" I asked more crossly than I had intended. I didn't relish the thought of discussing my dreams and visions with Lord Vader or the Emperor.

Master Kjestyll regarded me for a moment. "Of course, you are right." He said in that manner which told me I had missed the point, as usual.

I was suddenly very tired and it was getting late. I had not noticed the passage of time or the fact that the sun was now low in the sky, the bright yellow if its light turned to dusk orange. Master Kjestyll stood up and I did the same, taking once last long glance around at the beauty of the garden before reluctantly following him out of its sanctuary. I was startled by the noise of the city which had seemed so faint behind the garden's walls and the sorrow I had felt in my vision returned. As he locked the door to the garden it occurred to me to wonder why no one seemed to notice this place. A small walled off square in a less busy area of a city that just never stopped. I knew we were not on ground level; there had been too much sunlight for that, so it must have been on top of some flat roofed building which had been somehow covered and layered into the ever changing landscape of Coruscant.

"Will I ever get to come here again?" I asked quietly as he began the walk back to the palace.

"Perhaps." Was all the answer I got. I was content that it hadn't been a 'no'. The rest of the walk was silent.

At the foot of the stairs which led to the small entrance near the North side of the Palace, Master Kjestyll bid me good evening.

"We will continue our lessons the day after tomorrow in your training room. I have asked another student to come and spar with you; I believe you know Makki Iekki."

I nodded. I could not hide my delight. Despite the fact he had told me I would be able to train with other students it was something that happened rarely. I had met Makki at the Bunduki trials and we had become friends after a fashion. I was happy to get to see him again.

"Then, Ke'ashj Merlyn, I wish you a pleasant night without any more disturbing dreams." And before I could reply or bow in respect he had turned around and disappeared into the oncoming night.

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I got word that Thrawn had been sent to the Pakunni sector, aboard the victory class star destroyer *Stalwart* and was currently engaged in setting up a base there as well as fighting off pirates. His latest letter had described the attacks and his impressions about the mission in general with his usual flair but underneath his eloquence I got the feeling that he was a little bored and that policing the area against pirates was not particularly challenging. The one thing that had been of interest to him, had been a pilot named Stele.

*...He's quite clever, more so than the average Imperial pilot that the Academy spits out these days. While on escort duty he actually used his TIE bomber to defensively beat back an attack. Most impressive when one considers that TIE bombers were never designed with defensive manoeuvres in mind. I found it refreshing to see a young pilot think outside of the box when it comes to combat tactics. He will be reassigned to your favourite Grand Admiral, Zaarin's command shortly, as I feel he will not get the notice he deserves serving under me. In the meantime we continue to deal with the pirates in this system and serve the Empire as best we can.*

*You asked if I had heard anything further concerning the rumours about Admiral Harkov and while I have, I am not at liberty to discuss this. You will, I am quite certain, learn what you wish to know soon enough. You are one of the most resourceful people I have ever met when it comes to securing information of any sort, when it piques your interest. ...*

The rest of his letter had gone on to discuss a set of books I had been reading as well as more personal things which had made me smile. He was one of the few constant and consistently good things in my life. Grand Admiral Zaarin, on the other hand, was not especially when he barged into my office demanding information I was not prepared to give him.

"He's away." I said tersely.

Zaarin looked at me crossly. "Away? where?" It was a stupid question because he had high enough clearance he could have found this information out for himself.

I shrugged with one shoulder which irritated him even more. "If you want to speak with him you need to do so via the secure HoloNet."

"I thought getting in contact with him was your job?"

"No sir, that would be his secretary droid's job." I said trying to keep my annoyance out of my voice. "I am not his secretary. I am not one of his aide de camps. I am his personal assistant."

"What is the difference?" Zaarin asked leaning over my desk.

"I don't make comm calls to my boss when he's out in the middle of space on a military engagement." I told him, it was sort of a lie but I wasn't playing secretary for Zaarin. "His secretary droid is in the next room."

He stood up and tugged at his jacket. "You know, it wouldn't hurt you to be a bit more polite to me." He said.

I raised an eyebrow. "I am being polite, Grand Admiral Zaarin."

Instead of making a scene or getting annoyed he simply smiled. That kind of smile I was used to from Imperial men that said *Oh I see, you're playing hard to get*. He stared at me for a moment then said. "I wonder, Miss Gabriel if you would accompany me to the dedication ceremony for the new wing."

That surprised me. I hesitated just a fraction of a second too long before I said, "No. But thank you for asking."

This surprised him. "May I ask why? Admiral Thrawn is not in town so you should be free to accompany anyone you wish."

I arched the other eyebrow because I knew that annoyed people. "I prefer to go alone. I have been the subject of the *Daily Digest* gossip column enough thanks."

He stared at me for a moment and then nodded. "Perhaps that is to be expected when you shack up with the Emperor's pet alien, or is this just another rumour?" He smiled as he said this but his eyes remained stone hard.

I just looked at him, not rising to the bait. "One should not believe all one hears on the gossip nets, Admiral."

His expression didn't change. "Well, Miss Gabriel, I hope to see you there. Perhaps you will share a drink with me."

I smiled coolly. "Perhaps."

He didn't react, he just left. He didn't need to ask me to contact Vader for him; he was quite capable of doing that himself. He just came in to bait and bother me. We both knew it but since this was how Imperials played games there wasn't much I could do about it. I was glad when the door to my office closed. I sighed and patched a short note through to Lord Vader that Zaarin was looking for him. The last I had heard he was off on a wild bantha chase somewhere out near the Lybeya system. I knew he would not answer any call I put through to him so I just sent a text message.

Grand Admiral Zaarin had been seen around the palace on and off despite the fact that official reports placed him permanently placed in the Vilonis Sector doing research on new versions of TIEs. I assumed that he was back for briefings and planning sessions that had to do with the second space station the Emperor was having built and other military issues I was not in the least bit interested in. I had seen more than one White uniform running around so his presence was of little surprise. I supposed that the Emperor would also want an update on the projects Zaarin had been working on, after all his funding was worth millions of credits. He had spoken to me about his research some time ago at one of the Grand balls but since then I had not heard any more about the development of these designs.

I had to fight to keep my loathing of the man from surfacing every time he was near me. He had tried to kill me in order to disgrace Thrawn and when that had failed he had tried to get rid of Thrawn by means of a cloaked ship which had attacked the shuttle we were on en route to rendezvous with the *Avenger*, neither tactic had worked and I wondered what he would do for the third encore. If Zaarin had any inkling that I knew what he had done, he never gave it away, I suspected he didn't. Like so many men who worked for the Empire he made the standard mistake of assuming I was not terribly smart or perhaps it was just that he felt he was smarter. Either way, I wasn't about to try and educate him on the error of his ways. With a sigh I went back to reading the mail.

**TO: Office of Lord Darth Vader**

**FROM: Human Resources and Development Department**

**RE: Notice of Employment Termination**

*Please be advised that effective immediately Agaddi ren'Nor, palace horticulturalist, will no longer be working for the Imperial Palace Botanical Gardens. Please join us in wishing Mr. ren'Nor all the best in his new position with Prince Xizor.*  
Yvett Tourne,  
Assistant Manager  
Human Resources Development Department

That raised my eyebrows. I had met Agaddi ren'Nor a couple of times and had chatted to him while he had been working in the gardens. He was very good at his job and it surprised me that he would accept a position with the Prince. I guessed that the offer Agaddi had been given must have been worth it. I would miss seeing him around; he was a quiet man with a gentle nature. The Imperial palace did not generally have a quick turn over in jobs, unless one worked under Lord Vader. Most people tended to keep the jobs they had. I was never sure exactly why that was but I suspected it was partly out of fear and partly because working for the Empire had a great benefits package.

**TO: Miss Merlyn Ty'Erijann Gabriel**  
**FROM: The Imperial Palace Social Department**  
**RE: Dedication Ceremony for New Palace Wing**

*Miss Gabriel, Please find enclosed your personal invitation to attend the Dedication Ceremony for the New Assemblage Wing of the palace. This invitation is for the closed reception which will follow the public dedication and will be held in the Tarkin Conference Room.*

*Please note that the reception is formal dress and / or dress uniform with no exceptions. There will be no admittance without the invitation. Should you wish to bring a guest you must register his or her name and pertinent details with the Palace Events Coordination team twenty-four hours prior to attendance.*

*The reception will be catered by Ta'lucci and Frolla, there will be an open bar. Music provided by the Imperial City String Quartet. The reception begins at 21:00 hrs and ends at 00:00 hrs CST.*

*Marlann Taralae*  
*Palace Events Coordinator*

I looked at the invitation that had been tucked inside the form letter that had arrived on my desk along with a dozen other memos and letters. I set both my invitation and the one for Lord Vader to one side. I had reminded him about the dedication ceremony but I wasn't sure if he would be back in time for it. I confirmed my dress fitting appointment with Cati and then set about dealing with the daily barrage of nonsense that never seemed to end. I was fairly certain that if Lord Vader had to deal with and answer all the mail he received himself there would be a lot less bureaucrats in the Empire. I was in the middle of replying to the last memo when Shiv poked his nose in my office.

"Lunch?" he asked.

"Only if it's very quick, I have a dress fitting in half an hour, or can we do lunch afterwards?"

"Sure that works for me, I need to find a new suit for this dedication reception. Are you heading to Cati's? I take it you got your invite? Share a taxi?"

I nodded to all of his questions. "Yep. *Formal dress required* means I need to show up in a dress I haven't worn before."

He grinned. "Don't make that face Rim-Girl, you love being a fashion plate."

I shook my head. "No, I don't but I do like Cati's dresses." I slung my satchel across my shoulder and followed Shiv out of the office locking the door behind me.



While Shiv was searching for a decent suit to wear I was standing on the platform which I had dubbed Cati's alter of pain while the Rodian seamstress pinned the final adjustments to the dress she had designed for me.

"So, will your gentleman be there?" she asked casually as she took the delicate fabric in at the waist.

"I hope so but I don't know." I told her. "It's just a reception for the new wing dedication but you know the Empire, all fuss and fanfare."

Cati managed a shrug. "I don't complain, Miss Gabriel, it keeps me in business." She let out a little sigh. "You need to stop losing weight. This is the third time I have had to take this dress in for you. I'll never get it finished in time if you keep that up. Have you been ill or something?"

I looked at her and the dress she was taking in. "No, not really."

The look she gave me said *'Uh huh. I don't believe a word of it.'*

"I don't sleep well because I have constant bad dreams and I have no appetite to speak of." I told her tartly, anything to get her to stop looking at me in that manner.

"Well, you might want to stop that particular bad habit, this dress is for showing off curves not bones." She chided. "Your gentleman will not like to come home to find you withering away. The skinny waif look is very passé." She said.

"Well don't pin too tight then, I'm going to *B'schu'le's* for lunch with Shiv. I plan on eating lots because I'm famished. I didn't think I had lost that much weight."

"Enough it shows, you are not at the wasting away stage yet. Are you having your hair done at Bam's for the event?"

"Hadn't planned on it, I have an appointment for a wash and trim tomorrow though. I made the appointment ages ago."

She nodded and stepped back to take a look at her work. "Smart, he's booked solid." She said. "So, what do you think?"

I turned around and looked at my reflection in the mirror. She was right, I looked as though I had been ill but mostly this was a product of sleepless nights. The dress she had created was lovely. She had found the perfect shade of pink that matched my skin tone and hair colour. The fabric was soft and supple, and clung to what it touched. In difference to most of the dresses she had designed for me in the past, this one had a back and a pretty, not too indecent, sweetheart neckline. It also had both slender shoulder straps and flowing off the shoulder sleeves. It was very pretty.

"You should wear Corellian Sweetheart rose buds in your hair, the colour would go perfectly with this dress." Cati said casually and she took in her handy work.

I glanced at her and nodded. I had long since given up arguing with her in the area of accessories. I had come a long way from tying my hair back with bits of routing wire. I was about to step off the fitting platform when Shiv came in.

"Wow." He said, setting down his new suit which was all carefully wrapped up in a garment bag and another huge shopping bag whose contents I couldn't see.

Cati grinned. "Show him the shoes."

I did as I was asked and lifted the dress so he could see the matching shoes.

Shiv grinned, "Oh the little bows on the open toes are very cute." He teased.

I made a face at him. I felt a little like a prized eopie at an auction.

"Okay, that's it, get out of the dress so I can finish it off and get it sent over to you. Don't lose any more weight between now and the event!" Cati scolded. "Because if I have to re pin this dress one more time, I shall hurt you."

I nodded, and went to get out of the dress and back into clothes than made sense. While a part of me loved the elegance of the Empire, it was just so unreal. I much preferred my standard Tatooine chic.

While I was changing I heard Shiv ask if she wanted to join us for lunch but true to Cati form she refused politely stating a busy fitting schedule. She had made time for me and I was grateful, while Thrawn wasn't back yet I knew he would be and I wanted the dress to look perfect. I hadn't told her this but she had figured that out anyway. I was a bit sad that she would not come with us because on the few rare occasions when she had joined us it had been a lot of fun. Their conversation had ended with Cati telling Shiv in not so uncertain terms *'For goodness sakes Shiv, feed that girl before she fades away to nothing!'* I walked out of the changing room pretending I hadn't heard a thing. With a brief hug and the traditional kiss-kiss both Shiv and I said our goodbyes and headed off to *B'schu'le's*.

I loved *B'schu'le's* and so it seemed did the rest of Coruscant. The restaurant was very crowded when we walked in and I was thankful that Shiv had thought ahead to reserve us a table.

I ordered a big salad and a noodle dish. When he ordered wine with the meal I knew we weren't going back to work afterwards which was okay by me. Now I understood why we had taken a taxi to Cati's instead of his air-speeder.

"Are you going to talk about what's been bothering you?" he asked as I stabbed my fork through leafy salad.

I glanced up at him, "I told you the last time you asked. I don't sleep very well." He looked at me for a moment. "The palace doc could fix you up with something that would help with that."

"I'm not going to start taking sleeping aides, it will pass. It's just bad dreams and I get them sometimes."

"See, I'd normally believe you but you've had this scary death warmed over thing going ever since you got back after Hoth and it reminds me a lot of how you looked after Jyrki, well you know... kidnapped you."

I made a face. "I had bad dreams then too." I said with a mouthful of salad. "It will pass; you need to trust me on that."

For a moment I saw him hesitate, the decision of whether or not to push me wavered across his face. He was worried. "It's not like you to lie to me." He said a bit sadly. He had decided to push.

"I'm not lying. I don't sleep well, I wake up with really terrible nightmares most of which I don't remember and I can't get back to sleep afterwards. It's not like I have the luxury of being able to nap in the afternoon, you know." I frowned. "Do you really want the absolute truth?"

He nodded.

"I hate sleeping alone when I am on this planet."

That made him smile and for the first time all afternoon he actually seemed to relax. "I knew there had to be another reason." He grinned. "You're pining for the man you love."

I sighed. "See, this is exactly why I don't tell you things!" I said crossly, mutilating the last bits of defenceless salad on my plate so loudly that people sitting one table over looked at me. I glared right back at them and they returned their attention to their own plates so fast I thought they might get whiplash. "I am not pining!"

He just shrugged. "Whatever." He leaned over to reach the shopping bag; a glossy red dura-paper thing with little string handles and shoved it over to me. "I thought that you might want some company in bed, seeing as how you get lonely...." He let his sentence trail off with a knowing wink.

I sighed and shook my head. "Honestly Shiv, you're as bad as the gossip girls from HR."

The waitress came and cleared away our empty salad plates and replaced them with the main course. Shiv had some sort of thinly sliced reddish meat, rizzoles, and vegetables

all drizzled with a creamy looking sauce. It smelled wonderful. My pasta was covered with a chunky sauce made from a red fruit and was heavily spiced, just the way I liked it. While the waitress hovered around us, refilling our glasses and smiling, I held my tongue. As soon as she left I pulled the bag to me and peeked inside. Underneath a layer of delicate tissue was the largest stuffed toy bantha I had ever seen. Despite the fact that we were sitting in a good restaurant I hauled him out of the bag with a squeal of delight. He was perfect, with soft, long shaggy fur and horns made from some sort of roughed up leather. The detailing on him was astonishing, even his glittery eyes seemed real.

"I am way too old for cuddle toys Shiv, but he's gorgeous...where did you find a bantha toy on this planet?" I said as I slipped him back in the bag and grinned.

Shiv beamed. "We special ordered him from Ji-Ji's, really he's for your birthday, I mean, birthdays. He's from me, Ynyth, Bobbyn, Maxxi and Cati and I wasn't supposed to give him to you until your other birthday but goodness knows if you'll be here for that and I figured you could use the company at night. I got the call this morning that he was done, so it seemed like the right time all around."

I shook my head. I didn't know what to say. I had never really talked to Shiv about my love affair with Banthas yet somehow he had known. My guess was that maybe Thrawn had given something of that away but I was pretty sure no one would admit to anything.

"Eat your lunch before it gets cold." He waved his fork at me. "I have to tell Cati that I saw you finish a meal with my own two eyes."

I did as he asked, not because I had to but because I really was, for the first time in ages, very hungry. Like most things, my bouts of anxiety and sleeplessness came and went. The regular routine of being back on a planet again helped a lot. That Lord Vader was more often away than on Coruscant helped even more. The best of all was that the Emperor had not been around much either. Slowly the nightmare I had lived through on Wayland was receding, relegated to the same strange part of my life that Jyrki's treatment had been and I tried not to think about the moral implications of working for the Empire. My ongoing training sessions with Master Kjestyll were helping to re-ground me and for a while I could forget about the Force and all of its sides, light dark and in between.

"What are you doing after this?" I asked him.

"I am coming back to your place and we are going to watch some of the latest season of *Smuggler's Run*, which I happen to know you just picked up and then I am going home and you will get a decent night's sleep." He said, "Unless you have a lesson or something?"

I shook my head. "Nope no lessons tonight, so we'll go with your plan." I agreed and went back to finishing my pasta. By the time we had done with the main meal we decided to get desert to go because while *B'schu'le's* made the best cakes in the galaxy, their 'caf was awful.

*Smuggler's Run* was a brilliant drama about a band of rag-tag nobodies, in a galaxy very far away but amazingly similar to ours. It was a funny, campy show with a great cast of characters. The brilliant but broken captain who is trying to get away from his past, the crazy alien mechanic who could fix anything, twin brothers who were mercenaries and finished each other sentences, the weapons expert who just happens to be a hot chick and the stowaway kid, who everyone except the mechanic thought was a guy but who was really a girl. They lived by their wits on their ship which loosely resembled an old Corellian tub and was always falling apart. They usually ended up helping people instead of actually doing anything terribly illegal. It was hilarious but also sometimes sad and touching.

We ate our delicious deserts, sipped excellent spiced 'caf and then topped it all off with a glass of Thrawn's thirty year old Corellian brandy. I was stuffed and my sides hurt from laughing so much.

Once we had eaten I had hauled the large bantha toy out of the bag and slouching on the couch with my feet on the 'caf table I had it balanced on my lap, face to face. He was the

cutest thing I ever saw next to a real bantha baby. He had been made to perfection and I had fallen in love with him.

Shiv poked me in the ribs. "How can you see the screen?" He asked.

"I see fine over his head!"

"His?"

I looked up at Shiv and nodded. "Yeah, he's a he."

"How can you tell?"

"The shape and thickness of the horns." I said tracing my finger around the loop of the sueded leather. "Females horns never grow to more than one circle and the ridges aren't as pronounced. I love banthas."

Shiv grinned. "I know."

"Who told you that, because I'm sure it wasn't me?"

"I am sworn to secrecy." He said. I opened my mouth to say more but he wagged a finger at me. "Shut up, not another word, just watch the show!"

I smirked at settled back down, cuddling the huge stuffed toy, watching the 'net with one of my very best friends.

"What are you going to call him?" Shiv asked after five minutes of silence.

"I'll have to think about it. Naming a bantha is a big deal."

"Will you tell me what you name him then?"

"I promise, now will *you* shut up?"

He laughed and grabbed the remote to backtrack so we could catch up on what we missed.

It was late when he left and despite his advice of letting the dishes sit until the morning I just couldn't. Thrawn did not like clutter and chaos in the house and some of that had rubbed off on me, besides I couldn't stand the sight of dirty dishes when I first got up and ever worse was a messy kitchen, I was never awake enough to deal with that first thing. Once everything was tidy I took my bantha toy and went to bed. I hadn't slept with a stuffed cuddle toy in bed since I was a very small child. I sighed when I slipped under the beautiful linen sheets, wearing one of Thrawn's pyjama tops and wrapped my arm around the bantha to snuggle it. A small piece of furry comfort in the darkness the night had become. Unfortunately its presence didn't stop the nightmares but it was something to grip on to when I felt as though I were drowning.

The nightmares had become indefinable night terrors involving faceless attackers and endless chases through never ending labyrinths which usually ended up with me falling into the molten lava on the planet the Emperor had called Mustafar. It was not a particularly great way to wake up. Going back to sleep after such a nightmare was usually impossible so I would get up, make myself tea and use the portable computer terminal to get some work done. This way I could sit in the living room and have the HoloNet on in the background. While I was wading through the latest barrage of inter-office mail the late night programme that was currently on was interrupted.

The news anchor was shaken as he read out the latest report of fighting between the Empire and the Rebels. While these kinds of reports were not really new the disclosure that someone from the Imperial side had defected to the rebels was. The news programme did not have a name and details were sketchy at best which was typical.

With my portable computer terminal, I quickly logged into the palace network and began to scan through the internal imperial bulletin boards that I had access to via Lord Vader. The traitor was Admiral Harkov. It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did and I could not help wondering how many more so called loyal Imperials were not exactly as they seemed.

I was instantly awake. It was that weird state of hyper awareness that comes when you wake up cold in the middle of the night knowing something isn't right. My hand

snaked under my pillow and curled around the lightsaber I been keeping there. I lay as still as I could and listened. I could hear nothing, but I knew that someone was in the flat; I felt a presence as sure as I felt the weapon I was clutching. I fought to slow my racing heart and opened myself up to the force which flowed around me like sand across the ground in a storm. I searched the flat with my mind and when I found the reason I had woken up I let out a silent sigh of relief.

Thrawn moved through his own home as though he were the intruder not the owner. He walked so quietly I would have had no idea where he was if I could not sense him through the force. When he reached the bedroom I was no longer holding my lightsaber.

"You can turn on the light, I'm not asleep." I said as he walked silently across the wooden floor. He had taken his shoes off, it made me smile. He didn't turn the bedroom light on, instead he switched on the one in the bathroom so that it illuminated the bedroom just enough for him not to bang into the bed the way I always did but not enough to make me squint. He didn't actually need to turn any lights on, so I was pretty sure this was for my benefit.

"I didn't want to wake you." He told me as he came to the edge of the bed and undressed.

I looked up at him; he had his back to me. "That happened the moment you entered the flat."

"I should have known, I suppose." He said. "You really are quite scary, you know." He teased but he sounded tired. The light from the bathroom was soft, illuminating the outline his body as he stripped off his clothes. I longed to reach out and touch him but the sharp state of being awake had shifted back into a warm doziness and I couldn't be bothered to move. I yawned.

He got up, went to the bathroom, closed the door and the room was plunged back into the usual darkness. I rolled back over onto my side and curled around the bantha toy. I heard Thrawn come out of the bathroom, but he had turned off the light before he opened the door. I felt him pull aside the covers and get into bed. He spooned himself around me, my back to his front, his arm curled around my waist, stopping when his hand touched synthetic fur.

"Is there something you want to tell me, Sji'u' Tekari?" he murmured in my ear.

"That's Runi'." I answered. "Shiv and the gang's birthday gift to me." I said. I rolled over onto my back making him do the same. I pulled Runi' out from under the sheets and dumped him on Thrawn's chest. He gave a little laugh as he took the toy and looked at him.

"A very accurate likeness of a Bantha." He said, appreciatively. "It's too dark to see him that clearly." I felt him look at me and I felt his eyebrow go up. "My dear, I keep telling you, Chiss have excellent night vision."

I stuck my tongue out at him and he chuckled. "I saw that as well." He said. "I take it he was my substitute while I was gone?" He added.

"I wasn't sleeping well." I told him by way of answer, settling down again. He was quiet for a long moment, staring at the Bantha balanced on his chest.

"As in nightmares or as in working too much or maybe just staying up far too late with Shiv watching too much HoloNet?"

"Nightmares."

"This has to do with what happened after Bespin?" He asked. "I sensed there was something you were not telling me in your last letter."

I nodded. "It was bad." I said.

He shifted a little to look at me. He patted the bantha on his chest. "Can I put your little friend here on the floor?" He asked. "Or will he be offended?"

"Banthas generally don't like being cooped up, so he'll probably be happier on the floor." I said as I shifted so that one leg slung across his hips and my arm across his chest. I rested my head in the hollow his shoulder made for me, feeling him move as he put Runi' down beside the bed. Then he wrapped the arms around me. I breathed him in deeply, hardly believing that he was here. He smelled like spice and soap. He ran his fingers through my hair.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asked.

"The Emperor found out about my talent for reading objects." I said bluntly and quickly, as though saying fast would make it go away.

He let out a slow breath. A ripple of anger flashed through him and I could feel it when he clenched his jaw. "What did he use to test you?" There was a strange tightness in his voice.

"Something terrible and if it's okay with you I'd rather not talk about it in the dark."

He pulled me closer to him as if that could protect me from what had already happened. "When you are ready, I will listen."

"I am so glad you are back." I told him looking up at him.

"I know you are." He answered quietly. Something in his voice made me look up at him. I could see his eyes, a soft red glow in the dimly lit bedroom. He kissed me on the forehead in that wonderful manner he had which said, *you are mine, I am here so you are safe, and I am quite tired so can we please just go to sleep now?* I just closed my eyes and for the first time since returning from Wayland I slept the rest of the whole night through.

I woke up late, sunlight streamed into the bedroom, dancing through the gauzy white curtains which shifted in the little breeze coming through the open window. I was alone in the bed except for the stuffed bantha which occupied the side of the bed Thrawn slept on. It made me smile. I got up, slipped on a robe and made my way to the kitchen where I was handed a cup of creamy stim'caf with a smile that made my heart speed up more than the stim'caf ever could.

"You were so fast asleep that I didn't want to wake you." He said by way of explanation. He was already showered and dressed.

"Thank-you."

"No nightmares?" He asked, pushing a plate of warm, buttered scones in my direction.

I sipped the hot stim'caf gratefully. "No nightmares." I confirmed.

He simply nodded and went back to his own drink, reading the latest news flimsy that had been delivered.

"I see Xizor has dumped his latest girlfriend." He commented.

The corner of my mouth curled up in a smile. "Are you reading the gossip column?"

"No, it made the headlines." He snorted with distaste. "She is, apparently, devastated."

"Oh." I knelt up on the kitchen stool and leaned on the counter to read the flimsy with him.

"Oooh, Lord Vader's offensive at Vergesso Prime was successful." I commented, reading the headline *'Imperials Win Again!'* "Of course you know that he went out here on a tip from the Prince. He'll be so cross that Xizor was right."

"Well, I would wait until Lord Vader returns and tells you what really happened before I'd believe what was written here."

"And maybe he'll tell me about Harkov as well!" I said. "The Admiral was executed wasn't he? The reports don't say much, it's all very hush hush."

"A very bad business that." Thrawn commented with a nod. "Do you recall that young pilot I wrote you about?"

"Stele?" I nodded.

"Well apparently he, along with a couple of others, had a lot to do with helping in that capture. They managed to get Harkov but the fleet he commanded is still out there, presumably acting on Harkov's behalf, and has also turned rebel." He said. "Vader deal with Harkov personally, so you know the end result there."

I just looked at him. "A whole fleet defected? That wasn't in any of the reports I read. I am surprised that even after three weeks nothing has really been mentioned, it's even fairly quiet over all the official channels."

"Of course it is, my dear. It is bad enough that an admiral of the Imperial navy turned traitor but an entire fleet? Well, you can imagine if news of that got out."

"This rebel thing is getting out of hand." I said flatly.

Thrawn nodded. "Indeed." He said. "More 'caf?" He asked and then went back to reading the morning's news. Something caught my eye and without thinking I pulled the flimsy to my side of the counter. This earned me a raised eyebrow and an annoyed look.

"Oh my!" I exclaimed.

"What is it?" Asked Thrawn.

"Agaddi ren'Nor is dead." I said as I quickly read through the short obituary.

"Who is that?"

"He was one of the Emperor's best horticulturalists; he recently went to work for Prince Xizor. It says here that before he could even start his new job he was found dead. Apparently some freak accident with a lift. There's an investigation but they don't suspect foul play. How sad, I kind of liked him." I handed the flimsy back to Thrawn who skimmed the small text quickly.

Thrawn shook his head and snorted. "No foul play indeed. The Emperor does not like to give up his best people, especially to someone like Prince Xizor."

"You don't think it was an accident?"

He just arched an eyebrow at me. "No." he replied.

"Speaking of accidents, did you hear about the attack on Xizor?"

He shook his head.

"Happened a little while ago now, some moon-brain managed to get past all Palace security and attacked the Prince after he had a meeting there. Wanted revenge, blamed Xizor for the death of his family or some such thing. Now you have to wear your ID tags visible at all times, no exceptions. Security keeps arresting people for no ID tags. It's very silly."

"How did this assailant avoid security in the first place?"

I gave Thrawn a look. "How do you think?"

Thrawn shook his head in disgust. "It doesn't become Vader to play these stupid, bickering games, you know."

I just shrugged. "I think he just gets bored sometimes."

That remark earned me a smile. "They mention the public ceremony for the new wing dedication tonight; they expect a lot of people to come." He said. "Did you get a new dress for the reception afterwards?" He remarked, switching topics deftly.

"I did." I said with a grin.

"Has Cati performed her usual magic?"

"She has."

"Do I get to see it?"

"Only if you're planning on attending." I told him coyly.

"I'd say that chances are good I will be there." He replied as he refilled my stim'caf. For a moment our eyes met and that world shattering sensation flashed through me like a seismic charge. I swallowed, bit my lip, blushed and looked away. He smirked.

I sipped my drink. "I told Zaarin I was attending alone when he asked if I would be his date a couple of days ago. He figured that since you were not around I would be easy prey."

Thrawn's eyebrow shot up. "Oh?" he said. "I imagine he did not enjoy being told 'no' yet again. He's quite persistent with you, I'll give him that. Most men would have walked away by now."

"He's not persistent, he's just stupid. Most men would have taken the hint by now." I scowled. "He's an arrogant Imperial male who thinks he can have what he wants at the snap of his fingers. 'Getting me' has become a personal mission, I think. He won't win; he's just too stubborn to figure that out!" I made a face. "I told him I was tired of being gossip fodder by way of an excuse, he said if that were really the case I should probably not be shacking up with you."

Thrawn had to work hard not to spray the mouthful of stim'caf he had just taken all over the counter. "He actually said that?"

"Yes, he actually said that." I confirmed.

"I am all ears as to your response, my dear."

My shrug was nonchalant. "I just smiled at him and told him he shouldn't believe the all the gossip."

"Really?" He did that annoying eyebrow thing. "I see some of my lessons on diplomacy are rubbing off on you."

"More like I can't be bothered to deal with him, it's tedious and besides, he tried to kill me. If he wanted me to go out on a date with him he should have thought about that before he tried to poison me and blow you up." I said crossly. "Smiling at him confuses him." I added. "One of these days I shall be smiling when I throttle him with my bare hands. Which I could do quite easily, you know!" I made wringing motions with my hands to make my point.

He shook his head in mock despair. "I can see that some of Vader's tactics have *also* rubbed off on you."

"Hardly! I don't go around force choking everyone who pisses me off."

He smiled. "No, you shower us unsuspecting males with enough desire to drown an entire battalion."

Our eyes locked a second time and another seismic charge exploded in my belly. "Neither you nor he can complain if I am being polite." I said. "Frosty smiles are about as nice as I get these days. I've run out of patience and I'm all out of nice. It doesn't get me anywhere anyway. I could still do him in though."

"I would much rather you were frosty and polite to him than you took matters into your own hands and eliminated him." He said with a hint of reproach. "Removing him from the galaxy is not your job and I doubt it would make the Emperor very happy if you were to attempt it."

"Puh! You don't let me have any fun!" I told him, taking a scone to munch on. "And the Emperor is...."

"...never happy, I know." He finished for me. "Speaking of fun, I take it your wish to attend this thing solo means that I cannot ask you to be my date for the event?" He was teasing.

"You can ask, but you'd get the same answer Zaarin did." I said with a shrug. "In light of self interest and self preservation I think it's best that I go unattached or shadow Lord Vader if he will be there. He got back to the core a day ago but he's been pretty busy with meetings with the Emperor so I have not really seen a whole lot of him. You are supposed to be in disgrace. I am supposed to be trying to keep a low profile. Besides, I am getting tired of having my face splashed on the *Daily Digest* flimsies and the HoloNet



entertainment nightly shows just because the gossip mongers have nothing better to write about. "

He laughed. "So you mean you actually plan behaving at this event?"

I made a face. "I always behave." I told him crossly. "I can't help it that trouble finds me."

I glared at him when his eyebrow shot up. "I seem to recall the last time you attended an official function it ended rather disastrously." He remarked tartly. "And that particular trouble was self inflicted."

"You will never let me forget about that, will you?"

"You are very funny when you are inebriated." He said with a little grin. "I really wonder if it is at all safe to let you loose without a chaperone."

"You know, just because I don't feel the need to fuel the fires that already circulate around you, me and our odd little relationship doesn't mean I won't behave myself at this stupid event. Last time, as I recall, it was because I got pecked at by the powers that be I ended up going off the deep end. If I hadn't been drinking I would have hurt someone." I told him hotly, all the while watching him try very hard not to laugh. "Anyway, you don't have to worry; Shiv has taken it upon himself to act as the big-brother watch dog this time around. He was pretty ticked at me for getting so drunk at the last event and he blames you. He wasn't happy about your inability to keep an eye on me. I told him it was hardly your fault, after all, it's not as if anyone actually instructed you to baby-sit me, you didn't force feed me the bubbly and I could have and should have just gone home. Ugh, I don't want to even think about fizzy champagne let alone drink any." I shuddered.

Thrawn laughed and caressed the side of my face with a brush of his fingers. "Why is Shiv even complaining? He wasn't the one picking up the pieces the day after, I was."

I sighed. "I can move back to the palace, you know!"

He just continued to smile. "That is an empty threat, you like my bed too much and I like having you in it." He said. "But if you must have an answer to the unasked question behind that statement, I think I'd prefer you stay here where I can keep an eye on you." He punctuated this statement with a light kiss on the top of my head.

I didn't know how to reply to that so I just nodded and sipped my drink. The silence between us was so utterly comfortable that I didn't want to break it.

"I noticed your speeder isn't here. Do you want a ride to work?" He asked after he had finished reading and drained his cup.

"Sure."

"Then I suggest you get yourself ready, my dear, I have to leave soon. I have meetings all day and I probably should not be late."

It occurred to me, while I showered, that this must be what having a normal life felt like, that billions of beings all around the galaxy lived this way, every single day. It was magical. As I dressed for work, I felt a touch of regret that it couldn't stay this way forever.

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Like Prince Xizor, Lord Vader had a large extravagant castle near the Imperial Palace. Unlike the Prince or the Emperor, Lord Vader did not bother himself with interior design and décor. His home was sparsely furnished and the walls were mostly bare. For the most part I found it incredibly gloomy and despite the glowing write up it had been given in the Coruscant lifestyle magazine, *Famous Homes and Famous People*, it was anything but warm and welcoming, although the description of minimalist was pretty much spot on. Even so, Lord Vader preferred to spend his time here whenever possible. He said there were fewer distractions which, for him, was mostly true.

From my office at the Imperial Palace to my work space in his home it should have taken about a twenty minute walk but that was never the case. Usually it took closer to forty minutes to an hour depending on how cranky security was feeling. Despite the fact that pretty much everyone on his staff knew me, the rigorous screening and security checks that everyone had to go through in order to be granted access were mandatory and the guys delighted in stopping me at every single turn. Mostly, I didn't mind because it was more an excuse on their part to hear any gossip that was going on in the palace than out of spite. Sitting at a check point all day guarding the entrances to Lord Vader's home and the Imperial Palace was not the most exciting job in the world and I usually had some tidbit of gossip to keep them happy. It was a decent excuse to procrastinate getting there. I hated it when he wanted me to work from his home.

For the longest time it had meant sitting in the depressingly cold room he called a study with bad lighting and uncomfortable greel wood furniture. Even worse than the freezing cold gloom was that there was no place to make tea or have lunch unless I found my way through the palatial labyrinth of corridors to the servants' quarters and swipe stuff from them. Needless to say they were not pleased about my intrusion on their space and a little war of wills had ensued.

After a while my complaints must have annoyed him into action because he eventually had the study renovated into a warm, bright office with an adjoining small kitchen and refresher that was more or less solely mine. It didn't mean I liked working from his home any more but at least it was more comfortable than it had been. Located in the west wing, near his training rooms and the room with the hyperbaric chamber it was usually a quiet place, but not always.

I was in the middle of making stim'caf when I felt rather than heard someone behind me.

"He'll be cross that you bypassed his security again." I said when I figured out who it was.

The man standing behind me laughed. "How do you always know?"

"Well this time it would be because you smell like a dying bantha, Jix." I turned around and gave him a look. "What did you do run through the waste management plant?"

He grinned. "Aw come on, darlin' you like my manly scent."

"Uh huh. That's why I'm wrinkling my nose in disgust and walking away." I sipped my stim'caf, "Why are you breaking into his home this time?" I asked as I went back into my office.

"He called a meeting, sent his boys to come and remind me." He said with a shrug. "I like to beat 'em at their own game."

"You like to piss off Lord Vader by breaking into his house." I said. "I don't know why he keeps you around."

His smile was warm and genuine. "Could ask the same thing about you, you know, you're a lousy secretary; you didn't even offer me a refreshing beverage."

"That would be because I am not his secretary, I am *his* personal assistant, not yours and you snuck in uninvited."

"I didn't scare you like last time though." He grinned.

"Last time you didn't stink so much." I told him. "And I was in the middle of a shouting match with one of Lord Vader's droid suppliers."

"Yeah, right I remember that." He laughed. "So, will you go tell him I'm here or shall I just sneak into his egg chamber thing room again?"

I shuddered. The last time he had done that Lord Vader had been furious and the fallout had been lengthy and unpleasant. "Wait here and don't touch anything!" I wagged my finger at him.

He just smirked and planted himself down on the couch near the desk, putting his feet up on the small table. "I'll just make myself comfy then!"

I sighed as I left for the training room. I didn't need to comm him to know where he was I could hear it. The door to the training room was open. The sound of the lightsaber's hum was marred briefly by the sound of broken droid parts crashing to the floor. The combat droids were supposed to be the best in the galaxy but Lord Vader swept through them like a Hutt eating kreetle eggs. He knew I was there, standing just inside the entrance to the training room but he ignored me. Until he acknowledged my presence I kept my mouth shut. I liked watching him at play which amused him to no end. I didn't mind waiting.

"What is it girl?" He asked after the third droid went down in a hail of glowing metal bits.

"Wrenga Jixton is here to see you." I told him. "I found him loitering in my kitchen." I said. "Maybe you could ask him to sneak through the servant's area next time? Or better yet use the main entrance like everyone else has to?"

There was a moment's pause while Lord Vader digested this information. He decided to ignore it and said, "Send him in then and get back to your work, I need those figures and the information I requested today not when you feel like it!"

"Yes, my lord." I nodded and left the room, the scent of molten metal, lightsaber and ozone following me out as I went.

By the time I made it back to my office Jix had helped himself to stim'caf and cookies. He looked perfectly at home. Despite his scruffiness and roughness around the edges, I liked Jix. He had an easy manner that was familiar to me. He was a tall, well built man with very long brown hair which he always kept tied back. He almost always dressed in faded brown utility pants, well worn standard issue boots, a soft hide vest, his riding gloves and a pair of swoop goggles which permanently sat around his neck. Shirts did not seem to be a part of his wardrobe, but the two blasters he carried slung cross-wise low on his hips were. He liked to carry himself off as a tough guy and I was certain he was not someone I wanted as an enemy but there was something more to him than met the eye, a kindness he kept well hidden but I felt it sometimes. He routinely broke into Lord Vader's home, just because he could and he didn't seem to be afraid of anything or anyone. He had been instrumental in saving Lord Vader's life once. He had also struck some sort of a deal which had indentured him to the Dark Lord's service forever, no questions asked. I liked him but I didn't need to let him know that.

He looked up at me as I walked into the office. "You make a mean stim'caf, darlin'."

"Did you eat my lunch as well?" I asked.

He grinned, finishing what was left in his cup. "No, I hate salads, but thanks anyway. When you get some real food maybe I'll join you for a meal next time."

"Huh, who said I'd even invite you to lunch, let alone share?"

"Awww I love it when you flirt with me!" He gave me the once up and down. "But I thought you were seeing someone."

"I am." I told him. "And it's none of your business."

"Too bad, I like red heads!" he gave me a grin. "They're sassy!"

"Yeah, you and every other man in the Empire!" I snorted. "As much as I'd love to stand here and banter with you all day, Lord Vader will see you now." I said when he raised his chin a notch.

"Maybe I ought to avail myself of your facilities and pretty myself up first." he said with a grin.

I gave him a look, "Lord Vader breaths filtered air, he won't care that you smell like a Hutt."

"You always say the sweetest things!" He smirked. "Should I go find him myself or are you holding my hand?"

"The nice gentlemen in pretty white suits will lead you." I said waving the two stormtroopers in who had been waiting to take Jix to see Lord Vader.

"Hey, babysitters, how thoughtful." He said.

"Play nice!"

"Next time I'll bring you flowers!" He said with a wink.

"He's in a mood, so mind your manners!" I called after him as he walked out the office. His answer was a wave and a chuckle.

I shook my head and went back to work. Vader liked having Jix around because he was useful but he didn't always tolerate Jix's rudeness. I think it mostly annoyed him that Jix wasn't scared of him the way almost everyone else was and he also hated the fact that Jix had once saved his life. Lord Vader wasn't really big on owing anyone anything.

I was just about to sit at my desk when the comm buzzed. "Yes?"

"Er Miss Gabriel, erm...Prince Xizor is here to see Lord Vader, what shall we do?" A nervous young man's voice told me.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Xizor! He had a scheduled appointment and Jix had been uninvited. Well, I thought, I had already made the trip down the hall once.

"Well for goodness sakes go and tell Lord Vader then, he's in his large training room." I snapped at the young man.

"Yes ma'am." He said and I switched the comm off. I looked at the dirty dishes Jix had left on the small couch table and sighed. How the hell was I supposed to get any work done in this place with all these interruptions? This was why I hated working from Lord Vader's home.

I got up and went to greet the Prince.

He was waiting in the main foyer with his usual and unnecessarily large entourage. He looked both regal and bored all at the same time.

"Prince Xizor, if you would please follow me." I said politely.

The Falleen looked at me and gave me a smile that never reached his eyes. "Miss Gabriel, how delightful to see you again." He spoke casually as I led him and his people to the conference room Lord Vader had requested be used.

There was no conversation as we walked down the hallway to the meeting room. Xizor had long since lost any interest he might have had in baiting me. He was frostily polite and I was happy with that. Thanks to Shiv I knew what his trick was when it came to enticing females into his bed but knowing what it was and being able to fight against the lure of his pheromones were two different things. I wasn't anxious to test my ability to resist him should he ever wish to try this again.

The Conference room was large, comfortable in a utilitarian sort of way but devoid of decorations. This specially designed room that was so full of surveillance equipment that one could almost hear the hum from the circuitry. Xizor was as paranoid as he was powerful so I knew that he would also have some sort of surveillance equipment with him. He and Lord Vader never seemed to tire of playing spy verses spy.

One of the serving droids had already made certain that refreshments had been laid out but I knew nothing would be touched. Lord Vader did not drink or eat in public and the prince would be worried about poison. However, this game that was being played also consisted of who could out polite who. The Emperor prized courtesy and there had been repercussions in the past for Lord Vader when he had been especially rude to the Prince.

"Please, your highness, make yourself comfortable. Lord Vader will be with you shortly." I said.

That irked Xizor, who did not like to be kept waiting. "I have a busy schedule, Miss Gabriel. I do not have time to waste."

I gave him one of my best smiles. "Yes, your Highness." And with that I left him to sit and work out where all the hidden spy equipment was.

I wondered how anyone could go through life the way the Falleen prince did. Always scheming and plotting. He was ruthless and calculating, not to mention ugly. All my force senses told me he was dangerous in every way possible. I hated being in the same room with him. He made my skin crawl.

His business with Lord Vader, on the surface was nothing more than standard negotiations about ships and equipment but really he was after something bigger; Lord Vader suspected that he was after Luke Skywalker. If that was the case it would not have surprised me, although how the Prince knew that Luke was Vader's son was a bit of a mystery. I didn't think it was a coincidence that both Jix and then Xizor showed up on the same day within thirty minutes of each other.

I went back to work and salvaged what was left of my day. By the end of it I had accomplished most of the tasks I was supposed to, resorted out Lord Vader's schedule for the sixth time, dealt with the droid dealers and given him the results he wished for.

He read the data when I handed it to him and nodded. "This will suffice." He said and then changing subjects asked, "I suppose you will be attending the reception after the dedication ceremony with Admiral Thrawn?"

I shook my head. "No, I decided in the interest of not being gossip fodder I'd go on my own. Why, do you need a date?" I asked cheerfully, knowing this would probably annoy him more than amuse him.

He turned around and I could feel the glare from behind the mask. "I take it you are actually avoiding Zaarin's attentions as well as the media?"

"Zaarin is a pompous idiot who doesn't get the hint!" I retorted. Zaarin had become a touchy subject and he liked to push that particular button. It amused him, although I had no idea why.

"In some respects yes, he is. However he has expressed great interest in you, perhaps I should order you to attend with him anyway. You can find out what has been on his mind. His reports from his various projects have been somewhat thin as of late."

I sighed. "You could but it wouldn't accomplish much. Zaarin's mind is very strong and I can't read much from him. If he is lying about his work, I never pick it up."

"Interesting how that works. I would have thought, if you put your will to it you could entice information out of him."

I glared at him and for a moment we just stared at each other, although really it was like staring at a mirror because all I saw in his mask was my reflection. I looked away first.

"If you actually forced me to do this you'd have to find another personal assistant because I'd rather jump in the Great Pit of Carkoon than be *intimate* with that man."

He chuckled. "I believe you would at that." He said. "And that might be amusing to watch."

I shook my head; there was no suitable retort to this statement. "I could accompany you and quietly try to read him while you talk with him." I suggested.

"Yes, perhaps, although I will only plan on attending the actual dedication ceremony. I will not be attending the function afterwards, unless my Master demands it. I have better things to do with my time." He said. "Still, you will have plenty of opportunities at the reception to read him and perhaps after a few glasses of the Emperor's champagne he will be more open to suggestion."

"Perhaps." I said. "I will see what I can do, but I am not playing doxy for you, he has enough courtesans who like to bed with him, I won't be one more."

He chuckled and then said, "A driver will pick you up promptly at eighteen-thirty hundred hours. Be ready. I will not be kept waiting."

"As you wish, my lord."

"You may leave now." He flapped his hand at me in that all too familiar dismissive gesture and turned his back to me once more.

"Yes, my lord." And before he could change his mind or say anything else I swirled around and left to go home.

In difference to Cati's advice I did not put rosebuds in my hair. While the idea sounded lovely it was a little too cute for my tastes. I tied it up with a set of bone Zenji sticks, nice and simple, with ringlets to frame my face. I studied my reflection in the full length mirror in the hall. I had told Cati that if she wanted to make me a pink dress, it couldn't be strapless, it needed to be comfortable and above all it needed to be something I could kick someone's teeth in while wearing it, if I had to. The last pink dress I had worn had been a hindrance in a situation where teeth kicking would have been useful. I sighed at the reflection of the person in the mirror. There were days when I didn't recognize myself any more.

"That was a terribly big sigh." Thrawn said as he walked out of the bedroom.

"Just thinking." I said as I moved aside to let him use the mirror.

"About?" He straightened his jacket and brushed off some nonexistent dust from his left arm.

"The girl I used to be and the one I am now."

He glanced at me as I leaned against the wall. "Are the two so very different?" He asked moving aside.

"Yes, maybe, I don't know. Some days it feels as though I only just arrived here from Tatooine and other days it is as if my life there almost never happened." I just shrugged and went back to standing in front of the mirror so that I could put on my necklace. "And I was just thinking that if this stupid reception wasn't considered mandatory I'd be curled up in my favourite chair reading a book."

"If this reception was not mandatory I would be whisking you away to a dark corner, no reading just conversation." Thrawn purred in my ear as he stood behind me. "We have not yet had a chance to ...talk since my return."

On any other night his teasing would have been enjoyable but right now it was just annoying. "You can steal me away afterwards." I told him tartly, getting frustrated as I fussed with the pendant I was trying clasp around my neck.

"Here, allow me." He took the pendant from my fingers. I had decided to wear the very first one he had given me, the tiny delicate one. It matched the dress better and I figured no one would ask questions about it. He kissed the nape of my neck when he was finished, and despite my mood, goose bumps prickle up and down my arms.

"You look lovely, my dear. That dress suits you very well." He brushed the backs of his fingers along the sides of my bare arms.

"Cati does work miracles." I said with a shiver.

He nuzzled the side of my neck, "Your perfume is intoxicating."

"Of course it is, you bought it for me." I told him moving away from his affectionate play.

I felt him smile. "I thought it would suit you." He whispered in my ear. "And I was right."

My heart thumped painfully in my chest. While my mind wasn't on seduction, my body sure was. I sighed again.

"If you keep that up I'll be late and you will have to explain to Lord Vader why."

"It could be worth it." He said, enjoying the game he was playing. He knew I wasn't really in the mood for his seduction but sometimes he liked to push anyway.

I turned around to face him. His dress uniform had been pristinely cleaned and pressed, his hair had been recently cut and he also smelled wonderful. "I seem to recall you saying something about me not ending up in a med lab." I told him. "Something about

having plans? But if you tick Lord Vader off I will be the one who suffers for it, so behave!" I poked him in the chest to let him know I wasn't kidding.

He arched an eyebrow and caught my hand in his before I could jab at him again. "Why are you so cross? Usually you enjoy these functions."

I made a face. "Usually I am not expected to play human lie detector for Imperial officers." I snapped.

There was a flash of anger in his eyes. "Ah, Lord Vader is requiring you to be pleasant to a certain Grand Admiral again?"

"In a manner of speaking, he thinks Zaarin is up to something, or better to say lying about his work." I said.

"Everyone in the Empire lies about their work, it comes with the territory." Thrawn said coolly.

"Well, Lord Vader doesn't seem to trust Zaarin anymore. I don't trust him either but for completely different reasons."

"Understandable, my dear, I would prefer you not engage in spy games with Zaarin, the Empire has people trained for this job but I suppose simply trying to sift out truth from lie while conversing with the man at a public event could not hurt."

"No probably not but if he tries to hurt me, or touch me again I'll hurt him, I swear it."

That comment made Thrawn clench his jaw. "That would not be an advisable action. Zaarin still has the Emperor's favour and is a valued member of the Imperial Navy. Do not get yourself into something you cannot get out of. Please be careful." I wasn't sure what irked him more, the thought of Zaarin putting his hands on me or me putting mine around Zaarin's neck.

"I'm always careful."

He shook his head and smiled. "No you are not, what you are is lucky. There is a difference."

"Puh!" was the only thing I could think of in reply. He smiled at that and caressed my face gently.

"Stop worrying so much about things you have no control over. Zaarin is not your concern." He said.

"Lord Vader makes it my concern. Zaarin's attentions make him my concern." I shot back.

"If you are not careful I shall start to worry about this other man you spend so much time obsessing over." He said.

"Jealous?" I asked.

"Cautious." He countered.

"Why? Are you afraid I'll suddenly run off with the Grand Admiral?"

"Is that something you feel you are likely to do, Sji'u' Tekari?" His fingers moved from my face to stroke the back of my neck. I glared at him, doing my best to mask the desire that he was creating. The look he gave me in return was pointed and intense. The massive seismic charge which exploded in my gut made me drop my gaze from his. I just sighed and shook my head.

"No. The thought of him anywhere near me is repulsive." I shot back.

He gave me a grin. "That is good to know." He said. "I should hate to think I could be replaced."

"I haven't had time to find anyone else." I shot back. "Besides I rather enjoy your company, when you are around."

"We do have some catching up to do, don't we." He smiled.

"I thought that's what we were doing now?"

He gave a small shake of his head. "Right now I am doing my best to dissuade you from doing something foolish." He said. I made a spitey face but he continued speaking before I could say anything to counter this statement, "I would much prefer our intimate conversation not include thoughts over this other man whom neither of us particularly likes."

I glanced up at him. "Well, if you'd let me deal with him then I wouldn't have to think about him." I drew a finger across my neck.

He smirked. "Yes, and that would present you with a whole other set of new problems. While Zaarin maybe distasteful to you he is still a valued member of the Imperial Navy not some renegade turned rebel." His fingertips played up and down the nape of my neck. "Let Palpatine deal with the Grand Admiral and allow me to deal with you." He leaned in and murmured in my ear. His breath was warm. I closed my eyes, drawing a deep breath to take in his scent of soap, spice and something I could never define but made me shivery and achy.

"Well, don't start something you can't finish now." I grumbled, my palms flat against his chest.

He lifted my chin upwards with the tip of his forefinger. His smile was charming. His kiss was teasing, slow, and made my knees tremble. When he pulled away from me I was both cross and aroused.

"That was so not fair." I said when I found my voice.

"Of course not, but tactically it was the best way to distract you." He brushed his cheek against mine, "A little reminder of my prowess in the art of non verbal warfare." He murmured. His skin felt cool against the blush of my own.

"I can hurt you, you know, with my hands not my tongue." I told him without any real conviction.

He smiled slowly, "Promises, promises," he said, which earned him a smack on the arm.

"I have to get ready; the driver will be here soon." I said. "This little extra curricular activity you may or may not be a part of after the public reception better not tire you out too much!" As soon as the words were out of my mouth the mood between us changed from playful to serious.

He lifted an eyebrow and gave me a cool look. "It would be wise not to even think about mentioning that outside of this flat, Tekari." He said. "You are not supposed to know about this."

"This is a really big deal isn't it?" I asked.

His answer was taciturn. "Yes."

"Then why so hush-hush?" I asked.

"Because I am the Emperor's dirty secret." He said stepping back from me.

I looked at him in puzzlement. Sometimes the games that went on in Palpatine's inner circle were utterly perplexing. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He drew a deep breath and made that face I had come to associate with lengthy and unsatisfying answers. "It is a very complicated real life game of dejarik. There are a lot of things going on right now, none of which I am at liberty to talk about and none which I want you involved in. I don't want you to be any more of a target than you already have been." He caressed my face with his fingertips. The teasing tone from earlier had vanished.

I cocked my head to one side, put my hands on my hips and stepped back from his touch. "Do you think I am too stupid to understand the complicated game of internal intrigue?" I couldn't keep the annoyance I felt out of my voice. I was tired of being kept at arm's length when it came to his political affairs, especially when they somehow managed to involve me.



His jaw tightened. "On the contrary," He said coldly, "I keep you out of this side of my business because if I have to worry about you, on top of everything else, I may lose my concentration. You are the one element in my life I cannot seem to predict. You make things chaotic. This is a very dangerous game I am playing and I need to know you are not in the line of fire." He played with one of the strands of hair which curled by my cheek. "Leave this alone. Tonight just play along and be pretty palace decoration because while I know what you are capable of, know how strong you are and how dangerous you can be when pushed in the right direction, most of the people who have power out there don't. At the moment you are not a threat to any of the major players. I would prefer it stays that way. Zaarin happens to be one of those players and believe me when I say this; he is far more dangerous than you like to think. As with so many others in this Empire he plays his role to perfection. He may come off as a lecherous bastard but I am certain this is just a ruse for something else, something bigger and not pleasant."

"So he's not actually interested in me?" I asked, not bothering to keep the bite of sarcasm out of my voice, "and all his attentions are just for show?"

Thrawn smiled slowly. "Oh, Tekari I have no doubts that he would bed you in a heartbeat if you gave him the slightest chance but there is more to his advances than meets the eye. It is not like him to be so persistent in his pursuit of a woman who clearly does not want him. In all my time in the Empire and for as long as I have known him, he has never been so single minded about a female before. This leads me to conclude there is more to his desire to have you than simply satisfying his lust. You are, after all, the one person, aside from the Emperor who knows Lord Vader better than anyone else. Such knowledge would be invaluable to a man like Zaarin."

"You make it sound so sinister." I said with a scowl.

"That would be because it is sinister, my dear. Zaarin is intelligent, powerful and dangerous. He has tried to kill me and he has tried to kill you. He is not what he appears to be and Vader should know better than to place you in the middle of it all." He said sharply. He stared at me making sure I got the message he was trying to send. When I didn't answer, he sighed. "A'myshk'a, the very last thing I planned for was having someone I truly cared for in my life, you know this. Yet here you are, exactly the distraction I don't need while I am engaged in these political campaigns. Eventually you will know everything, so please back down; this isn't a contest of wills between you and me, don't turn it into one just because you don't get your own way." He spoke earnestly; the concern in his voice outweighed the frustration of arguing with me. I knew two things for sure. He wasn't lying and he was a little worried, the latter was very unsettling. For a moment we just stared at each other and then I gave way.

"If you insist." I said giving him a slight, tight smile.

"I do." He replied. He cupped my face with both hands, making me look up at him.

"Okay, for you I'll do the palace fluff thing tonight but you'll owe me for it." I didn't bother to hide my annoyance and frustration. I was getting tired of these games.

His smile turned wolf like. "That is a debt I am certain I will enjoy repaying then."

I just rolled my eyes. The door chime rang letting me know the driver was here. "I have to go."

"Best not to keep Lord Vader waiting then, he's not the most patient man in the galaxy." He nodded, handing me my wrap.

I planted a quick kiss on his cheek, grabbed my purse and left. He would not be far behind me and although we would not be attending this event as a couple, I took a lot of solace in knowing he would be there.

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Lord Vader stood statue still, with his hands behind his back, watching the crowd. I stood at his side and waited quietly. He liked to make a dramatic entrance so he always paused before entering a crowded room. The buzz of voices in the great audience hall died to a dull whisper when he swept down the stairs to the grand foyer with me in tow, desperately trying not to step on his billowing cloak.

Lord Vader was many things but the life of the party was not one of them. As he passed through the crowd, people stepped back from him, giving him room to move through the crowd. He paid no attention to the hush and once the shock of seeing him had passed the conversation level rose back to normal. I watched as the momentary stillness was broken by elegant wait staff winding their way through the throng. They did not even stop doing their jobs for a moment. I was tempted to snatch a glass of what ever it was they were serving but decided not to. The drinks had that tell tale sparkle which let me know they had been laced with glow spice.

As he stalked through the room, with me trailing in his wake, several people stopped to speak with him, mostly Grand Moff's and members of the Admiralty. The conversations were dull and I stayed in the Dark Lord's shadow, letting my mind drift. I nearly jumped out of my skin with fright when someone touched my shoulder from behind. I turned around to stare in to Grand Admiral Zaarin's face.

"My apologies, I did not mean to startle you, Miss Gabriel." He said with a pleasant smile.

"Good evening, Grand Admiral Zaarin," I smiled back at him.

"Please Miss Gabriel, call me Demetri."

We'd been through this dance before. I just nodded and smiled. "As you wish."

"Will you be watching the ceremony from here or from the balcony with Lord Vader?" He asked.

"That depends on Lord Vader's wishes." I answered. "What about you?"

"As a member of the Council of Twelve I shall be with the Emperor as he gives his speech. It would, of course, be made all the more pleasant by your presence." He punctuated his statement with a casual caress of my forearm. I moved so that the contact was broken. His smile slipped a little.

"I must admit I am surprised to see you here, I thought that you would be busy with your engineering projects." I said. "I understand they are quite time consuming."

"Ah yes, well the Emperor wished all twelve of his Grand Admirals be present for the dedication ceremony." He said casually, "and of course we live to serve."

"Of course." I smiled. There was a lie underneath his words and he was not at all happy to be here. "So your projects are going well?" I asked again.

He gave me a tight smile. "The last time we spoke you did not seem terribly interested in me or my work."

"On the contrary, as I recall, you discussed your work at great length ruining several fine linen napkins in the process. I am very interested in the newest technology the Empire is creating." I said. *I am just not interested in you*, I thought.

"Ah yes, of course. Well, the designs I spoke of with you have been finalised and many new ones in various test phases." He said.

"I heard a rumour that you were working on trying to cloak ships, that sounds very exciting."

He paused for a second but I just gave him a smile. "It has been a project in the planning stages for a while but there is no real project to speak of, plenty of ideas and plenty of problems." He said. I didn't have to dig to even feel the lie underneath the words.

"So there is no prototype yet?" I asked.

"Not yet, but the conceptual designs are worth looking at. It is quite exciting actually; perhaps if Lord Vader is so inclined you would be permitted to visit the facility

and you could see them for yourself, I understand your clearance would allow that, if not I am sure I could find a way to have an exception made."

"I'll try to catch him on a good day and ask." I replied with a light smile.

He paused for a moment and studied my face then said, "You know you might want to consider changing jobs and working for a less ... *difficult* member of the Imperial Navy." He spoke casually but underneath his words was an anger I couldn't quite place. "I am certain the Emperor would permit you to transfer to assist another officer, or department."

"Oh, I don't think I'd want to transfer. I like my job, it is always interesting." I said sweetly.

As he leaned in closer to me, he said. "You seem genuinely interested in my work, you have the engineering skills to make you a useful assistant to me and I would enjoy working closely to you. Surely your skills are being wasted under Lord Vader?"

"Well, I think you would have to ask him about that, I cannot judge if he wastes my talents but I think he might disagree with you."

He simply smiled. "I could provide you with an interesting job and I guarantee you it would not be so dangerous."

I moved back from him just a step and gave him a polite smile. "Oh, I don't know about that, believe it or not my job is extremely interesting and," I said, "I imagine you can be quite dangerous when you wish to be."

A shadow crossed his face as he sorted out the meaning behind my words but he hid it well. "I shall take that as a compliment, Miss Gabriel."

I played with a lock of my hair and smiled coyly but before I could say anything else Lord Vader came to stand beside me and engaged Zaarin in conversation. While the two men spoke I listened with that strange inner sense but despite the impression Zaarin was hiding something, I could not tell much at all. He was very strong willed and not easily bent to the force. It was frustrating.

"*Merlyn!*" Lord Vader suddenly snapped in my mind.

I blinked up at him then realised that Zaarin had been speaking to me directly.

"Oh I'm sorry Grand Admiral, you were saying?"

Demetrius Zaarin smiled tightly. "I was just telling Lord Vader of your interest in my work and then I commented that you look quite radiant this evening."

"Uhm, Thank-you. I have to give the credit to my dress maker, Cati, she really does create miracles." I said, a little taken aback by his sudden compliment.

Zaarin watched us for a moment and then continued to speak to me. "I noticed that you did not accompany with Admiral Thrawn, although I saw that he arrived shortly after you did. I did not realise he had returned to Coruscant and I am surprised he did not require your company for this event." He was fishing.

I shrugged, "Admiral Thrawn does not require my company for anything." I answered coolly. I did not like the ripple of hatred that had slipped into the words Zaarin spoke.

"So you are here on your own?"

I smiled. "No, I am with Lord Vader." The dark lord glanced at me but said nothing.

"Ah, yes, of course. Will your delightful assistant be accompanying you to the balcony to watch the Emperor's speech?" He asked Lord Vader.

"I suppose she may join us and watch the festivities." He replied. I hated it when men spoke about me as though I were not standing right in front of them.

"That's kind of you, my lord." I said a tad more tartly than I had meant to. Lord Vader said nothing but I felt the tiny Force nudge to behave. I knew that he wanted me to read Zaarin and if that meant forcing me to be near the Grand Admiral, Vader would play that game. I bit my tongue, I could get away with being a smart mouth with lord Vader in private but never in public.

Zaarin's smile widened just a little. "Perhaps after the official ceremony is over we shall have more time to discuss my work." He punctuated this statement with a brush of his hand on my arm.

"Perhaps." I said lightly, moving back from his reach. I did not like that he kept touching me as though suddenly I was his property.

"Then I shall look forward to later on." He said.

I was saved from having to answer by the announcement that the ceremony was about to begin. The speeches and the actual dedication would take place out on the huge balcony which over looked the main palazzo allowing the general public, who waited eagerly beyond the barriers set up by security, to see and hear the words of the Emperor. I followed Lord Vader up the stairs to the balcony where seating had been arranged. I felt the glances and heard the whispers that swirled about as the crowd moved back in to fill the space we had made. I wasn't sure what the buzz was for this time and the attention I was being shown was a little more than I usually got but I didn't mind. I was more than used to being the topic of people's idle chatter and the subject of their gossip.

The new Assembly wing had been in construction for just over a year and contained a very large theatre style auditorium, a set of new conference rooms, a new daycare center for palace workers and a public access library. A great deal of fuss had been made about the new wing because it had been incredibly expensive to build and there had been several nasty articles on the HoloNet about the waste of tax payer's money. The writers of these articles had all met with surprising and sudden accidental deaths.

The Emperor arrived with all his usual fanfare and entourage, including six royal guards. The guards never ceased to amaze me, they moved like red ghosts, silent and eerie. Standing in semi circle around the Emperor as he sat on the chair provided for him. Along with the guards were his advisors, pale, pinch faced men with beady eyes and a lust for power so great they seemed swallowed whole by it, and the beautiful courtesans who adorned the Emperor's entourage like the pretty jewels they all wore. I noticed that Mara Jade was among them and sat close to her master. A great hush washed over the masses of people and while I was never sure quite how the Emperor managed to inspire such awe I was certain his use of the Force had a great deal to do with it.

Lord Vader, being who he was, did not sit but instead chose to stand directly behind me, freeing up a chair which Grand Admiral Zaarin decided he could take instead. I glanced at him and he gave me a sly smile. I sighed, wondering if my plan of using Lord Vader as a shield had backfired a little bit. I glanced around and saw that the entire council of twelve were present, but of Thrawn there was no sign. I guessed he had not been invited up to the balcony, after all, in theory, he was still in disgrace.

*'How long will this take, do you think?'* I asked Lord Vader silently.

*'How should I know?'* Came his cross reply. He hated these functions even more than I did and he was very unhappy that attendance for this one had been mandatory. *'No more than half an hour, the Emperor has other things to deal with tonight.'*

I turned around to look up at him. *'Oh?'*

I felt his scowl as he looked down at me. *'For Sarlacc's sake, girl, mind your own business, stay out of things that do not concern you!'*

I turned back to sit straight and gaze out over the crowd of people. While the overall mood seemed festive enough the under currents were anything but. Recent battle at Hoth, general unrest and small skirmishes out on the Outer Rim had people in the core concerned. The Core worlds, which enjoyed the most Imperial protection, did not like disruptions in the shipping lanes and the effects of what had happened to Alderaan still lingered in people's minds.

The Emperor stood as he began to speak; loudspeakers amplified his voice for all to hear. His speech contained a lot of words like *great* and *glorious*. He was an excellent

public speaker, I suppose that came from his days as chancellor of the senate but as I sat with my hands clasped on my lap; one leg crossed over the other, I mostly tuned him out. I had heard a variation of this speech many times and I no longer believed it.

My thoughts turned to what Thrawn had talked about earlier. The *Emperor's dirty secret*, he had said. I didn't understand what he had meant by that. I had always been under the impression that Palpatine liked having Thrawn around and that the two worked closely together, conspiring to bring the vast Empire under tighter control but after our conversation I was not so sure any more. I was so deep in my thoughts that when Zaarin put his hand on my thigh I jumped in fright. He leaned over and whispered a comment about how glorious the new wing was.

I turned to look at him. The hand on my thigh moved in a slight caress. Even though there were people seated in front of us blocking any view of what he was doing I didn't think causing a scene would be the smartest move. I took his hand in mine gently and gave him a sweet smile. He returned the smile with one of his own and I could feel his surprise. He was about to be surprised further. I let my fingers run over his hand until I found that tender spot between the thumb and palm and then I applied enough pressure to cause pain. Zaarin snatched his hand away with a hiss that made Lord Vader stir behind me. I felt the dark lord's subtle warning to behave.

"*He's being a nerf herder, can't you force choke him or something?*" I asked by way of explanation.

"No."

"*If he touches me again, I'll have to seriously hurt him.*" I told him.

"*Behave yourself or I will deal with you!*" Came the terse reply. I was on my own with this latest problem.

I didn't have time to reply because the Emperor had finished his speech and we were all expected to stand and applaud while he turned his back on the crowd, swallowed up by his royal guardsmen and was whisked away to the safety of some inner sanctum.

With a sigh I followed Lord Vader out, Zaarin walking behind me decided to push his luck by placing his hand on my back, a few centimetres too low to be polite but not low enough to be downright improper. I gritted my teeth as we left the balcony and used the force to shift one of the chairs we walked past just enough so that he stumbled on the leg. I quickened my pace to put enough distance between us so he couldn't touch me again. It was a relief to reach the main hall and even more so when Shiv found me standing beside Lord Vader.

"Lord Vader, good to see you, sir." Shiv said politely. "I trust you are well?"

I watched as Lord Vader regarded Shiv for a moment and then gave him a slight nod. "Yes." He said pointedly and then walked off to speak with a Moff, whose name I didn't know.

"He's in a chatty mood, isn't he?" Shiv said with cheerful sarcasm.

"Don't be a Hutt-head." I smiled.

"Listen, I have to go pick up Ynyth and Bobbyn. Do you want to come with me?" There was almost an hour to go before the private reception started.

I shook my head. "Not really, I was thinking that I'd go to my office, finish up some work and have a cup of tea." The thought of negotiating Coruscant traffic with Shiv driving made me inwardly cringe. He was not the best driver I had ever seen and usually I spent any trip I made with him with my eyes half closed.

"Work?"

"I always have work to do." I said. "But there is a last minute project Lord Vader wants done as soon as possible. I thought I would take advantage of the quiet time to get a start on it."

"He's such a slave driver." Shiv said. "Hey, I see your Admiral is back on planet." He commented nodding over in the direction of the main entrance.

I looked up and saw Thrawn speaking with one of the Emperor's advisors. "Yes, he came in late last night."

Shiv grinned at me. "Oh?"

"No 'oh' just good to have him back for a while." I told him. Then I asked, "Why didn't Ynyth come with you for the public part of this shindig? I thought we all had to be here?"

"*Mandatory* is just the Empire's way of making sure some people come to these functions. No one really cares. She couldn't be bothered to sit through all the speeches; it's not as if we haven't heard them before. No one important misses us minions at these things but they will probably ask about her at the reception so I told her I'd pick her up after the public dedication."

"True enough. I wish I could have avoided coming though." I said ruefully, glancing around to see Grand Admiral Zaarin staring at me in a way that reminded me of how scyks looked at prey. I glanced away from his gaze.

"Do you want us to stop by your office and pick you up or shall we all just gather at the reception?" Shiv asked.

"Oh at the reception is fine. Things won't get going for a while anyway so take your time. You can comm me if you need to." I said stifling a yawn.

Shiv grinned. "No sleep last night?"

I shook my head. "It will surprise you but actually, I slept the whole night through. The Admiral came back very late so it's not what you think. This event is just dull."

He nodded. "Well, you could go talk to Zaarin, I've noticed him giving you the eye." Shiv teased.

I made a face. "Ugh don't talk to me about that slimo. He's all hands on tonight; I don't know what's gotten into him. It's as if someone gave him the go ahead to feel me up at every opportunity."

"Well, maybe the rumour that you and Thrawn broke up might have something to do with that." Shiv said studying his nails.

That raised my eyebrows. "What? Where did that one come from?"

"He's here, you're here but you didn't arrive together, you haven't said a word to each other in public and I suppose someone figured he'd dumped you. It's been a while since anyone saw you two actually together at an official function. It's not as if you advertise your relationship with one another in the first place. That's how rumours start and they spread like wild fire. So far in the last hour I have heard three variations on exactly how he dumped you. It was very dramatic and you are devastated by the way. There are two accounts on how you cheated on him with someone. No one is sure who it was you cheated with but good money is, of course, on Zaarin. According to one of the courtesans I spoke to, Thrawn is so heartbroken he cannot even bear to look at you. And lastly, one very odd story about you being pregnant with Thrawn's love child which he refuses to acknowledge. According to my source, you should start showing in a couple of months and it's a boy."

I shook my head. "I do so love this crazy place and its penchant for insane gossip, but that would explain why Zaarin suddenly thinks I am free for the taking and has been pawing at me since I arrived. Guess I am going to have to educate him on the error of his ways."

Shiv smiled. "I take it that none of those rumours are true then?"

"Not even close." I told him. "Things on the home front are good, I think. He's only been back since late last night so we haven't had much time to catch up yet, but so far things are fine."

"Glad to hear it, you two are my faith in romance."

"Oh, like you and Ynyth aren't a solid, albeit secretive, couple." I teased him.

Shiv just smiled. "Speaking of Ynyth, I suppose I'd better go so that I get back here in time to enjoy the wonderful canapés and dull conversation. The traffic will be hell with everyone who was watching the speeches trying to get back home from here."

"Yep, not good to keep her waiting and you know how Bobbyn gets if he thinks he will be late."

Shiv laughed. "And people think I'm neurotic." He gave me a kiss on each side of my cheek. "Okay kiddo, we'll see at the reception. If we get back before the doors open we'll stop by your office."

"Drive safely." I wagged my fingers at him and watched as he sauntered out of the hall. I glanced at the chrono on the wall; I had about an hour before the private reception in the Tarkin room began. I turned to leave only to come face to face with Zaarin holding two glasses of some sparkly drink.

"I took the opportunity to fetch you a drink." He said with a smile. "I thought you might be thirsty."

I looked at the glass and shook my head. "That's very kind of you, but I am afraid I cannot drink that."

"Oh?" He asked. "Why is that? Is the drink not to your liking?"

I was about to answer when Thrawn suddenly appeared at my side. He saluted Zaarin who had to hand one of the glasses he had been holding to me so that he could return Thrawn's salute. I had to fight the urge to giggle. The two men may have despised one another but that did not mean they did not observe proper courtesy.

"Miss Gabriel is allergic to glow spice." Thrawn said as he removed the glass from my hand to place it on the tray of a passing waiter in one fluid, elegant motion.

Zaarin looked at us both but neither Thrawn's nor my body language was telling him anything other than we knew one another. Thrawn was his usual cool, reserved self and I made sure I did not show my delight and relief at his sudden presence by my side.

"Oh, I see." Zaarin said after a moment. "I was not aware of this. Is it a serious allergy?"

The lie in his words was so strong it felt like a slap. I simply nodded at him. "It can be." I said simply. I didn't need to go into details. He knew them intimately despite his words to the contrary.

"And how is it that you are aware of this Admiral?" Zaarin asked Thrawn coolly.

"I remember her telling a waiter of this fact at the Grand ball several years ago." Thrawn replied in an offhand almost bored. "It was an usual allergy so it stuck in my mind, causes severe headaches if I recall correctly" He added looking at me. I nodded in agreement.

Zaarin nodded and sipped his drink. "Yes, that is unusual." He said. "You have my apologies, Miss Gabriel, shall I order you something else not so detrimental to your health?"

I opened my mouth to say no but Thrawn interrupted. "I must apologise for being impolite but I would be grateful if I could have a few moments of your time alone, Grand Admiral. There are some items I would very much like to discuss with you. I have a meeting I must attend to in a few moments and I have no idea how long it will take, so I am afraid I must intrude upon your time here and now."

Zaarin looked at Thrawn for a moment and then nodded, "Of course, Admiral. Miss Gabriel, if you would excuse us?" he said politely dismissing me.

I was only too happy to comply. "Gentlemen." I said with a little nod of my head and turned to vanish into the crowd which was beginning to thin out. With the public dedication finished and some time until the private reception began people had either

decided to go home in between or sit and wait in small groups, chatting quietly. I glanced about looking for familiar faces but there was no one I knew well enough to chat with and although a few people stopped me as I meandered through the crowd to make polite small talk I was, for the most part, left alone.

I glanced at the chrono on the wall and figured out that I had just enough time to go to my office, make myself a cup of tea and finish up on some things I had to do. As I took one last glance around the room I saw that Lord Vader and a few other key figures had left the main hall. I caught sight of Lianna, who was really called Mara Jade, coming to stand beside Sate Pestage. Their conversation looked tense.

As usual, she looked lovely and I wondered what Pestage was saying to her because surprise and suspicion crossed her face for a second. I watched them converse for a few moments longer and then she nodded at something Pestage had said and turned gracefully to leave the hall. I watched as Pestage walked to where Thrawn and Zaarin were having their discussion, interrupting them. As Pestage spoke, Thrawn glanced around the room, his eyes caught mine, I went to give him a little wave but an almost imperceptible movement of his head made me change my mind. He held my gaze for a few seconds longer than necessary and then at Pestage's urging he too left the hall. I glanced back briefly to where Thrawn had been standing only to find Zaarin staring at me. I pretended I had not noticed and left for the solace of my office.

The palace was very quiet. I liked it when it was this way. I walked through the dimly lit hallways quickly, the sound of my high heeled shoes echoing loudly off the marble. I knew two of the guards on security duty and told them they hadn't missed much when they asked about the ceremony. It would be holo-cast later on anyway; the HoloNet News team had been all over the place.

My office was a refuge of peace and tranquility. I turned on the small corner lamp, filled the kettle up and turned it on and then I went to stand at the window to watch the never ending movement of lights as the traffic flew around the city. When the kettle boiled I made a pot of white chaya leaf tea, poured a cup which I cradled in my hands for warmth then went back to staring out of the window ignoring the work I had intended to do.

This city, this planet which never stopped moving, never slept amazed me almost as much as it repulsed me. Technically, it was a wonder such a place even existed at all but that was more spectacular mechanical engineering than anything else. It was a sort of jungle made from duracrete and metals, life forms of all sorts and processing plants which scrubbed the atmosphere, cleaned the water and provided never ending power. I wondered how many of the millions of beings who lived here really cared about whom was actually in charge. Did it matter who actually ran the government as long as essential services kept working, and salaries got paid, public transportation ran on time. Did the average citizen worry about the inner political workings at all? I didn't really think so. All most beings cared about was how they would feed, house and clothe themselves and their families, what they would watch on the HoloNet when they got home from work and how much they hated or loved their jobs.

These questions led me to think about the pursuit of power. I wasn't sure I understood that either. What was the purpose of more power, more fame and more money? Surely there must be a point at which too much was just too much. Greed was a concept I didn't really get, I had never lusted after material wealth or things. How much junk could a person have in their lives? All the clothes, books, expensive jewels and so on didn't make one a better person, it just weighed one down. Living on and off of ships had taught me that too much stuff was a burden not a good thing. The less one owned the more freedom one had. I supposed, as I thought about it, that my desires and wants lay in different directions, I just wasn't sure exactly what they were. I sighed. It hurt my head to think about this topic.



I sipped my tea quietly, enjoying the peace that my office provided. I was so lost in my own thoughts that a knock on the door made me jump. I smiled, thinking Shiv must have driven his speeder like a mad thing to get back so quickly and I used the force to unlock and open the door, a trick he usually made fun of but never tired of seeing it.

"You guys must have broken all the speed limi..." I started but by the time I had turned around I realised that it wasn't Shiv and Ynyth standing in the doorway it was Grand Admiral Zaarin.

"Good evening, Miss Gabriel." He said as the door behind him. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

There was a pause in time while I assessed this situation. He had a look on his face which said he had made up his mind about something and I probably wasn't going to like it much.

I kept my voice light. "Grand Admiral Zaarin, what can I do for you at this late hour?"

"I thought you and I might have that little chat about my work now and perhaps I could get to know you a little better." He said. "I saw you leave the assembly hall and wanted to make sure that you were alright so I followed you. It hasn't been safe lately to wander around the palace alone. Did you not hear what happened to Prince Xizor?"

I walked over to my desk, put my cup down and turned on the small desk lamp to add more light to the dim room. "Yes, but I am quite sure that was an isolated incident. I'm fine, so there is no need for you to concern yourself with my well being."

"On the contrary Miss Gabriel, I am quite concerned for you. You don't seem to understand the sort of trouble a young lady such as yourself might attract." He casually walked towards the desk, picking up a book then laying it back down again. There was something in his voice that made me look at him carefully.

"I think you underestimate my ability to take care of myself, really I'm fine. You should return to the great hall and enjoy the event." I said.

He looked at me. "I think I would prefer to enjoy the pleasure of your company in private."

"That is very flattering but I afraid you will find me quite dull."

"I doubt that Miss Gabriel." He said "I rather find you quite fascinating."

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. This was beginning to sound like a bad Holloway script. "Then I would be happy to chat with you at the reception later but right now, it would be best if you allowed me to return to my work. I am rather busy and Lord Vader is unforgiving if I am not on top of things." I told him putting a little edge in my own voice.

"You didn't look terribly busy to me," He said in a casual manner, "staring out of the window drinking tea."

I sighed, dropping my *I'm being nice* face. "Okay seeing as how being polite doesn't work what about this? Please leave." I moved so that the desk was between us, making him have to come around it to come to stand in front of me. I wanted my desk and the office door at his back. He took a step forward forcing me to step backwards to avoid closer contact with him.

"You know, Miss Gabriel, I am getting rather tired of being turned away and told 'no' by you." Now we were getting to the truth of the matter.

"Then maybe you should stop asking me for things you can't have." I replied. Anger, lust and something I could not quite define rippled through the air. I took another step away from him, wondering how far he would go and how far I should let him. I was not scared. I didn't think he was a threat to me in any real physical sense and in the back of my mind I saw an opportunity to accomplish what Lord Vader had requested, but that didn't mean I wasn't feeling the adrenaline rush through my body.

"There is nothing here I cannot have." He said casually as he backed me slowly and carefully against the wall behind the desk. Now he was facing me and the wall, he could not see my desk or the entrance to the office.

"I am willing to bet the Emperor would see things a little differently." I replied, keeping my voice light. We could have been talking about tea instead of what he really wanted.

"The Emperor has no say in how I conduct my private affairs." He snarled.

"Really?" I asked a little more tartly than I meant to. "I was under the impression that the Emperor rules this galaxy so I would assume he actually does have a say in the affairs of those who work for him."

He said. "Well, maybe for now that is the case but it won't always be that way."

"Oh?"

He moved in front of me, caging me in place with his arms on either side of my body. He was taller than me so I had to look up at him to meet his stare. "Have you considered what would happen to you if the Emperor were no longer in power?" He asked.

I shook my head. "No." I said. "Why would I ever even imagine such a thing?"

"The Emperor is human." He said as if that explained it all.

I shrugged. "Well if something ever were to happen to him, I imagine that, as second in command, Lord Vader would take up the slack and I work for him so I don't think my life would change very much." I said.

He didn't like that answer much. His eyes had become cold and hard. He hadn't done anything yet to make me defend myself so I didn't have a reason to hit him but I itched to do so. My skin crawled at his closeness. The sour scent of recently drunk champagne on his breath, which was warm on my face, as he spoke to me made me queasy. I didn't want to provoke him into violence because I hoped to avoid that but he was making me cross. I doubted that if he was on the receiving end of my Bunduki training he would be very chatty about his nefarious plans, if he even had any. I wasn't entirely sure that Lord Vader was just over-reacting to Zaarin's ambitions.

Zaarin's voice was icy as he spoke, "Lord Vader is obsessed with finding one rebel. He is consumed by anger and hatred. His leadership skills are next to nonexistent. His ridiculous notions cost this Empire precious time, credits and man power! Do not think for a moment that he would take the Emperor's place. He is a lackey, dressed to put fear into the minions who live only to serve."

"I am not so sure that he would see it this way." I commented dryly, not liking how he spoke about the man I worked for.

This clearly puzzled him. "Do you not wish to better your station? Are you not tired of working for a man who does not appreciate your talents?" He asked. His voice was suddenly soft and coercive, but I had heard this speech before, although last time it had been from a man I actually liked and respected. Zaarin's words did nothing except stir up the spark of anger in my gut.

"I like the work I do, Grand Admiral Zaarin. I also enjoy working for Lord Vader and I have no desire to change that any time soon."

When he caressed the side of my face I pulled up some of my own power, took the lust I felt from him and showered it back. I knew he felt it because his pupils dilated and he gasped slightly. I hoped it would put him off balance but he just smiled.

"I could make you so much more than you are now, you could be at my side and have everything you ever desired."

"How would you do that? I don't think Lord Vader would let me switch jobs and work for you." I asked not bothering to even tell him I had everything I desired already.

"You would not be working for me, dear, you would be my companion."

"Oh really." I said flatly. "Well, I don't think that would work out." and then added before I could censor myself, "I already have companionship." I didn't miss the flash of anger in his eyes, "Besides the Emperor has made it clear how he feels on relationships between palace girls and members of the Imperial Navy." I added.

"That rule has not seemed to hamper you any when it comes to Imperial men. I've seen how you and that red eyed abomination carry on and I've heard the rumours about your ... exploits. You have no problems ignoring the rules when it suits your purpose." He said sharply.

"You really believe all the gossip you hear about me?" I asked.

He ignored me and continued, "There will come a time when the Emperor will not have a say in such things at all." I caught a flash of hatred. He was not lying, he truly believed that soon enough the Emperor would not be around to dictate any longer. I tried to read more from his words but my skills for that were not very strong. I tried a different tack.

"How do you know this?" I asked. "Is the Emperor ill or something?"

He gave me a predator's smile and leaned even closer against me. "The Emperor's health has been failing for many years now. Nothing lasts forever, even stars eventually die." He said. "It is good to be prepared for all eventualities."

"I see, so what exactly is it you want of me?" I asked. I was getting tired of this.

"The same thing you apparently give every other man who asks." He toyed with my hair, tugging one of the Zenji sticks out. "You are quite versed in the art of seduction, I hear. You have Thrawn and Vader seemingly wrapped around your little finger, so I think you already know the answer to that."

I sighed. "Ah, you think, like everyone else, that I can read your mind?"

"You have a sharp tongue, Miss Gabriel. Not a very attractive trait in a woman." He said as he pulled out the second Zenji stick and my hair tumbled down about my shoulders. The air around me was suddenly filled with the scent of my shampoo and perfume. He tossed my hair sticks on the floor and ran his fingers through my hair. I winced as he caught a knot and pulled through it.

"Did you come here to chastise me for my lack of manners?" I asked crossly, "Or just play with my hair?"

He smirked. "You're a feisty little thing, I'll give you that. I can see why someone like Thrawn would find you fun to play with. I believe he enjoys breaking down difficult challenges. How often did you say no to him before you let him seduce you?"

"What makes you think I ever told him no?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. It probably wasn't the smartest thing in the galaxy to say but I didn't care. I was getting annoyed with him touching me. I was beginning to feel like one of the slave girls at Jabba's and I didn't like it very much.

His expression turned ugly. He grasped my jaw roughly, forcing my head back against the wall with a dull thud. For a split second anger flared through me and all I wanted to do was kill him. I bit this back in favour of baiting him just a little more.

"Hurting me won't win you my affections." I told him.

"I do not wish your *affection!*" He smiled. He said as he began to touch me in a manner that made me want to vomit on him. His lust was powerful and I used it the same way I had on Myrkr when Thrawn had used my talents to seduce Ormante and his men. Desire clouded men's judgement and made them loose tongued and dopey. I hoped it would work here as well because if it didn't I was going to have to end this before it got utterly out of hand.

"Brute strength won't get you what you want either. Not even the Emperor who is more powerful than you are and rules this Galaxy could force me to do what you want." I said.

"The Emperor's power is fleeting."

"I don't think so."

I tried not to wince as Zaarin continued to hold my jaw in a vice like grip and fondle me. He was not gentle. "You are as naive as you are lovely." He said. "There are always ways in which to bring a tyrant down. Would you not rather be on the winning side?" he asked.

It crossed my mind briefly that the way in which he was man-handling me was how most people tested fruit in the market to see if it was ripe or not. I wondered how any of the women who slept with him put up with it. He had the romantic skills of a rancor. When he pinched me hard enough to hurt I pushed his hand off my breast.

"This behaviour is inappropriate." I told him. "And you are talking about treason. I won't be a part of this. I am loyal to the Emperor and I am not yours to touch!"

His eyes narrowed to thin slits. "Did you think you could just tell me to go away and I would? I always get what I want and that includes you, *little girl*." He brought his face close to mine and whispered in my ear. "Just because you work for Vader doesn't make you special. You seem to think you are too good for anyone else but that's not the case. I know exactly what you are." His breath was sour and the sudden flashback I had of being in a similar situation when I was younger caused a tiny flash of panic, it lasted only a moment but he had not missed it and I felt his sense of triumph as he pinned me against the wall with one hand.

"You know nothing about me, you repulsive snake, and you never will." I hissed between clenched teeth.

He backhanded me violently across face. "Oh really, we'll see about that. By the time I am done with you not even the dregs of Coruscant will want to touch you."

"You disgust me!" I spat at him, my temper now getting the better of me.

"You need to learn respect, Miss Gabriel." He said tightly, hitting me a second time. I let my head roll with it this time. When I brought my face back to meet his eyes there was no mistaking the hatred I felt for him in my expression.

"Respect needs to be earned." I replied and just stared at him. I suppose he read the defiance in my eyes because he suddenly tore the bodice of my dress with both hands. I was glad this dress had allowed me to wear a bra. I shivered as the cool air hit my skin. He leered at me and suddenly the lacy lingerie I had on didn't seem to cover enough. Of course, I hadn't worn it with him in mind. "And tearing my clothes won't earn you mine. It just pisses me off." I told him.

"You are prideful for Outer Rim trash." He said. His eyes narrowed when he caught sight of the tiny ma'arilite pendant around my neck. He picked it up between his thumb and forefinger. Something in my expression alerted him that this meant something to me. "What's this? A gift from the Emperor's pet?" He spat. "Payment for services rendered? There is another thing I shall get rid of when I am in charge of this Empire. There is no place for freaks like Thrawn."

So that was what he was planning to do, a coup of some sort. When I didn't answer he yanked on the chain hard, breaking it and flung the necklace behind him spitefully. I heard it clatter across the desk. I had to swallow my fury but the hate that was boiling away in my belly was starting to get the better of me. Zaarin smiled and ran his finger along the edge of my collar bone. I shuddered. This had nothing to do with sex; this had everything to do with power. I wondered how much longer I should let this continue. His wandering hands decided that for me.

"You are really very pretty; it is too bad that alien has spoiled you for the rest of us. I might have considered making you my wife but I won't keep tainted goods."

I drew a deep breath and concentrated. As he pawed at me, I made my first move carefully and used the force to send my tea cup flying across the room where it smashed

against the opposite wall loudly. The noise startled him and he turned around to see what it was, worried about getting caught in a compromising situation. The momentary distraction was just enough that I could move. I grasped the hand he had planted on my breast and I twisted it using pressure points causing him pain. He gasped in surprise, pulled his hand free allowing me to shove him further away from me, giving me just enough room to strike.

With a move Boba Fett had taught me called the serpent's kiss I struck him. It required a little concentration and a lot of accuracy. The hand held straight and stiff, so that the energy from the sudden jab, quick and sharp, flowed through the arm and out of the fingertips like a lightning strike. I hit him just below his Adam's apple and he stumbled back from me gasping and clutching his throat. It wasn't as intimidating as Lord Vader's force choke, but it had the same effect. It was painful and it would feel like dying although it wasn't fatal. Chances were good that it probably wouldn't even leave a mark. While he stood trying to breathe I went on the offensive. Using the same technique, I found a second point of pain just under his collar bone and he grunted as his left shoulder and arm went numb. There was a little nerve there that hurt like hell when enough force on exactly the right place was applied.

I knew exactly how painful this was because, when he had been teaching me about pressure and pain points, my uncle had made sure I knew what everything felt like. "*So that you know the right points to hit at the right times Lei-lei.*" He had said. My arm had tingled for at least an hour afterwards and I had been furious with him for doing that to me, but now I was grateful. I wanted Zaarin to suffer and I knew he would.

The surprised expression on Zaarin's face told me he had not expected this outcome. He had come here with the full intention of taking from me what he thought would be easy to get. To him I was just someone who had said no one too many times. He had wanted to hurt Thrawn and maybe even Lord Vader by hurting me. He had not bargained on me being able to fight back in a way that was not exciting for him. I stared at him in disgust. He was a pathetic, unattractive, older man who was grasping for power that was never his to have. I didn't care what Thrawn had said, I thought Zaarin was a moron.

He tried to straighten up and for a split second I debated what I should do next, how best to really hurt him because that is what I wanted to do. I wanted to damage him beyond repair and this desire rippled through me like wildfire. I had to fight the urge to let my powers loose and simply attack him without thought at all. Killing him would have been surprisingly easy but would land me in no end of trouble, besides Thrawn had repeatedly told me not to and the last thing I wanted to do was make Thrawn angry at me. I took a deep breath and forced myself to get a grip on the silent rage that flowed through me. I felt the wall of white noise recede and went to turn away from Zaarin but then he opened his mouth.

"You little bitch," He croaked, his voice was horse with pain. "You're nothing but Outer Rim trash and that damned alien's dirty little whore. You should be...." Before he could finish his next insult my anger got the better of me and I smashed my knee up into his groin as hard as I could. I felt rather than heard the rush of air he involuntarily exhaled. Groaning, he sank to his knees with a thud, his face utterly contorted in the white hot agony. I bent down beside him so I could whisper in his ear.

"If you ever touch me again *Demetri*, I will kill you and I'll do it in such a way that you will experience the most pain you have ever known in your life. When I am done I will dispose of your body so that no one, not even the Tze'yusha'Jin, will ever find you afterwards. Do we have an understanding? Nod if we do."

He nodded, his face red from pain and anger.

"You owe me a dress. I'll be sending you the bill, make sure you pay it."

I stood up and left the office as quickly as I could. Holding the pieces of torn bodice together, I made my way through the quiet halls to my old flat and let myself in. It had been a while since I had come in here at night. For a single moment I thought I saw something in the shadows move and imagined I heard the whisper of Jyrki's voice but when I turned on the lights the flat was empty. Ghosts, nothing more. I let out the breath I had been holding and went inside, locking the door behind me. A wave of shock shot through me and I was suddenly shivering and cold. I made my way to the 'fresher to clean up, washing my face with ice cold water hoping it would clear away some of the shakes. As I stood in front of the small bathroom mirror, stared at my reflection and sighed. My face and jaw were beginning to ache and my hair was a mess. I went into the bedroom to find something to wear. I had pretty much moved everything I owned into Thrawn's flat but I still kept enough clothes here in case of emergencies. I found a dress that was both suitable and pretty.

The deep cerulean blue set off my eyes. I studied my reflection in the mirror, feeling glad I had left a couple of formal dresses here just in case. I kicked off the pink shoes and slipped my feet in to the strappy little sandals that matched the dress I was now wearing. It was more revealing than the pink dress Zaarin had ruined and because I had lost some weight after it had been made, it was a little loose, but I didn't think anyone would care too much. It came with a matching shawl which I was grateful for because now in the aftermath of the adrenaline rush, I was cold.

I touched up my makeup, taking special care to try and hide the slowly blossoming bruises Zaarin had left. It would not be the first time I had attended a public function with marks like this and everyone would put it down to Lord Vader's brutality. Still I hid them as best I could. I brushed the tangles from my hair and decided to leave it long and loose. Once I had managed to make a passable job of makeup, I then went into the kitchen to see if there was anything decent left to drink.

I was in the process of pouring brandy into a glass when my comm peeped. It was Shiv.

"Hey Rim-Girl, the reception is starting. Where are you?"

"In my old flat, I had a bit of an accident and needed a change of clothes."

"What sort of accident? Are you okay? You sound a bit odd."

"I tripped on that stupid rug in my office and tore my dress, I'm fine. I'll be there shortly."

"Okay, see you soon." He said sounding concerned. I could tell he wanted to ask more but I switched my comm off before he could and before anyone else could message me.

I sipped the brandy thoughtfully, going over in my head what had happened. Zaarin had not been very forthright about concrete information on his plans. I would have liked to have learned more but I was certain that he would never have told me, not even if I had slept with him voluntarily. Still, I thought as I let the brandy wash over my tongue, I had an idea of what he wanted to do. He wanted to get rid of the Emperor and take his place. Zaarin wanted to rule the galaxy. I just had no idea how he was going to go about trying to make that happen. It seemed to me, as I sat in the dimly lit kitchen that men like Zaarin just did not understand that nothing taken by force ever lasted. I swore silently to myself that the next man who ever tried that with me would just die. No more playing around. I was not a piece of merchandise to be manhandled and pawed at. With a sigh I drained the glass and made my way to the reception. The evening was off to an interesting start, I hoped that no one else tried anything with me because I was definitely in the mood to kill.

By the time I had finished changing and sorting myself out, the reception was well underway. As I entered the hall, I looked around but didn't see the Emperor or Thrawn. I did see Shiv and Ynyth who along with Bobbyn were waving like mad at me to get my

attention. As I made my way through the crowd to meet them I stopped one of the waiters handing out drinks.

"Do you have anything besides that fizzy stuff?" I asked.

"Yes miss, whatever you like, I can get you from the bar." He replied politely.

"In that case I'd really like a Corellian double brandy kiss." I said and with a nod he vanished to fulfill my drink wish.

Shiv was the first to comment. "There you are, we were about to send out a search party." He said.

I grinned. "No need. I'm here. What did I miss?" I asked.

"Not much. It would appear that all the important people have vanished on some secret meeting and left us to fend for ourselves." He said in a mock whisper. "What about you, what happened?"

"A little accident. I was not watching where I was going." I said with a small shrug.

"Well, good that you keep extra clothes here, I guess." Shiv said as he gave me the once up and down. "But the other dress fit you better."

I nodded. "I know, but I kinda like the blue and all that pink does tend to make me feel like a china doll."

"Did you hit your face?" Ynyth asked suddenly, the light catching the bruising starting show under the makeup.

"I don't want to talk about it. I feel dumb enough as it is." I had hoped no one would really notice but my friends always did.

She looked at me and nodded. I could see by the expression in her eyes that she, like the others, thought Lord Vader had done this. He had hurt me often enough and left his mark on my face that it was an easy thing to assume. I did not correct them but something about my hesitation had alerted Shiv and he would not let the matter drop.

"It's not like you to be clumsy; in fact you are one of the most graceful people I know. You wouldn't be lying to me would you?" He said quietly, taking me aside.

"If I would you understand that if something else had happened this is neither the time nor the place to speak of it?"

He drew a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, but you better fill me in later or else." He waggled his finger at me. I just nodded and when the waiter came with my drink I took it from him gratefully and drank a large steadying gulp.

We kept the conversation light, laughed at the silliness we saw around us, made fun of guests and courtiers alike but if I had been asked what had been said I couldn't have answered. It was a blur.

The reception was surprisingly well attended which meant that Shiv and Ynyth were busy making small talk with whomever came over and joined our little circle. Neither Bobbyn nor I minded being left to our own devices and for the most part we were quite content to just watch the crowd in silence. Bobbyn was always the quiet one but ever since Antygra's arrest and execution he had withdrawn even further in to his shell. I never knew if he blamed me for what had happened to Tygs or if it was just that with Tygs gone the group dynamics had changed. I had been accepted as one of them only through Shiv's insistence, Ynyth as his mate had backed him up and somewhere along the line we had also become friends after a fashion but I was Vader's handmaiden, and no one really trusted me despite what appearances they gave. I didn't mind not having many friends, it meant less hurt when one of them betrayed me.

It was easy to tell when the Emperor had entered the hall because the electrified quiet that washed over us made me shiver. I looked to the entrance and saw Lord Vader follow in his master's footsteps. The hushed awe that had settled over the room receded slowly and soon the noise level was back to where it had been before the Emperor and his

second in command walked in surrounded by a sea of red from the Royal Guard and the gaggle of colourful courtiers.

I was surprised to see Lord Vader in attendance because he had told me he would not come. I guessed that the Emperor had ordered him to show his face, so to speak, and this meant that Lord Vader would be in a foul mood. I made a mental not to stay away from him because the two of us in a mood was never a good combination. Despite the cheery happy face I was putting on underneath all the fancy dress and finery what I really wanted to do was hurt something. The last thing I needed was a reason and someone to goad me into it. Lord Vader had a knack for picking up my moods and he always knew how to needle me. I didn't want him to try that in public, bad mood or not.

The Emperor, on the other hand, must have been a great mood because he was actually mingling, something he rarely did any more. There had been many rumours about this failing health. In the few public appearances he had made where I had been present I had noticed he seemed older, shrunken somehow, as though the use of the Force was consuming him from the inside out. I had often wondered what toll using the force as he did must take. I knew from my own small experiences that after it I was very weary.

*Everything was energy and all that energy had to go somewhere, my uncle had once said to me. The Force is energy, using it takes its toll, be careful how you wield your power Lei'lei.*

I watched the Emperor carefully, looking for signs of illness or weakness but I saw neither and the power that radiated from him was as strong if not stronger than it had ever been. He moved through the crowd with exquisite grace, Lord Vader at his side a towering, clumsy nightmare, dressed in black to scare. I wondered how many would be scared of him if they knew what he had been before the mask? A reckless hero, desperate for the recognition and love of those too haughty, too blinded by pride, to give it to him. In many ways, I thought, he was still like this, looking to Palpatine for acknowledgement and praise. Despite all the evil he had done, I did not hate Lord Vader, the same could not be said for the shrunken old man at his side.

I was lost in thought when Thrawn, speaking with one of the Emperor's advisors, made his way gracefully down the stairs that led from the entrance. He was elegance personified and I could not take my eyes off him. I was not alone; other heads turned to look at the blue skinned, red eyed alien whose favour came and went at the Emperor's whim. I wondered what the courtiers would say if they ever learned the truth. They thought Thrawn was a puppet, a distraction of the Emperor's whose grace at court was tolerated only because he was good at battle tactics. I wondered if the Emperor even knew how deep Thrawn's brilliance went, and who it was that was manipulating who. He moved with a languid ease through the crowd and my heart raced at the sight of him, though I did my absolute best not to show it. I watched him until he made eye contact with me, and wove his way to where I was standing. Shiv and the others decided that now would be a good time to give me a little space and drifted off into the direction of the buffet table.

Thrawn smiled when he reached me but it didn't reach his eyes. "I distinctly recall you wearing pink when you left the flat earlier this evening, my dear." He said quietly.

I nodded, returning smile with one of my own. "And as always, your memory would be perfectly correct." I sipped my very strong drink.

He gave me a curious glance, the tone of my voice let him know that something wasn't quite right. "Is everything in order?" He asked quietly.

"If we are talking about the pink dress rule, then yes." I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Zaarin had finally made his entrance. He was too proud to retreat and it would have looked very bad for him, not showing up as all the other members of the Council of twelve were there and had been long before I had arrived. He didn't look so well. I was glad.



Thrawn followed my gaze, watching me watch Zaarin. "The pink dress rule?" he asked, his eyebrow lifting slightly.

"Every time I wear a pink dress something bad happens to me." I said lightly, glancing at Zaarin again from over the rim of my glass. His hand went to his throat often which made me smile.

Thrawn gave me a look which said '*Explain!*'

I turned my attention back to him. "I want you to do something for me."

He nodded. "If I can."

"I want you to smile and nod as though the conversation we are about to have is light and fluffy."

"Merlyn, what is going on?" He asked, frowning slightly.

"Smile." I urged and glanced around quickly to see where Zaarin was now then turned my attention back to Thrawn. "We are having a lovely time at this wonderful event but I will be heading home soon." I said through clenched teeth. The flirtatious tilt of my head did not quite match the venom in my voice.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

"No, but I am angry. If I stay here all evening I might do or say something that won't make anyone very happy." I chattered gaily. Then once again looked about to see where Zaarin was heading. Thrawn's gaze followed mine and for a moment we stood in silence. Then I said. "This event is well attended, don't you think? All the Grand Admirals are here, even Zaarin."

"Indeed, although I am surprised to see him arrive so late." Thrawn said. "I thought he would already be here, there was no Council of Twelve meeting before hand and he is neurotic about punctuality."

"Well, maybe some fluffy distraction detained him." I said cheerfully.

Something in my voice made Thrawn study me carefully. "What really happened to your dress?" He asked coldly.

"The dress was unfortunately damaged beyond repair." I answered. It was the truth.

I watched the muscle in Thrawn's jaw twitch as he clenched his teeth. "How?"

"Delicate fabric doesn't tend to do well against brute strength." I replied.

I knew when he had noticed the bruising I had tried to hide under the makeup because he frowned ever so slightly, his eyes narrowing, and reached over, moving my chin with the tip of his finger to see it better. I felt a ripple of anger from him. "Did you and Vader have a disagreement?" His voice was hard but he kept his expression neutral.

"I will answer that question of yours with a no." I giggled, sipped my drink and glanced in Zaarin's direction. "The Grand Admiral doesn't look so well this evening, does he?"

Thrawn watched where I was looking but said nothing. From under dark lashes he studied the Admiral's demeanour carefully then looked back at me. "Is he limping?"

"It would appear he has some sort of groin injury judging by his walk. Perhaps he pulled it trying out a new sport, a one on one sport that requires aggression and submission to work properly." I bantered lightly.

Thrawn stared at me for a moment. It didn't take him long to put it all together.

"Something happened between you and Zaarin." His voice had gone flat.

I tilted my head to one side, "Nothing a good knee to his groin couldn't solve." I smiled sweetly.

"Merlyn, did he...?" He began.

"He tried." I answered, cutting him off quickly from voicing his thoughts. I sipped at my drink.

I watched as Thrawn worked to maintain his calm. "Are you....?"

"I'm fine. I am a big girl and I can take care of myself against the likes of him. I'll have some bruises on my face but nothing worth writing home about." I said with a casual shrug. "Believe me, he didn't get what he bargained for and he won't try it again. He'll be having... performance issues for a while."

Thrawn turned away from me. I felt his anger come off him in waves. I watched as he drew a deep breath under the guise of flagging down a waiter. When he turned back to face me he had his emotions under control. I didn't think that anyone else in the room would even notice that he was upset. He hid his feelings so well that even I would have not seen it unless I had known exactly what to look for.

"Shall I take you home?" He asked coldly as he touched his glass to mine and pretended to sip at his drink.

"No. I need to show him he didn't win, which is why you need to smile at me." I told him.

He did one better. Not only did he smile but he reached over and caressed the side of my face tenderly as though we were simply flirting with one another not discussing Zaarin's attempted assault. It was a gesture that did not go unnoticed. I hoped that it would quell some of the negative rumours and maybe give the gossips something to talk about that did not lead in a Merlyn - Zaarin direction. I did not think it would be prudent for anyone to even imagine anything had happened between him and me, especially not the truth.

Thrawn's hand slipped behind my hair, around the back of my neck and he drew me close to him, his grip unyielding, so that he could whisper in my ear. "You had better damned well be prepared to enlighten me in full when I return home." He said, his voice was whip sharp and ice cold. "Now, Miss Gabriel, I do believe it is your turn to pretend everything is light and fluffy." I had never know him so angry but he hid it remarkably well.

I pulled back from him and turned away shyly and pretended to smile even though his quiet fury had unnerved me. "You should mingle now, otherwise people will talk." I told him nibbling on my pinkie finger.

He glanced at my trembling hands and said, "People will talk anyway. This evening appears to be rife with rumour, particularly about you and me. I did not know we had such an interesting private life both together and apart." He replied with such disdain that for a moment I let go of the part I was playing to stare at him, hurt and angry.

*"Remember where you are, A'myshk'a."* He spoke softly in Cheunh.

I drew a deep breath and found my smile but it made my jaw ache. "The Imperial Court does love its intrigue." I said in Basic. "But this keeps the gossips from digging up the real news from behind the scenes, so I don't mind. Perhaps we can swap stories later on?"

He nodded. "Certainly I shall wish to hear yours." He replied with a cold smile that went nowhere near his eyes.

I gave him a sweet, girly giggle. The strong drink I was slowly sipping helped me play the coquette. "Enjoy the rest of the evening." I told him quietly and then I walked away from him without looking back.

I found my way to where Shiv was standing, laughing at something Ynyth had said. I joined in their conversation for about half an hour then I told Shiv I was going home because I wasn't feeling so well.

"You do look a bit pale. Maybe that accident you had some more damage than you thought? You could stop by the med-lab on your way. " He said.

"No, I'm fine really, it's just a headache and I am quite tired."

"Do you want me to run you home?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks you stay and enjoy the party. I'll get one of the palace drivers to drop me off."

"Okay, kiddo. I'll talk to you tomorrow then." He said and we all went through the kiss-kiss ritual.

I handed my still half full glass to the nearest waiter and meandered through the crowd to leave.

I was almost to the entrance when the Emperor intercepted me. Standing at his side was Grand Admiral Zaarin and several royal guards.

"There you are my dear," He said. "I was hoping to see you here."

I curtsied. "Your Highness. The dedication you gave earlier was lovely. The new wing is quite spectacular." I babbled. I had hoped to avoid seeing Zaarin again so close, so soon.

"Thank you my dear." He said. "You know Demetrius Zaarin, don't you?" he asked, gesturing to Zaarin at his side.

I smiled as genuinely as I could. "Yes, we are acquainted with each other." I said looking at the Grand Admiral. He stared back at me, his eyes were as cold as the smile he managed to give me. I could feel the hate coming off him in waves and knew that if I could sense it so could the Emperor. I shivered involuntarily.

"I was just telling Demetrius about your Bunduki skills and how well you carried yourself at the trials you last took."

My smile stayed exactly as it was but my anger grew. "Is that so? I didn't know the Admiral was interested in that sort of thing."

The Emperor smiled. "Demetri commented on what a delicate little thing you are. I merely told him that looks could be deceiving, you are quite talented." He said.

"As always, your Highness is very kind with his praise." I said demurely.

"Oh come now, child, you have done very well in your training. Your skills in defence are to be admired and spoken of." The Emperor smiled. Then he turned to Zaarin and added. "She was challenged to a death match and killed her opponent, even though she had a punctured lung and a dislocated shoulder. Our Miss Gabriel is really quite lethal, you know." He said, "Goodness knows what she would do if her fury was truly unleashed."

Zaarin glanced at the Emperor. "Oh really?" he asked. His voice was still a little hoarse. "One would never suspect such a thing of a simple office girl."

"Indeed, as I said, looks can be terribly deceiving." The Emperor said, with a wide, toothy grin.

Zaarin wouldn't look at me directly and that made me smile a little more. "I have excellent teachers." I said. "I owe everything I have learned to your kindness, your Highness." I wondered what he would say if I suddenly dropped the bomb that the Grand Admiral at his side really wanted to kill him and take over his place as ruler of the galactic empire. Then I wondered if that was something the Emperor already knew. It certainly wouldn't surprise me in the least; he seemed to know everything else.

The Emperor chuckled. "Indeed, child." He said. "Oh and speaking of looks, what happened to the pretty dress you were wearing earlier? I rather liked the pink, it suited you."

"I had a little accident and the dress was unfortunately torn." I said. It was the truth, sort of.

"Oh I do hope that it wasn't anything serious." He commented. "Did you hurt your face at the same time?"

I glanced at Zaarin before I could stop myself. He had the good grace to flush and look away. I smiled and then shook my head. "Your Highness's concern is most touching but really I am fine, I tripped and stumbled, nothing to worry about."

The Emperor patted my arm. "Then I am glad to hear it. I should be distressed if anything were to happen to you. I do so enjoy your company and your unique talents make you a valuable asset to my court."

I could feel Zaarin's discomfort coming off him in waves and I was almost certain that the Emperor knew something of what had happened. I feigned embarrassment and glanced away shyly. "Your Highness is very kind." I said.

"Well, child, I have other guests I must attend to, enjoy your evening. I make certain we have further opportunities to talk when I have more time. I shall let you know."

"I would be honoured, your Highness." I dropped another curtsey and smiled waited until he had left, with Zaarin at his side, then as quickly as I could I got out of the reception hall. I could not get home fast enough and the driver had broken several speed limits for me when I had threatened to sic Lord Vader on him.

In the quiet of the flat, I wondered as I stripped off the finery and ran a bath, why I didn't just get on the nearest transport and get the hell off this planet. It was a question I had no answer for.

I was sitting out on the balcony when Thrawn returned. I had bathed, scrubbing my skin so hard it had almost glowed pink, and changed into comfortable clothes. I had a Dantassi blanket wrapped around my shoulders against the cool of the night and was nursing a large brandy. My face ached dully despite the pain-killers and the bruising by my swollen lip was a pretty shade of reddish purple. I did not move as he went through his usual routine. Once he had changed out of his dress uniform, washed up and gotten something to drink he joined me. I sat in one of the balcony chairs with my feet up against the railing; he came to stand with his back against the same balustrade, facing me. For a very long time neither of us said anything we sipped our brandy in silence.

Finally he broke the stillness. "So, do you care to explain what happened this evening without being cryptic?" He asked. He was tense and I could feel his annoyance and anger underneath his calm facade. This would not be a happy conversation.

I drew a deep breath and I told him. I kept it simple and as close to just the facts as I could. He listened without interruption or comment and when I was done it was his turn to take a deep steadying breath.

"Are you certain you did not misinterpret his intentions?" Thrawn asked carefully.

"He had his hand all over my breasts, he slapped my face when I told him to piss off and he ripped my dress, so I would say that me misunderstanding his intentions is a definite no." I retorted hotly. I wasn't exactly happy with what had had happened but I was certain I had not instigated it nor misread the situation at hand.

"Why did you let it get that far? Why did you not simply evade him?"

"Evade him? Like how? It's my office not his and I did ask him to leave. Things didn't get *interesting* until after he'd backed me up against the wall" I said. I didn't tell Thrawn that I had kind of let that happen in the first place. "He was the one who said he was tired of hearing me say no to him. *He* was the one who decided to push."

"So you just decided to play his game instead of getting away from him or calling for help?"

I scowled at him. Call for help, I thought? Who the hell would have come running at that time of night in a deserted part of the palace. Instead I said, "That's complicated," which was entirely the wrong thing to say.

"Well, un-complicate it for me. I want to know why you let it get that far." He said dryly.

"It didn't get *that* far at all." I snapped.

"He tore your dress, he touched you in an inappropriate manner and he hit you. I'd call that far enough." His voice had gone stone cold.

I sighed. "I wanted to stop him once and for all. I wanted to make it clear I am not part of the palace stable of pretty girls free for his taking." I sipped my brandy. "If I had not made my stance there and then he would have just tried again some other time, maybe when he would have had more of an advantage over me. He made the mistake of thinking

he was stronger than me and that fear of him would keep me in line. It didn't even occur to him that I would fight back in the way I did, much less hurt him." I said calmly. "Besides, I thought it would be a good opportunity."

"A what?" He asked, clearly puzzled by this. I had momentarily stunned him. "The man wanted to physically assault you and you thought this was a good thing?" He hissed through clenched teeth.

"Well, yes, sort of."

"Care to enlighten me on this particular line of thought because your logic escapes me."

I drew a deep breath knowing he was not going to like what I said next at all. "Lord Vader wanted me to read him." I said. "I thought that while he was distracted with other things Zaarin might let something slip."

I could feel Thrawn's anger swirl about him as he tried to contain it. "And did he?" he asked coldly.

I made a face. "Sort of, I got the impression he is planning some sort of overthrow of the government. A coup, maybe. He kept hinting at how different things would be after the Emperor was gone. That the Emperor's rule would not last forever and I should make plans for a job change. For sure, he wants to get rid of the Emperor and wants to take his place. I got the distinct impression that what ever he has planned, he is very sure it will succeed and that it will happen sooner rather than later."

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. "I don't suppose you managed to *seduce* any actual details for these particular plans out of him, did you?" he asked, his voice still cool but now it carried a nasty edge I had never heard from him before.

I stared at him for a moment. His attitude was starting to piss me off. I drained my glass in one gulp. "No, and for the record I did not plan on seducing him at all. In fact I tried to stay the hell away from him but he had other ideas!" I said crossly. "I simply took advantage of an existing situation."

"Yes," He nodded, "an existing situation. His attentions to you at the dedication ceremony did not escape my attention. I should have thought that alone would have made you think twice about engaging him in any sort of conversation in private."

"Engage him... in private...?" I didn't know how to respond so I resorted to girl logic, "You're making it sound as though I invited him to meet me in my office for exactly that purpose!" I said hotly. "If I had *known* he was following me I'd have gone someplace where he could not find me! I thought it was Shiv who was at the door when he knocked so I opened it. It didn't occur to me that it would be Zaarin."

Thrawn ignored my statement. "He was making a play for you at the dedication ceremony. The drink he handed you this evening was full of glow spice."

"Yes and he knew exactly what it would do to me if I actually drank it."

There was moment's pause while Thrawn took in my words. "He lied about his knowledge of your allergy, then." It wasn't a question. We both knew that it had been Zaarin who had arranged the glow-spice laced cake which had damn near killed me.

I nodded.

"So, while he knows about your allergy he does not know about your force talents for reading truth from lie then."

That hadn't occurred to me. "I guess not." I said with a little shrug. "I was hoping to maybe get something out of him that I could report to Lord Vader, something concrete not just a vague sense of ill will."

"Instead you got attacked and he knows a whole lot more about you than he did several hours ago."

"Would you rather that I'd played the victim and let him have his way with me?" I asked snarkily.

"I would rather none of this had happened at all! I told you to stay away from him!" He said sharply, losing some of his eerie façade of calm.

"Well, you failed to tell *him* to stay away from *me*!" I shouted.

"I am beginning to wonder if you deliberately manage to get yourself into these situations just to see how angry you can make me!"

"What?" I exploded, "This is not about you!"

"You court danger the way most people eat fruit." His eyes were hard as he glared at me.

"Oh, for Sarlacc's sake!" I exploded. "Zaarin wasn't a threat to me! He's an old man with grandiose ideas and a libido to match his ego!" I got up from my chair. Now I was cross. "He's lucky I didn't permanently damage him, which I could have and probably should have!"

"You didn't report this did you?" Thrawn asked completely ignoring my outburst.

I made a noise of disgust. "Just how stupid do you think I am? Do you really think anyone would believe the truth? He is one of the Empire's highest ranking, most respected officers and while you and a couple of other people know I am a tad more than palace fluff that's not what would come across in an investigation. I am certain that no matter what the truth was, the reality of the situation would be distorted so that he was the victim and I was the one leading him on. I don't want that, I don't want my life, my relationships and everything I am dragged through the muck. No one really cares about the attempted rape of a *'palace girl'*; it happens all the time and gets ignored. Imperial men seem to think they can do what ever they please. I've heard enough horror stories from Shiv about this that I know no matter how much in the right I am it would never be presented that way. If I have learned anything by working here it is that sometimes the best thing to do is nothing at all. I'll bide my time, sooner or later Zaarin will get what he deserves." I took the long pause that followed for agreement.

"Have you spoken to anyone else what you gleaned from your little foray into the world of seductive espionage?" He asked.

I shook my head. "No. I was going to tell Lord Vader when I see him next."

"Don't." He commanded.

"What? Why not?"

"Because I asked." He said in a tone of voice that said this was anything but a request. "Because I would rather let Zaarin think you had decided to forget the whole incident and say nothing about what he did."

"Now who is playing games?" I shot back.

"Merlyn, stop it!" He raised his voice. He was finally angry, I had pushed enough. "It's bad enough you land yourself in hospitals when you tangle with your friend from Tatooine but you make it far worse when play the spy for Lord Vader and get mixed up in things you have no idea about. You meddle in affairs better left alone. You have absolutely no idea what is going on so stay out of it!"

"I do not set these situations up!" I shouted at him. "Why are you making this so complicated?"

"I am not the one who makes things complex, my dear." He said icily.

I stared at him for a moment. "What is really pissing you off here? Is it the fact that I didn't do as you asked and stay away from Zaarin, even though he was the one chasing me or the fact that he tried to take by force what I give to you freely?" If Thrawn had been even remotely inclined to violence chances are good he would have slapped me after that statement instead a deadly stillness crawled over him. I would have welcomed violence in contrast to his unreadable calm.

"Have a care with how you speak to me on this incident." He said softly. "Under Dantassi law this would be a very serious matter."

For a moment he had floored me then I said, "Dantassi law has nothing to do with this!"

"I am your Ta'kasta'cariad." He replied. "I am required by our Dantassi laws to protect you, to keep you from harm." That was not the whole truth of it but I didn't think this was the right time to ask for clarity.

"Oh, like you kept me from harm by dragging me to Myrkr?" I asked as I hiked up my skirt and pointed to the large white scar on my thigh, reminding him of the injuries I had sustained on that planet. Technically this was unfair as he had taken me to Myrkr before he had taken on his Dantassi role in my life. His jaw clenched and his body language said he had not expected me to throw that back in his face. It was entirely the wrong button to push but I couldn't help it. "And none of this has anything to do with the current situation!" I wondered, briefly, how far I could wind him up and push him before he would explode at me. I decided I wasn't sure I wanted to experiment with this right and bit my tongue to keep from saying anything else that might dig the hole deeper.

"It has everything to do with this situation." He countered. "You are a chaotic menace to order and careful planning in every single way possible."

I blinked at him for a second then let my mouth get the better of me. "Oh, I'm sorry, am I stepping on your toes? Have I stumbled on some plan or nefarious scheme I wasn't supposed to? Do you actually know what is going on with Zaarin?"

He drew a deep breath, trying to keep his temper in check. "It's no secret to me and a few others that Zaarin wants more power. It is also no secret that he does not appreciate the Emperor's method of ruling. I have been studying his moves at great length for some time now and I believe I know him well enough to gain some insight into what he will do but you are making this job difficult."

"I am making your job difficult?" I almost exploded. "How can I make your job difficult when I don't even know what that is?" I asked. "May I remind you that Zaarin is the one who came after me! I just went to my office to get some bloody work done. I did not ask him to show up uninvited and prove how big of a man he is!" I yelled. "You make it sound as though I deliberately enticed him to come after me!"

"Did you?" He asked frostily.

I didn't think about it I just flung my empty brandy glass at him. When he actually caught it in his hand it infuriated me to the point of being irrational.

"I'll take that as a no." He said calmly as he set my glass down on the floor.

"Is it so unbelievable that he would actually come after me without me doing anything to encourage him?" I asked. "Or do you, along with everyone else in this Sarlace forsaken galaxy, think I am just a cheap palace whore?"

He jaw tightened and he drew a deep breath, "I did not think Zaarin would be so desperate to prove his manhood that he would chance coming after you like this. It would appear I underestimated his libido and the bruising his ego has taken at your hand." He said tartly. "Never speak of yourself in that manner again. You dishonour me, you dishonour Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and most of all you dishonour yourself. This I will not have." We stared at each other for a moment. We had never fought like this before and I didn't know how to untangle the mess we were making.

"So what you are really saying is you underestimated me." I stated flatly.

His answer held a nasty edge to it. "I only underestimate how well you seem to manage getting into ridiculous situations that land you in a med lab!"

I shook my head and stormed back inside the flat. He was making me cross, this conversation was making me cross and what had happened earlier on in the evening made me cross as well. It was not a very good way to end an evening. I heard him follow me in, closing the door behind him. He caught my arm and pulled me around to face him. I didn't fight his grip but he let go of me as soon as he saw my expression. I was fed up of being

man handled and some of that must have shown on my face. The air between us crackled. I folded my arms across my chest defiantly and waited for the lecture I knew was coming.

"What you did tonight was foolish. Brave on some level maybe, but truly foolish and Vader has no right to ask you to spy on Zaarin, force talents or not." He said firmly. "Zaarin thinks that he is unobserved and free to do as he wishes. If he even suspects his plans are discovered he'll change them and make it that much harder to deal with when the time comes. He may come off like a stupid middle aged man whose desire for a young palace girl clouds his judgement but let me tell you he is far more intelligent than you seem to give him credit for. I am assuming that he thought you would be an easy target tonight due to all the rumours that were flying around you and me. Perhaps he had a little too much port at dinner or something and once he came after you, I strongly suspect you helped him out in the desire department hoping to egg him on in a misguided attempt to lure some information from him. Now he has a real reason to hate you and he knows just how sharp your teeth are. He won't underestimate you again. You had just better hope he doesn't think you've figured out something of his plans because he will stop at nothing to make sure he eliminates any threats to his power. This includes you. While you have a place of some small importance in the Imperial court, make no mistake, you can be replaced. Aside, perhaps, from the Emperor, everyone in this galaxy is expendable."

I knew he was mostly right but I hated to admit it so I didn't say anything. Thrawn took my silence for stubbornness and pressed his point. With my arms folded, I gritted my teeth and glared at him. He stared back at me. Neither of us was backing down.

"Stay away from Zaarin. I am not asking you. I am telling you." I knew this tone of voice and it was not negotiable.

Petulance made me snarky, "Fine!" I snapped.

"Then we have an understanding." He said in a manner which told me he thought everything was settled.

"No, I don't think we do!" I said crossly. "I don't understand you at all!" I yelled at him. "And you sure as hell do not understand me!" My outburst puzzled him but I wasn't about to try and explain why I was now so pissed off because I wasn't sure I knew myself. It was probably a girl thing.

We stared at each other for a moment then I turned around and stormed away from him, into the spare bedroom and slammed the door as hard as I possibly could. I could not ever recall a time when both of us had been so angry or said so many unpleasant things to each other before and I had no idea how to undo it all. I stood with the door at my back and swallowed down my anger, letting out the breath I felt I had been holding since the evening had begun. It occurred to me that I did not have the upper hand in this situation, and by locking myself into the small bedroom I had essentially backed myself into a corner. With a snort, I went and flung myself down on the bed. I wondered if my world was crashing down around me, if I should pack my things and go back to living in the palace and never see Thrawn again but somewhere in the back of my addled brain I knew this was over reacting.

My father and I had often fought, especially after the death of my mother. The shouting matches in the house had been spectacular and usually ended with me storming off. Unlike Thrawn, my father had a temper that matched my own and I used to wonder why we didn't cause lightning to crash inside the house when we sparked against each other, usually over something stupid I had done. At least fighting with my father had been satisfying somehow, as though airing the anger and frustration between us somehow cleansed the spirit. Fighting with Thrawn was like fighting a great wall of impenetrable silence. I did not know how to battle his calculating logic and icy calm and I had really wanted to make him mad, to get him shouting at me because that the only way I knew how



to fight. Loud, emotional and with sparks flying I could deal with, unnerving quiet calm put me completely off balance.

As I lay on the bed with my arms folded crossly over my chest it occurred to me that just maybe Thrawn was not so wrong in his overall assessment of what had happened. It had probably not been the brightest move to allow things to play out as they had and now instead of Zaarin just being an annoying pest, he had become an enemy. I closed my eyes and sighed. I was suddenly very tired. It had been a long, awful evening and I just wanted it to go away. Despite my anger, curiously enough, I fell asleep almost instantly.

*Sand swirled about my bare feet but when I looked up I found myself in the Jedi Temple not the desert. A young woman grabbed my hand and began to pull me through the sunlit hallways. I knew her face, A'kali L'uanna as a girl.*

*"Come on, they're here!" She said and all but dragged me to a place where we had a clear view of a wide entrance. She pointed to the people arriving, specifically at a small blond haired boy.*

*"Who is that?"*

*"He's the Chosen One." She whispered. There was no mistaking the reverence in her voice.*

*I turned back to look at the boy not noticing that A'kali had slipped away. He looked frightened and lost. I sensed a great sorrow around him and the people he was with. It pierced my heart with its intensity.*

*"He mourns my death." Said a new voice at my side. I looked up into the face of Qui Gon Jinn. "He has too much attachment, it will be hard for him to let go. This was our first mistake." His words puzzled me.*

*I looked back at Anakin only to have him stare up into my face. "You." He mouthed but I didn't understand. For a moment our eyes met then everything around me morphed into something else.*

*I found myself still in the Temple but in the great Library. All around me was chaos, while I could not see anything I heard the screams and knew what night it was. The night the five oh first came, following Anakin who had turned to the darker side of his passions. The five oh first would forever be known as Vader's fist after this, the terrible Fist of a man who would kill children to serve his own needs. I often wondered how those cloned soldiers had felt following the duty that Vader had tasked them with.*

*I didn't understand this dream but I couldn't get away from it either. I shut my eyes tightly and covered my ears with my hands hoping to block out the screams and sounds of blaster fire and lightsaber's slice. Only when someone touched me on the shoulder did I open myself back up. The silence was more deafening than the sound of the furious slaughter. I glanced at the shimmering image of Qui Gon and then followed his own gaze. I shuddered at the sight.*

*"You have done well, my young apprentice." I heard the terrible voice of Palpatine say. His words echoed through the stillness.*

*Anakin, a young man torn by grief, anger and the knowledge that he had betrayed everything, knelt on the floor before his master's feet. What went through his mind I did not know but I could guess. I wished I could have saved him, turned back time and stopped it all from happening. I had to choke back a sob that threatened to engulf me.*

*"He doesn't understand. He never understood." Qui Gon told me. "Neither did we." The sorrow in his voice was heart breaking. I watched as the scene once again shimmered and changed.*

*"Why do you show me these things?" I asked. I knew I was crying but I didn't bother to wipe away my tears.*

*"So that you might know."*

*"But why?"*

*"Because someone has to, because you see beyond the mask." He said cryptically. Before I could ask another question he faded away leaving me in the empty library. I looked about and realised that it was completely bare. Everything that had been in it had been stripped away.*

*I walked about the room trying to find a trace of the history it had once held but there was nothing at all. The place was finally dead. It didn't make me sad, it was a relief. I could touch things but felt nothing.*

*"You often come here, don't you my child." Palpatine's soft voice whispered from behind me, making me jump in fright.*

*"Your Highness." I said and began to kneel but he made a gesture with his hand and I remained standing.*

*"What do you hope to find in this place?" he asked gently.*

*"I don't know." It was the truth. "I never know."*

*"There are no more answers here." Palpatine said.*

*"I don't understand any of this."*

*Palpatine smiled. "Exactly, neither did he ... until it was too late."*

*I looked at the Emperor trying to decipher the hidden meanings underneath his words, but this was a dream and nothing made sense.*

*"You should not come here anymore." He said in that avuncular manner, as though I were a favoured niece not one of his pawns. "You should return home now."*

*The room shifted and I found myself in a med lab but not one I was familiar with. This one was dark and intimidating. It smelled like charred flesh and metal. When I heard a scream I turned around and at first could not understand what I was seeing.*

*Medical droids bustled around the terribly burnt body, stripping off charred clothing, strips of flesh, in some places down to the bone and the man on the medical bed was still aware, still awake and screaming in agony. The droids seemed oblivious to his pain. They busied themselves with the artificial limbs which would take the place of the ones Obi Wan had severed.*

*"Suffering will make you strong, Anakin." A voice behind me chided. "Use your anger and rise above the pain!"*

*I shuddered. Suddenly I felt sick. The Emperor had done this to him. No anaesthetic, nothing to dull the terrible pain. The med-droids began their terrible work, attaching metal to flesh, making Anakin whole again. No wonder Anakin hated the Emperor so much. No wonder Lord Vader was the way he was. How could one man endure so much pain and anger? I tried to turn away from the sight only to find someone holding my arm. When I looked to see who it was I found myself staring into Anakin's charred face, his eyes had turned a dreadful colour of fire. I couldn't bear to look at him but I couldn't turn away.*

*"Wipe them all out!" He screamed. "Cut them all down! Traitors all of them! Even you, you betrayed me!" He stared straight at me but he wasn't seeing me, he was seeing someone else. Ghosts...I was surrounded by them.*

*I snatched my hand from the metal claw that held me and backed away. I bumped into Palpatine who, with his hands on my shoulders, spun me around to face him. "You see, little one, there is no escape, eventually everyone becomes mine. I have plans for you and your talents, but not just yet." He caressed my face with the backs of his fingers. I shivered. His smile was grotesque, as though a thousand years of malignancy had eaten away his flesh. "Go home now, he's waiting for you." He said, propelling me towards a door I had not noticed. It opened onto nothing and before I could do anything he had pushed me through it into the void where I fell, screaming.*

I woke up with my cries still echoing in my head, gasping for breath and disoriented. This was not the bed I was used to and for a moment I wasn't sure I really had woken up. When the reality of what room I was in hit and the memory of everything that had happened flooded back I knew I was not sleeping anymore and got up. The chrono said it was just after two am.

I stumbled into the bathroom and cleaned up then headed for the kitchen to make a cup of tea. While the water heated up I went to the balcony to get some fresh air. At first I didn't see Thrawn, standing in the darkness staring into the night, the lights from the city illuminated his skin softly but when I did my heart gave a little jolt. I stood very still thinking he had not noticed me, that I could just go back inside and not have to face any more of his angry accusations but then he spoke.

"Are you alright?" He asked without turning to look at me. "I heard you cry out."

"I didn't mean to wake you, I'm sorry." I said and turned to leave.

"You did not wake me." He said turning to face me, "and you didn't answer my question."

"It was just a dream." I said, "A bad one, but just a dream, I don't think it meant anything. I'm fine, I'm just ... I'm fine."

"Does this have to do with what happened after Bepin?" He asked.

I shook my head. We had not talked about that and although he knew something terrible had occurred, something that gave me nightmares so bad I was often afraid to go back to sleep afterwards, he had not pushed for information yet. "No. It was just a bad dream and it didn't make any sense. If it had any meaning I don't know it."

We stared at each other for a moment. Then he broke the stillness between us when he stretched out his hand to me, gesturing that I should come to him. I did so hesitantly.

He reached out and caressed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers. "I'm sorry." He said.

I blinked up at him in disbelief. "You're apologising?"

"Yes," He said, "I had no right to speak to you the way I did. You sound surprised."

"It's been my experience that men don't usually say sorry for anything, right or wrong."

That earned me a smile. "Well perhaps you have been keeping company with the wrong men." He said. "When I am wrong, I will admit it."

"Oh," I said as I looked up into his face. This was the last thing I expected him to do or say. His eyes, which glowed with an eerie reddish light, held concern and something else I couldn't read. "And here I was thinking that you were partly right about some of the things you said." I was grateful that I had wrapped a warm shawl about my shoulders, the night air was cool.

His eyebrow arched. "Oh, I was." He replied, "But that does not excuse the way I behaved."

I nodded. "Okay." I said slowly. "Were you going to just stand out here all night then or had you planned on coming in and telling me this?"

"When I went in to talk to you earlier you were sound asleep, I didn't want to wake you."

"Ah." I said quietly, turning away from his intense stare. "I kind of wish you had."

"I'll be honest with you, A'myshk'a, you drive me to distraction." He said plainly.

"Never in my life have I come across anyone quite like you. Nor have I ever experienced the wide range of emotions you seem to delight in putting me through. This relationship of ours is problematic at best and at worst, wrecks constant havoc on my well laid order and plans."

I held my breath and my heart thumped in my chest as I readied myself for the *we should stop seeing each other* speech which I was sure was coming. I opened my mouth to

say something but he shut me up by placing his forefinger gently on my lips and continued to speak. "I have never thought of myself as a man with a jealous nature. I am ambitious and probably also proud, but not jealous. Tonight's little incident proved me wrong and I handled it very poorly. I took my anger at what Zaarin did out on you. It was not my intent to raise my voice or imply the things I did."

I looked up at him puzzled. That had not been what I had expected. I took a deep breath. "Well, as disagreements go, this was a pretty normal one, if you ask me." I said slowly. "Tame in comparison to some of the fights I used to have with papa."

He nodded. "The Chiss do not fight. Nor do we have loud, angry arguments about anything. We are taught from very early on to contain our feelings and choose a logical not an emotional course of action. Humans are utterly chaotic in this respect. It is a wonder to me sometimes how anything in this galaxy ever gets accomplished." He paused. "Having an orderly discussion with you on a topic that you are emotionally involved in is nearly impossible." He said. "I am unused to this method of conflict on such a personal level. You make things not calm, not logical. Sometimes it is like living with a never ending, wild and unpredictable storm."

"Well," I said quietly, "At least it's not boring."

He gave a short laugh. "No, you are anything but dull, my dear."

"The Sand People have a saying. *Without the wild winds there would be no beautiful dunes.*" I told him.

"Yes, there is a Dantassi saying much like that only it has to do with snow not sand."

For a moment we were quiet, just looking at one another. Then I asked a little uncertainly. "So...I won't have to pack my things and move back to the palace?"

He opened his mouth then shut it again and gave me a look which said *remind me which planet are you from again?* "What in Da'hajn's name made you think that?"

"I tend to assume the worst these days." I said with a little shrug. "You were very angry."

He smiled. "You do have a knack for stirring me up, as it were." He said.

I just looked up at him and sighed. "I don't mean to, most of the time." I replied. "So, I don't have to leave then?" I gave him a little grin to hide the fact that I really needed to hear him say it.

"No." He said then added, "I have told you before, I am bound to you."

"What exactly does that mean?" I asked.

"That I won't be breaking up with you over something that was not entirely your fault to begin with." He replied.

"That's not really an answer."

"Yes it is, just not one you were expecting." He countered. "How is your face?"

I touched the place where Zaarin had backhanded me, the swelling on my lip had gone down and if he had not mentioned it I would have forgotten about the bruise. "It's fine."

He said, "So it won't hurt if I do this." His hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers snaking under my hair as he drew my face up to his. He kissed me slowly, tenderly. Relief washed through me as I kissed him back. When the kettle peeped to let me know the water had boiled, he broke from me to ask, "Do you still want to make tea?"

"Uhm, not really." I breathed.

"Good."

"Why?"

"We have a conversation to finish."

"I thought we were done fighting." I frowned.

"We are." He said. "I am speaking of the discussion we began *before* you left the flat this evening."

"Oh." I replied. "I guess arguing with me wasn't on your list of fun things to do this evening?"

"No. It was not." He said and he began to show me what was on his list of fun things to do.

The culmination slow and elegant seduction through our letters, the verbal foreplay from before the evening's events coupled with our anger at what had happened was so powerful I felt as though we would implode from it. Fighting, it seemed, built up a lot of passion and all that energy had to go somewhere; I liked his current solution better than the one from earlier on.

Thrawn was fierce and dominant, stirring me up like sand dancing in a windstorm. With his mouth, his hands and his body he marked the territory of what he had claimed was his. I didn't argue about ownership rights and I matched his intensity with my own, untamed and wild. I, too, had teeth and nails. The Chiss prided themselves on their cool logic, and had done their very best to train their kind to eschew all public displays of emotion but I knew better than to believe this all went bone deep. Thrawn was a man of intense passions, though well schooled by his people in the art of playing it cool, he allowed himself, on occasion, to be free of the constraints his lineage demanded. Ice to my fire, he melted and in doing so quenched the heat that threatened to incinerate me from the inside out. If I could have physically burned his name on the inside of my soul I would have. I wondered briefly if such passions as these would eventually die off and if so, what would be left in their place but these tiny doubts were soon forgotten as he made sure he my full attention.

In the quiet of the bedroom we moved like light on water. Our bodies rippled together as I sat astride his lap, riding upon him. His hands rested on my hips, holding me as he leaned against the headboard of the antique bed which I gripped tightly, trapping him within the circle of my arms. This was one of his favourite positions and when I had once asked him why this was, he had simply replied *because it is one of the few times we see eye to eye*. I had thought he was playing with words, just a joke answer but that was not the case. I had not really understood what he had meant.

There was so much power in our coupling that it sometimes amazed me we didn't spontaneously combust from it. He had taught me well in the art of giving him pleasure just as he had learned how well to please me. I had come a long way from the first night he had taken me to his bed, wounded and nervous. I enjoyed giving as much as I received. It was the one place where I did not feel as though he were constantly trying to teach me a lesson in politics or tactics of some sort and occasionally I was able to surprise him. I wondered, for a moment, if it was possible for two separate beings to meld into one because that's what it felt like, that's what I wished for. As the world boiled around us and when the energy between us finally exploded, I felt as though I had shattered into a billion pieces.

I could feel his heart pounding in his chest as I shuddered against his body, now holding onto him tightly, my legs around his, thigh to thigh and my fingers digging into his back. Our laboured breathing was in perfect synch. For a singular point in time it really seemed as though we had become one, but that tiny moment passed in the wink of an eye.

In the wash of serenity that followed the manic passion, still wrapped about his body, I inhaled his scent deeply and, sighing contentedly, I rested my head upon his shoulder. He mistook it for a sigh of something else.

"Contrary to what you often seem to feel, the weight of the galaxy does not rest on your shoulders you know. That would be the Emperor's job, Tekari." His fingers ran through my hair.

"I know that." I said indignantly but his words made me smile, which had been his intent. I looked into his eyes. It awed me how much I felt for this man, the ache it gauging a

great hole in the pit of my being. *Too much*, a little voice in the back of my mind whispered but I ignored it as I touched his face with the tips of my fingers, taking in the shape of his bones, the surface of his skin which was all shadowy lines in the bedroom's dim light. For a moment we simply looked at each other. Then, drawing my face with both hands, to meet his, he kissed me before I could speak. I wondered, not for the first time, how a kiss could be so tender and yet at the same time so incredibly possessive. I did my best to return it in kind.

"*Peyla'mer a'mal'yn.*" He whispered in my ear. *You belong to me.*

"*Zav'niaask nen kahden.*" I murmured back without hesitation. *Forever and always.*

"Yes." He growled so fiercely and so protectively that I looked up at him for an explanation. He gave none. I was his and that was that. It had never occurred to me before to ask if it worked the other way around. There was something unsettlingly familiar about these words and how they were said but I couldn't place it.

"But you are also mine, aren't you?" I asked, trying to shake the sense of having lived this scene already.

He studied my face carefully and nodded slowly. "Yes, bound by word and ritual." He said very softly.

There was more going on here, underneath the surface of the words he spoke, but I could not decipher them. I felt the same weird electricity now as I had during the middle of the unmasking ceremony on Hjal. Some deeply meaningful thing being observed without me knowing or really understanding it. I looked him in the eyes and asked, "So this means that I am bound to you as well?"

I could not read the expression on his face. "Yes, in a manner of speaking, if that is your wish. Although it is not formally binding."

"What does *that* mean, exactly?"

He caressed my face with the backs of his fingers. "There are some things which must be spoken aloud, witnessed and marked." He said gently.

"This is some weird Dantassi thing you won't explain to me and I will have to badger Navaari to tell me what it all means, isn't it?"

"Something along those lines." He said with a smile. "But for that to happen we must visit Hjal."

"I'm game for that. Navaari's always telling you to bring me and besides," I grinned, "I miss him."

"As he misses you." He replied. He moved slightly so that he could see my eyes. I watched his face but I couldn't read it. "A binding pledge is not given lightly and words spoken in the heat of passion can often be recanted or even regretted." He said.

I just looked at him. "There is no one else, now or ever. I am yours. I don't regret this, so deal with it."

He laughed and kissed my forehead. "Such are my trials." He smiled and I knew that this was all I would get from him on this topic but something in his tone of voice said my answer had greatly pleased him and some little missing puzzle piece had fallen into place between us. Goosebumps rippled down my arms and I shivered.

With the passion receding and the affection between us a quiet thing, I was cold now with no clothes on in spite of the warmth from his body. We moved apart then, one becoming two, and he pulled me down to lie beside him, tugging the covers up over us both. His long fingers traced the contour of my body, shoulder to hip and back. I would have thought that in the aftermath of our coupling we would have been sleepy but that was not the case. Instead we lay thoughtful as though there were unfinished business to deal with.

"You know, the Empire is going to all nine Corellian hells and back." I said, breaking the silence as I nestled into his body.

He moved to accommodate me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Things have not been running as smoothly as they should lately, that is true."

I snorted. "It seems to me this entire galaxy is coming apart at the seams."

"I suppose it must feel like that on occasion but really when one puts it all into some sort of perspective, what is going on is very small compared to the entirety of the galaxy."

"So these defections that have been occurring lately are normal?"

There was a moment's pause and I glanced up at him so I could see his face better. "Perhaps not so many in so short a time, but given the number of people who work for the Empire both from a military stand point as well as civilian, I don't think it is so unheard of. It is however, unacceptable." Thrawn replied. There was anger in his voice. Loyalty was one of the things he prized above all else.

"How did your little private promotion thing go?" I asked, changing the subject, there had been enough anger for one night.

He looked at me. "It was small and fairly unremarkable." He said. "Attended by the Emperor, a few of his most trusted advisors, Lord Vader and a certain young lady he seems to hold in high esteem."

That caught my attention.

"You know her as Lianna, I believe."

"But that's not her real name." I said pointedly.

Now I had his attention. "I'm listening."

"Her name is Mara Jade; she's one of the Emperor's agents."

"Yes, I learned this tonight. She is an Emperor's Hand, although I was under the distinct impression that she thinks she is the only one." He said.

"Why would she think that? The Emperor has many agents."

"Yes, you and I both know that. I suspect it is his way of controlling her, manipulating her." He said.

"So why was *she* there anyway?" I asked failing to keep the sudden pang of jealousy I felt out of my voice.

Thrawn glanced at me, and caressed my face gently, lifting up my chin so that I knew what he had to say next he meant for me to pay close attention to. "Envy is not an emotion that you wear well, Tekari. Put your claws away, you have no reason to feel threatened by her. She works for the Empire, as do you. She was there because the Emperor felt it was necessary I learn her true identity. You should feel sorry for her, not envious of her."

I gave him my '*what do you mean*' look.

He continued. "She was taken from her family at a very young age and raised by Palpatine as his ward, raised by the Empire as it were. She has been bent and shaped to his will her whole life. She has never had what you had, a family who loved her or a proper childhood. She lives only to please Palpatine and do her duty. She has never known anything else. You have nothing to be jealous of and she has every reason to envy you."

I just glanced at him. "Well I guess that would explain why she doesn't like it when the Emperor shows favour on others."

"She has never been allowed the luxury of friends. I am also certain that under Palpatine's hand she has learned far more about distrust and disfavour in her young life than you ever will. Palpatine is a master at manipulation when it comes to bending others, something you have also experienced."

I just nodded. I got the message and changed the subject back to the original topic. "Is it true that the Council of Twelve isn't aware that you are one of them?"

"Yes, this is true." He said.

"Why is that?"

"You would have to ask the Emperor that question." He said with a slight shrug.

"I think I'll pass." I said, "So how long will your promotion be kept a secret?" I asked.

"Until the time is right to make it public and that is up to Palpatine. He has his reasons for all the secrecy."

"He always does." I said a little crossly.

He shifted, leaning up on elbow to stare at my face. "Do not underestimate the Emperor in anything he does, Tekari, and do not assume to know the way of things. Not everything with Palpatine is as it appears to be. He is a man capable of such manipulations and machinations; I have never seen anyone as skilled in this art as he is." He chided gently but underneath the softness of tone was an edge of cold steel.

"So why doesn't he want anyone to know you are a Grand Admiral?" I asked.

He sighed as he lay back down, allowing me to reassert my territorial claim over his shoulder. "The quick answer is because he has stated there would only ever be twelve. I make thirteen. He wishes it to be a secret so it stays that way. The truth is, my dear, I don't know who does know and who doesn't. I only know that the Emperor has his reasons and I did not care to argue with him on them for the time being."

"You think it has something to do with what ever is going on with Zaarin?"

I felt him smile as he stroked a lock of hair from my face. "That possibility had occurred to me. The Emperor has a disturbing knack for seeing the future of things."

"That's a force trick." I told him. "But it isn't always right or even accurate."

"Have you ever seen into the future?"

I sighed. "I have had visions on a few occasions but I don't know what they mean. Without context there is no way to discern meaning."

"Give me an example."

"I had one of you once. At the gallery show where we saw the Bernau pieces, do you remember?"

That caught his interest. "I remember you went as white as a Csillian snow field. You had claimed to have not eaten enough but that was a lie."

I nodded. "It was a flash, really nothing more but so real, as if I had been some how transported into a different time and place. I saw you seated on some sort of command chair on a star destroyer, dressed in white, a Grand Admiral's uniform. You were clutching your chest. There was blood running over your hands. What ever had happened had surprised you. You were not expecting it." I shuddered involuntarily at this memory.

"Well, as you can see I am very much alive." He said thoughtfully.

"I have no idea what it all means, when it will happen or even if it will ever happen. But I can tell you this, it had that feel to it. I know when I get a real vision because there is a quality to it that is just unlike anything else, not a dream or a memory. The only time anything I have seen has come true was when I was on Rothana but I read it wrong. I thought it meant that Lian...I mean Mara Jade would be killed, instead she was just wounded. So you see, without context there is no way to know meaning. And if it is the future, it can change because the future is fluid and relies on the past. It's all terribly confusing."

He was quiet for a log moment then he said, "So the skill is in actually learning how to read these visions then and not just having them?"

I nodded. "I guess so. I don't know much about how it works and I don't talk to Lord Vader about this subject anymore because he got tetchy and violent the last time I tried. I don't dare ask the Emperor because Sarlacc knows what he might do if he knew I had this ability as well."



"Do you not think that the Emperor would have the experience and the skill to more accurately read visions of the future than you would?" He asked.

"I am sure he does, but would you not agree that even the Emperor is not perfect and could make mistakes?"

"Yes."

"And if he is wrong about something important, something that could affect the entire balance of power?"

Thrawn drew a deep breath. "Well," he said slowly, "that will be an interesting moment in time."

"I think it would be terrible and chaotic. If he relies on this power to see ahead but misses some small detail or doesn't account for some tiny element of surprise then everything could collapse." I shivered at this thought. "I mean can you imagine a galaxy without the rule of the Emperor?"

"I imagine it would be messy." He said quietly.

I glanced up at his face. "Not if you were around to step in and take over."

He laughed a little. "Your faith in my abilities as a leader is overwhelming, Sji'u' Tekari."

"People would follow you." I said and I meant it.

"Only if they overcame their fear of my differences first." He replied in a voice that said *no more talk of this*.

I sighed. "Are you sure you don't want to just retire to Hjal, father my children and go hunting with Navaari?"

He smiled with a sigh. "That idea has such sweet appeal but I am duty bound to serve the Empire and my duty comes first. However, there is nothing stopping you from leaving Lord Vader's employ and heading out to Hjal if you wanted." He was teasing.

"Yes there is." I said, poking him in the chest.

He wrapped his hand around mine. "And that would be?"

"You." I said. "It's too damned cold there and who would keep me warm at night?"

"Who indeed?" He murmured in my ear, sleep creeping into his voice.

I just nodded and sighed comfortably. He completed a part of my world I had never even known was lacking. What it was he got from me, I didn't know but I hoped it was enough. We lay drowsy until just before dawn but we also did not speak. There were no more words. When I woke up it was late and he was gone.

The note he had left for me on the Kitchen counter said;

*Mia Tekari,*

*I hope that you slept well. There is stim'caf ready to go in the pot and fresh scones in the warmer. You were so fast asleep I thought it best to let you rest. Lord Vader has been called off world. He did not say how long he would be gone for. You officially have the day off. Given the events of yesterday I do not think you will complain. Shiv left a message asking if you were alright and he will try to get a hold of you later on this afternoon. I am sure that will entail lunch and you explaining a great deal.*

*I am not certain when I will be home but it should not be terribly late. I have dinner taken care of and plan on not letting you out of my sight this evening so for the sake of peace and quiet, will you please try to stay out of trouble between now and then?*

*Za'ar*

I just stared at the note and waited for the stim'caf to brew. I grabbed the latest news flimsy, warmed up the scones he had left for me and sat down to read. I could not

think of a better way to start my day. It was the last truly peaceful day and night I would know for a very long time.

## **Chapter 10**

As I suspected there were no repercussions from Zaarin's attack. I went back to work as though everything was normal and no one was the wiser. Aside from Thrawn, the only other person I told about the incident was Shiv. He was horrified but not surprised and his only comment about it all was; "Remind me never to piss you off, kiddo."

Grand Admiral Zaarin vanished back off to where ever it was he was stationed without a word. I was grateful for that; I didn't really want to face him again although I was sure the feeling was probably mutual. Not only had I hurt him physically but it had been a pretty major blow to his ego. Most men, it had been my experience, didn't like getting their asses kicked by a girl.

Lord Vader came and went as his missions dictated occasionally I accompanied him but more often than not I was left behind which I mostly didn't mind. His focus was on catching his son but the Emperor kept holding him back, sending him on other missions that often had lots to do with Prince Xizor. This did nothing to improve his already bad mood. Occasionally, I got a call to ferry something out to him or meet him somewhere in the galaxy. Sometimes I used a lambda class shuttle, if one was available, and sometimes I used my own ship. While it wrecked havoc on my schedule I didn't mind. It was good for my piloting skills and helped me keep up the mandatory hours I needed to maintain my pilot's papers. The last trip I made out to meet him had also been one of the weirdest.

Lord Vader had been campaigning in the Outer Rim, near Shalyvane. Rebels had discovered the Emperor's desire to capture a strange, mythical creature called a teezl which was supposed to be a non-sentiment, creature that could be used as a natural hyperspace communications amplifier. It had sounded like a bunch of bantha poodoo to me when I had heard about it and Lord Vader was also sceptical but the Emperor had been quite insistent one of these things be found and captured, much to my surprise this had actually been done. During the skirmish between the rebels and the Imperials that had ensued over this galactic oddity many pilots had been injured or killed because the rebels had somehow managed to get a hold of TIE codes and the chaos that caused was incredible. The pilot casualty list had been greater than usual and the atmosphere on board the flag ship had not been good. Lord Vader had been fairly insistent that I stay out of the way, he was busy enough, he had said without me being under foot as well. That was fine with me; he had been driving me crazy anyway.

Shortly after the battle over the teezl, we had ended up in a huge argument that had started over a mixed up delivery but had ended with him pointing out all my flaws as a student to the dark side. He had not been very impressed when I had pointed out that he could either have me as a student or as an assistant but there wasn't enough time in the galaxy for me to be both and it wasn't my fault that he wasn't the best teacher in the galaxy. Needless to say, after this he had ranted at great length about why I was such a terrible student and that he did not know why he ever put up with me. The discussion had escalated into a true yelling match, the air between us fairly crackled ended with him storming out of my office and me being riled up enough to throw the nearest datalogue at him, after he had gone and the door had closed.

I had been so annoyed and angry that sitting down and getting back to work had been impossible so instead I had decided to go and work off some energy but I instead of ending up in the training room, I had wandered into a small secret medical facility. I had been so cross that I had taken a wrong turn, had not noticed where I was and had high enough clearance that the door opened for me.

I had known I was not supposed to be in the med lab the moment I had entered. It had that kind of feel to it, but the medical droids who had been fussing about the bacta tank had merely glanced at me briefly and then gone back to their work, monitoring the patient within.

Inside of the bacta tank had been a young woman. When I'd stopped and stared at her I had realised with a sudden knot in my gut that, despite the terrible injuries, I knew her face from an image I had seen while talking to Jorae. She had been an Imperial agent named Shira Brie. I could feel her strength as she fought for her life. She was a very powerful force user and I wondered if it had been that energy which had drawn me to find her there.

I don't recall how long I had stood there and watched her. I would never be sure if she had been aware of what had happened to her or not, but I had hoped not, I had hoped that Lord Vader had allowed her to be sedated and on pain meds unlike when the Emperor had taken care of him. In a bacta tank one was doped up pretty good and her condition was critical. She had been horribly burned and had lost limbs in the space battle. Part of me had felt sorry for her and part of me had been morbidly fascinated about what would happen to her next. I had been deep in thought when Lord Vader came in to check on her. He had not been pleased to see me there and I had felt the ripple of his anger keenly but I had ignored it and had chosen to let my own curiosity override my need to get out of shouting distance.

"Will she live?" I had asked him before he could chastise me for being in a place I wasn't supposed to be.

He had glared at me then went back to staring at the girl in the bacta tank, his thumbs hooked into his belt, his annoyance at me more or less contained. "Yes." He answered after a lengthy silence.

"She's a force user, isn't she?"

He had seemed to sigh. "Yes she is." He'd said, "Quite powerful, far more so than you are."

I had ignored his barb. "What will happen to her?"

A moment of silence passed then he had answered. "She will be returned to Coruscant and have reconstructive surgery, cybernetic implants and then she will be retrained."

I had shivered. "Retrained?"

My questions and my presence in this secret little medical lab had not been welcome and he grew impatient with my questions. When he'd answered me it was not friendly. "She is everything you are not." He had said snarkily. "Her force potential is great and her will to work hard and learn all that I and my master can teach is great, unlike you, she does not question every single little thing that happens to her and she thirsts for knowledge. Despite her injuries she will become a great student of the dark side of the force. She will be a powerful agent for the Empire." As he spoke I could feel the pride in his voice. He admired her for her strengths, for her ability to survive her catastrophic injuries and the student she might become. "Her ambitions will make her great, unlike like you...." He had not bothered to finish his sentence. I knew he felt I was a bit of a failure when it came to developing my force abilities. Although, his words had stung, as I had stood there looking at the damaged body of the woman he planned on reshaping in his own image, I had

realised that what she was, I never, ever wanted to be and if that meant disappointing Lord Vader then that had been okay with me.

I had been grateful when we had returned to the Core and I could resume my normal routines and work. Shira Brie had been transferred to the special medical facility for rehabilitation and cybernetic augmentations. I had no idea what had become of her afterwards but assumed she had recovered and was undergoing training. She would be, I had guessed, just one of the many secret agents Lord Vader and the Emperor had at their disposal and while Thrawn had often urged me to broaden my horizons and become more than just an office girl, I was glad I hadn't listened to him. I was rather attached to my limbs and it had seemed to me that seriously becoming a dark side adept had meant giving some of them up.

I liked the job I had, I was good at it and it was the one area where Lord Vader did not have too many complaints about. It was also, relatively speaking, safe. I didn't want to be an *Emperor's Hand*. It had never been my goal to run around the galaxy doing the Emperor's dirty work and I was extremely glad that neither he nor Lord Vader seemed intent on pushing this point at the moment. While I had some talents with the force, my best skill was also the most unpleasant and I wasn't terribly keen on using it. I was grateful that with the rising insurgence from the rebels, the construction of the second Death Star, and the additions of two new classes of Star Destroyers also in the works, the two men had more than enough to worry about without concerning themselves about the training of a single, insignificant girl from the Outer Rim who was not particularly compliant. As long as I did my job and stayed out of everyone's way, I was mostly left to my own devices, which was fine with me.

I was in the middle of confirming the latest order for more duelling droids when Lord Vader, who had recently returned to the Core, stormed into the office I occupied in his Coruscant home. He was furious. He had been ordered to go to the Kothlis Sector by the Emperor to retrieve Luke who had been captured by pirates. I thought he would be happy to finally have permission to go after his son instead of being sent on missions he considered beneath him, but that was not exactly the case.

"What is he thinking?" He snarled while pacing back and forth in front of my desk so savagely that his cloak, flaring out behind him, disturbed the air enough that I had to rescue several flimsies from flying off my desk.

I watched him stalk back and forth with my eyes. I didn't dare speak for fear of upsetting him further, when he was in this sort of mood, someone usually got hurt, someone usually me. He stopped for a second to glance at me. I just raised my eyebrows. I had no idea what he was talking about. He went back to pacing.

"Was it not bad enough that the first Battle Station was destroyed due to the plans falling into rebel hands that he has to actually hand them the plans to the second one as well?" He yelled. "It is the stupidest thing I have heard of yet! I cannot believe that my master would actually listen to the advice of that Falleen thug!"

I opened my mouth to say something but realised there was nothing to say. If what Lord Vader was telling me was true, then I had to agree with him. It sounded like a pretty stupid plan to me.

"Now I have to go out to Kothlis and pretend to care about getting the plans back! To make it all look real! It is a ridiculous waste of my time!" He ranted.

"Will I be accompanying you on this mission, my lord?" I asked.

He stopped mid stride and looked at me as though he were seeing me for the first time and had only just realised I was there. "No. I want you here to keep an eye on things; to let me know should that so called Prince tries anything else."

"I am quite sure your personal informants will do a much better job of that than I can." I replied carefully. I wasn't a spy and I didn't like being used as one, the last time I had tried to play that game the results had been mixed and I had ended up fighting with Thrawn over it.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Yes, they but you have a knack for getting information they cannot. I want you on Coruscant, is that clear?"

I nodded. "Crystal." I said.

While I was not happy about the reasons, I was happy to comply with his order. The thought of being cooped up on the *Executor* with him while he hunted down his son and put on a show for the rebels, was not my idea of fun. It didn't help that the rumours that Zaarin had become difficult to get in touch with, reclusive and secretive the TIE defender project was now the subject of hushed whispers and concern. Something was going on but no one knew what. This all made Lord Vader very unhappy. He was hard enough to live with at the best of times and these were not the best of times.

He stormed out of my office and went to destroy some droids, venting a little of his anger before he headed back into space. I was grateful when I finished up my work for the day and could go home where I planned on soaking in a tub full of hot bubbly water with a glass of very good wine. All the scheming and plotting which was currently going on was making my head spin.

For the next few days my life was fairly routine and when I wasn't in the office or at home I was training. I felt at peace, sort of, when I trained, when my body was physically working hard and Master Kjestyll knew this so he acted and taught accordingly. I was in the training room after a particularly hard session when Thrawn found me.

"When did you get back?" I asked, turning around to see him come in the training room. I could not contain my pleasure at seeing Thrawn's face, when his eyes met mine he, too, smiled. He had been off world long enough that I had missed him.

"About three hours ago."

"How long are you staying?"

He ran his fingers through his hair; he hadn't had it cut in a while and I thought it looked good. "I am not sure, a few days perhaps. It depends on the Emperor and how the meetings and planning sessions I must attend develop."

I grinned. "Well, I won't complain." I said. I was sitting on the wooden floor bathed in the sunlight which shone through the windows. "How did you know I was in here?"

"I passed Taisto Kjestyll on my way to your office. He said, "And I quote, *she is exercising some demons, you might want to tread lightly*. But it seems to me that you are just doing your bearded-jax imitation and finding the sunniest spot in the room to bask in."

I grinned as I lay back on the floor and stretched out as fully as I could. It felt so good that I never wanted to stop. "When Master Kjestyll says I was exercising demons what he really means is that he spent two hours straight kicking my ass. I get the feeling that the turn Merlyn into a deadly fighting machine isn't going as well as everyone planned. I'm just not that good." I said when I sat up.

Thrawn squatted down beside me, his elbows resting on his knees. "The people you get compared to have been in hard training most of their lives. You have only been at this a few years and even then only part time. Besides, when you need to, you can be quite ... formidable."

"Why are you here anyway?" I asked, looking up at him with a grin. "I would have thought you'd have gone home. I'd be there soon enough." I reached for my feet and stretched out over my legs.

"My presence has been requested at an exclusive art exhibition tonight by the Emperor. He *suggested* I bring you. I thought you might like some lead time to get ready;

it is a dress up affair. I was not sure if you had other plans or if you'd be working late so I had no idea when you would be home and your comm is off."

"Oh, didn't the Emperor go off world to oversee the construction of that new toy of his like the rumours are saying?" The Emperor had become somewhat reclusive and no one had actually seen him for a while. The whispers were that he was unwell and maybe even dying but I knew better. I knew that he had planned to go to the new battle Station and sort out the lagging mess the construction had become but no one knew when he was leaving or if he had already left.

"Apparently not yet." He said with a slight shrug, "Has Lord Vader returned to the Core? I must discuss some issues with him."

"He was here briefly after his trip out to the Kothlis system but then he left again almost right afterwards. The Emperor gave him permission to go search for Skywalker. I don't know when he'll be back."

"I see." He said. "So, I suppose this means that things have been relatively peaceful while I have been gone?"

"Are you asking for gossip?"

He arched an eyebrow and smiled. "Not intentionally."

"Well, let's see... Grand Admiral Zaarin has pretty much vanished from Imperial court life. The rumour now is that he has closed out all communications and no one knows what is going on with the SRD. Lord Vader wanted to send out agents to investigate this but the Emperor told him not to; needless to say he wasn't thrilled with this. He thinks that Zaarin is up to something big but doesn't know what. And no, I didn't say anything, before you ask. I figured it was none of my business and I want to stay out of it. I am a bit scared that if Vader thinks I know something he'll send me out to spy on Zaarin under the guise of delivering a message or something." I said with a sigh. "Of course, Lord Vader is his usual unhappy self. He came back from the trip out to Kothlis furious! Luke had escaped, and no one could find him and he had no one to really blame as somehow there were pirates or mercenaries or some such bad guys involved. He wasn't too specific. He also thinks that Xizor is behind it all, as usual. I don't want to be in Xizor's shoes if that's really the case, because if it is, Lord Vader won't give a Jawa's damn about upsetting the Emperor by eliminating Xizor. I suppose this war between them would be funny by now if it weren't so damned annoying. I am just getting tired of hearing Lord Vader bitch about Xizor all the time, you'd think the second most powerful man in the galaxy would just deal with it and not simply keep complaining about it. Xizor, on the other hand seems to relish all the backstabbing snarkiness. You should hear how polite he can be now, it's like being polite has become the new way of being rude. Oh and on top of it all he is rumoured to have a new love interest but no one knows who it..."

He put up a hand to stop me, unable to hide his amusement. "I get the picture, so about the exhibition tonight?"

"Whose work is being showcased?" I asked.

"Tarka-Null."

That got my attention. "The sculptor?"

He nodded. "Are you interested?"

I was but I made a face. "Does it matter? Usually if the Emperor suggests something it's more of a polite order than a suggestion." I sat back with my palms flat on the floor. "I just think he likes making us come to these things as a couple to paint big shiny targets on our backs for the *Daily Digest*. I feel like we are his entertainment sometimes."

Thrawn gave me a slight smile that never quite met his eyes and then he stood up. "As you say, does it matter?" his voice held that crispness of distaste in it that I knew meant he didn't want to discuss the Emperor's whims or wishes. "It will be an evening out and a chance to see some of the best sculptures in the galaxy."

He was right, what did the reasons behind it matter? "Will *The Waiting Dancer* be among the collection?" I asked offering my hand so he could help me up.

"I don't know." He told me, pulling me to my feet. "I have not seen the collection's datalogue, but it is one of his most well known yes mysterious pieces so chances are good it will be there. Is it a piece you like?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

I grinned knowing he would find my answer funny. "Because it always reminds me of me when I was six or so and desperately wanted to be a fluttery little dancer." I made dancer like motions with my hands.

His eyebrow arched. "Indeed?"

"You don't like it?" I asked as I stripped off my sweat soaked things and changed into dry clothes. I'd shower when I got home.

"I find it lacks some of the more delicate quality of his later works." He turned his back to me while I changed and looked out of the window. "But I have never seen the original, only holos of it."

"You know it isn't really considered a sculpture. It was actually a Maquette for a commissioned piece." I said, picking up my things and putting them in my bag.

"Really? No, I actually did not know that." He said as we walked out of the training room. "That would explain the lesser detailing then."

"My mother told me about it. He was supposed to complete a life sized version for the Alderaan Dance Academy, but it never happened and only the study exists."

"I have never read this information in any of the literature about him. How do you know this?"

I grinned as we left the palace, "Because my mother was the girl who posed for the piece, she told me all about it."

He chuckled. "Your family is just full of surprises."

"What time are we expected this evening?" I asked, waiting while he unlocked his speeder.

"At twenty-two hundred hours." He said. I just grimaced as we pulled out into Coruscanti traffic.

"Great, I have an hour to get something to eat, shower and make myself look like one of Coruscant's elite and beautiful. You realise you're asking for miracles, don't you."

He chuckled. "I have the food part taken care of, your ability to shower in under ten minutes has astounded me before and as for turning into Miss Coruscant, well you can work wonders under pressure, I know I've seen you do it."

I just shook my head. There was no competing with his logic and, of course he was more or less right. By the time I had showered, he had a light, quick meal ready to eat, after which I vanished into the bedroom to turn from Rim-Girl to beauty queen, no easy task.

It was not unusual for the Emperor to arrange private collections shows, usually as fundraisers. The wealthy and elite of Coruscant were more than happy to shower money on these endeavours if it got them the chance to rub shoulders with other rich and famous as well as be seen in the company of the Emperor. It was an old game, buying favour and power with wealth.

These venues were always interesting and often unusual. This one was no exception, being held in an old power plant that had been converted into expensive offices and studios in the area known as The Works. I was glad that Thrawn knew where he was going because I found The Works a total maze to navigate.

The gallery space was large and airy, typical for a remodelled production plant. The new design had cleverly incorporated the aspects that made these sorts of building special while modernizing it so that the space was comfortable to be in. The reception itself was

much larger than I had thought it would be and despite the room's vast size it was very crowded.

We walked through the crowd and mingled politely. It was easy to keep quiet as no one really spoke directly to me. Part of being palace fluff was being seen but not heard. I smiled a lot and sipped at the odd orange drink that I had been handed by the waiter. It tasted like a mixture of melon fruit, kiki berries and saqui liquor. It was potent and prickled on my tongue. I thought it was cute how they had decorated the glass with tabjio flowers.

I walked around the room beside Thrawn as he made polite small talk with various dignitaries and their wives or female companion and looked at the sculptures that were displayed around the room. Most of the works were from Tarka-Null's later years and the one piece I had hoped to see was not amongst the collection.

I was lost in thought when Thrawn nudged my arm and I looked up to see the Emperor approaching. I suppressed the urge to shiver and smiled as I curtsied. The Emperor acknowledged Thrawn with a slight wave of his hand and turned to address me.

"You look lovely this evening my dear." He said as he gestured for me to get up.

"Thank-you, your Highness."

"And how do you like this exhibition." He asked me.

"It's a stunning collection of his works." I said honestly. "I had no idea how beautiful some of these pieces were until I was able to see them with my own eyes."

"But you sound a little disappointed." He remarked.

I smiled to cover up my surprise. "Not at all, your Highness. I feel very lucky to have been able to view these pieces. Tarka-Null was one of the galaxy's greatest artists."

He chuckled. "Yes he was." He had begun to walk and had gestured for me to walk with him. Thrawn, who had not been included in this conversation, remained where he was and continued to banter with the couple he had been speaking with. "You are familiar with his works then?"

"Yes, my mother was very fond of him and she passed that love of his art on to me. We have many books on his works at home on Tatooine."

"Indeed." He said. "But I still sense you hoped for something more?" The Emperor asked as we stopped to look at one of the larger more abstract pieces.

"Your Excellency does not miss much." I said quietly. I could feel him digging, a subtle brush of his mind against mine. It felt like meat grubs boring into my brain.

The Emperor smiled slowly, "You, my dear child, are an open book to me." He said. "So tell me, what piece is missing that you wished to see?"

"*The Waiting Dancer*." I said. "Though technically it isn't actually considered a sculpture the way the others are. I had heard it was not on Alderaan when the planet was destroyed. So I thought it might be showcased here. "

He nodded and seemed to sigh. "Ah yes, that is an exquisite little piece." He said, "And no I don't believe it was destroyed in that unfortunate accident. Why are you so interested in it? It is, as you say, not considered a sculpture but rather simply a study for one that was never completed. "

"It reminds of me when I was small. I had wanted to be a dancer. I suppose it also reminds me of my mother." I told him. It was the truth it just wasn't the whole truth.

"Well, in that case we shall have to arrange for you to view the piece you so obviously adore." He said kindly.

I glanced at him, surprised. "That would be lovely."

His expression turned to amusement. "If it would make you smile like that for me, then I shall most definitely arrange it." He spoke in that avuncular tone which made my skin crawl. "Are you feeling better?" He asked.



"Your Highness?" he had caught me off guard with his question. My surprise was not feigned.

"I heard that you left the reception for the new assembly wing early. Siavaan mentioned you were taken ill. I remember you said you had had an accident, I hope it was nothing serious."

I glanced at him. "I tripped, banged my head and ended up with a headache." I lied and I suspected he knew that.

"Perhaps you were coming down with the same thing that afflicted Grand Admiral Zaarin, he was also not feeling so well when he attended the reception."

"Oh, really? I am sorry to hear that." I said carefully. "I hope that he recovers." Actually I was sort of hoping he'd rot in the nine Corellian Hells but that was another matter.

"Yes, I'm sure you do, my dear." The Emperor chuckled. "I would not trouble myself over his health if I were you; Grand Admiral Zaarin has a strong constitution. I am sure it would take more than a little run in with some minor health issues to bring him down." He glanced at me and smiled. "You have had quite the effect on my Imperial officers; he also seems quite taken with you."

I feigned shyness and looked away. "I was under the impression that the Grand Admiral wasn't really interested in anything other than his career."

Palpatine's soft laugh gave me goose bumps. "Yes, his ambitions do seem to want to get the better of him some days. Still he is a valuable part of the Empire, as are all employees under my care. I would be most displeased should any serious harm come to those I need and have use. Zaarin plays his part in the Empire, as do you, my dear." He stopped walking for a moment and paused to look at me. His words were pleasant and the tone of his conversation light but the reproach and warning behind it all did not escape me. I got the message. I wasn't sure quite how to react so I just gave him a smile and I made it reach my eyes.

"I can't imagine anyone wanting to displease you, your Highness." I said after a moment's silence.

"Of course not, child," He said patting my arm. "Now, why don't you run along and rejoin Admiral Thrawn. I know how much he enjoys your delightful companionship and how precious your time with him is. I should attend to my guests but we will speak again soon enough."

"As you wish, your Highness." I dropped a polite curtsy and stepped back to let him pass. Then meandered back to where Thrawn stood.

The wife of the man he was speaking to turned to me and smiled. I exchanged my empty drink glass with a full one from a passing waiter and took a healthy gulp. Thrawn watched me for a moment carefully and I knew he had noticed my trembling hands. The woman standing next to her husband began to chatter to me about how wonderful the collection was, how pretty my dress was and how wonderful it was to see the Emperor in such fine form. While I was grateful for the distraction, I wondered if she ever stopped talking long enough to breathe. For the most part I just stood quietly and nodded politely. Out of the corner of my eye I caught Thrawn's slight, sly smile as he covertly watched me hide my bored annoyance. The rest of the evening was completely uneventful and I was grateful when we were able to leave.

We drove back to the flat in silence and I was more than happy to get out of the dress up finery when we were finally home. It felt like shedding a mask or a costume. When I joined Thrawn in the living room he was sitting in a chair, having changed from his uniform to sleepwear he looked less austere and tense. He had poured me a brandy. I took it from his hand and sat across from him.

He had made it clear on the way back to the flat he wanted to know what had happened after Bespin, wanted to know what the Emperor had done to me to make me even more scared of him than I previously had been. I had told him I did not want to talk about it but Thrawn was insistent and he wasn't going to take no for an answer. He, perhaps better than anyone else, knew how well I bottled things up inside and what that did to me. For reasons I didn't understand he had made it his mission to draw out the poisons which damaged my soul. I never knew whether or not to be grateful or resentful, even though after talking about these things that worried at me, helped.

In truth, it was almost a relief to be able to speak of the unspeakable. To unfold the story that had been told to me by the lightsaber Luke had held. My hands shook and sometimes I had to fight to find the right words to try and describe what I had seen. Thrawn was well aware of what my talent for reading the memories of objects did to me and was patient. Once before, I had actually shared my gift with him, physically showing him the same images I had seen and it had shaken him to the core. Thrawn listened quietly without interruption until I was done. For what seemed like forever he remained silent and thoughtful. I could not tell if he was angry, upset about or just contemplating what I had told him. I swirled the brandy around in the glass, waiting for him to break the silence because I had nothing else to say.

"Did Vader tell him about this nasty little talent of yours?" He finally asked watching me closely, cupping his brandy glass in his hand.

I glanced at him. "No, in fact he suggested it was you who did that."

He let out a slow, deep breath and sat back in the chair. His expression was unreadable but his eyes, which had never left my face, turned cold and hard. "What do you believe?" he asked.

"I believe that the Emperor found out somehow, but really how he did doesn't really matter. I was the one who confirmed it for him. I don't believe that the information came from you or Lord Vader. The Emperor has eyes and ears everywhere; it was bound to happen sooner or later. It's possible he's known for a really long time but never had anything he wished to test me on before." I sipped my brandy slowly. "In the end it doesn't matter. He knows what I can do and when he needs to he'll use it."

He nodded slowly. "He did not learn this information from me, Tekari." There was a sadness in his voice which I didn't like hearing.

I had not thought this the case but I was glad to hear him confirm it. Still, something else nagged at me. "Did you mention to anyone about what happened between Zaarin and me?"

"No. Why?"

"I get the feeling that the he knew what had happened, just something about how he talked about the Admiral. You know how the Emperor can be sometimes, always some subtle message underneath the spoken words."

"That would not surprise me." He said. "Zaarin has caught the eye of the Emperor as of late with some of his more unorthodox methods of work. It is no secret that he had an interest in you just as your distaste for him was fairly obvious. The Emperor is not a stupid man; he could have put two and two together given how you were both behaving at the reception." He said. "I am certain that he is watching his entire High Command staff very carefully. There are a lot of undercurrents going on within the Imperial ranks at the moment. Admiral Harkov's defection was more damaging than first suspected."

"Why do you think he did it?"

"Harkov?"

I nodded.

"Who can really say? He stopped believing in the system? Perhaps it was the arrest and execution of his nephew that was the final trigger but I suspect he had been planning

betraying the Empire for some time." He said. "What would make a man turn against everything he has known? You would have to ask him this question, not me."

"Has it always been like this?"

"Like what?" He asked.

"Complicated and mixed up with all this suspicion and lies, all the back stabbing and double dealing." We had had this conversation before but somehow I could not wrap my head around it all.

"For as long as I have been a part of this Empire there have been these games." He replied. "But this is normal. I know of no society that does not have some aspect of this dance. Surely you must have seen something similar when you worked at Jabba's Palace?"

"I was aware of it but most of the time it didn't affect me, at least not until it landed me a job working for lord Vader. I just tried to avoid it all as much as possible." I said. "Why does this happen? Why aren't people just happy with what they have?"

He smiled slightly and looked at the brandy left in his glass, swirling it around in lazy circles. "I have no answer for that question. The lust for power does odd things to sentient beings. Fear, greed, ambition all set that drive for more. The easy answer is that it is our base nature for survival. He who has more, is stronger, has the biggest army, the most food survives longer."

"It reminds me of scyks fighting over a carcass." I said.

"An apt description." He agreed.

"What about you?" I asked. "You also play these games."

He regarded me for a moment. "I do." He said slowly, "Because they are a means to an end. I am here doing the work that I do because my own people would not allow me the freedom to accomplish certain things at home. Power and a high rank, having the commands I do as well as the favour of the Emperor allow me to better prepare for any eventualities which may come."

"You've mentioned this before but you don't elaborate. You hint at threats but you never say what they are."

He nodded. "This galaxy is full of dangers most beings, especially humans never even dream of. They feel safe, protected by the Empire, tucked away behind the security of a well armed navy. And while a little more thought should be given to these dangers which lurk out there it is more likely an invasion will come from outside our own galaxy." He said, "Living beyond the borders of unknown space, beyond the boundary that defines this galaxy, is an enemy so ferocious that fighting it will take all of our collective minds and strengths to even contemplate defeating them." He paused. "My people have had contact with these beings and judging by the ferocity with which the small reconnaissance force fought the Chiss, to come up against an invasion of these beings would be an unthinkable disaster were the worlds of this galaxy not allied and working together as one. Under the Empire the armed forces are strong and organised."

"Does the Emperor know about this potential enemy?"

"He is aware of the threat." He conceded after a moment's silence. There was something in his voice I didn't much like.

"This enemy, these beings, they worry you a little don't they?"

"That would be an understatement, my dear. These *far outsiders*, as they have been called, are of great concern to me. I am aware of what one small recon force was able to do to a highly trained military response team. The Chiss military is one of the best there is and they were hard put to deal with this enemy. Believe me when I say I do not wish to see any more of these beings cross into this galaxy but I fear that will be inevitable."

Knowing that he felt this way did nothing to comfort me at all. I always thought of him as fearless. I sighed and sipped at my brandy. In light of the conversation we had just had, my own problems did not seem so important any more.

He read that in my face and gestured for me to come to him. "These are worries we can leave for another day and preparations are being made to deal with the possibility of an invasion." He said as he set his glass down on the table.

"You sound pretty sure of yourself." I said taking the hand he offered, not resisting when he pulled me onto his lap.

"I, along with others, am doing all I can to ensure the safety of the galaxy is in hand." He said gently. "A little trust, my dear."

It was a phrase I was used to hearing from him and it always managed to make me smile and shake my head at the same time. It was also his way of gently telling me that he didn't wish to speak about politics or our jobs any more. I could not blame him, he dealt with these subjects day in day out, coming home was a respite he welcomed. Sometimes, he had told me, what he needed the most was quiet and calm away from the daily machinations of the Emperor and his empire. That he found solace in my presence had touched me deeply. I didn't push when he changed or shut down the topic of work.

I thought about what he had said, *a little trust...* but trusting him was not the issue, I did trust him more than I ever wanted to say, it was almost everyone else who worked around the Emperor that I worried about. It was a lot to think about and my mind buzzed as I rested my head against his shoulder. He didn't say anything else, he didn't have to. His hands were warm upon the skin of my back and I shivered when he nuzzled my neck, kissing that sensitive place below my ear which always made my skin prickle and me gasp. It was an effective way to direct my thoughts in another direction. Sometimes, I thought ruefully, he knew me just a little too well.

Later, as we lay curled about each other in bed; it seemed to me that even in the quiet of the night there was no peace. My fingers traced up and down his bare chest idly because I was restless but in difference to his usual methods to try and lull me into sleep this time he absently stroked my hair and we lay together in silence. His earlier words had troubled me; his own worry infected my thoughts. In light of what we had spoken of, the Emperor's seemingly endless plots and plans did not seem quite so evil minded. This didn't mean I liked him any better or feared him any less but it did paint a different image of what he was attempting to do, if what Thrawn had said was true. I suppose the conversation and these concerns also weighed on Thrawn's mind as well, because he, too, was wide awake, troubled and lost in thought.

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Lord Vader arrived back on Coruscant with the minimum of fanfare but that did not mean I could slack off. If anything he had me working harder than ever. I didn't mind though because with all the crazy that was happening his manners or lack of them were a familiar constant in my life. I almost welcomed it.

"I need an investigator!" Darth Vader snapped as he all but flew into my office.

I glanced up at him from my desk. "Imperial or private?"

"Private, the best there is. Do a complete records check!" He replied. He stalked to the window and stared out over the city. He stood statue still with his hands clasped behind his back. The sound of his breathing filled my office, which was a huge room, making it seem tiny and claustrophobic.

"Yes, my lord." I said and began to access the Coruscant Business Listings Database. "Did the Emperor's shuttle leave on time?"

"It did, he should return in three weeks." He replied.

I scanned the listings and highlighted several names then began to cross check names through the Imperial database. "Will the new battle station be ready on time?" I asked as I fitted the small earpiece and microphone to my head.

"No, most likely not. The project is ambitious and the crews working on it are not living up to their full potential."

I nodded to let him know I was listening to him and opened a line to the Intel office. "Hi, Kaytal, it's Merlyn from Lord Vader's office. Yes, I am sending over a list for complete background checks. I need the information as soon as possible." I said to the young man on the other end. "Yep, the works. Hey, listen this will be the first of several lists, you okay with this?" Lord Vader turned around and looked at me, I ignored him, "Yes, it's very important and yes he'll have my head if it doesn't get done in the next hour." There was a moment's pause then I heard what I wanted, "Excellent, you are amazing and I owe you one. Thanks." I took off the headset and went back to scanning the listings.

"Impressive. You make people actually want to work for me." He remarked.

"Well, actually they do it for me and I don't *make* them do anything." I told him as I sent Kaytal a second list.

"You work for me so they also are working for me." He said firmly.

"Yes, my lord." I grinned. I wasn't about to shatter his illusions. He was in a good mood; I guessed that being left in charge of Coruscant made him happy. "So when I find the appropriate candidate what do I tell him?"

"I will meet with him in my castle." He said. "That is all you need to know."

I nodded. My computer flashed as Intel began to send information back. It always amazed me how fast Intel was with their background checks and how many people they had red flagged.

"I heard a rumour about you and Grand Admiral Zaarin." Vader said. He had gone back to staring out of the window again.

"And which rumour would that be, because the last time I heard any gossip there were about five different stories circulating."

"The one about you damaging him."

"Ah, well he thought he could bed me and I showed him how difficult that would be with a painful a groin injury, among other things."

To my surprise Vader just laughed. "Serves him right."

I didn't say anything and just kept on working but I couldn't help the smile that snuck across my lips. "I suppose the Emperor told you this?" I asked.

"No but he did hint that something had occurred and that I should be more careful about who I allow *you* to *play* with." He replied. "It appears you are of some value to him despite your deficiencies in the force."

"Well, if the Emperor's boys played fair I wouldn't have to damage them, they need to learn to take no for an answer. Good to know I am still of some use, I guess. It's nice to be needed." I shot back before thinking.

"Speaking of need, I expect to see you for lightsaber practice tonight." He said. "I have new combat remotes I wish to see in action and you *need* the practice."

"Where?" I asked not looking at him, but concentrating on the work at hand.

"My castle training room is better suited for the havoc you usually wreck when you attempt to beat the remotes." He said. "Maintenance complained about the mess you left last time in the main palace training hall, I had to pay for the damages."

I had to stifle a giggle. I remembered that. The sprung wooden floor had not taken too kindly to my lightsaber skills or lack thereof and I had managed to put a pretty decent scorch mark on a wall when I had attempted to practice the saber throw technique. The pesky remotes got smarter every time. More files flashed on my screen, I discarded all of them except the ones with the double green flag. There were not many so it narrowed the field down considerably. "Male or female?" I asked.

"Male."

"Human or non human?" already knowing the answer. In general Lord Vader did not really have anything against aliens but he did not like working closely with them, and this dislike had only increased since the competition between he and Prince Xizor had gotten out of hand.

"Human."

That narrowed my choices down to three. I read him the names and the specs and he chose the one I figured he would.

"Contact him and arrange a meeting as soon as possible." He said. He did not move so I knew he wanted results here and now. It was not often that he waited in my office to get information or results but it did happen sometimes. It didn't bother me the way it had the first few times he had done this, it just meant he was either hiding from the world in general and liked the peace and quiet in my office or he just wanted company. Whatever his reasons I took them as a compliment.

I slipped on the tiny earpiece again and got in touch with the investigator of Vader's choice. The man was cold, professional and very polite. It took less than five minutes to set up the meeting.

"He will be at your home in an hour." I said, sending all the details to a small datachip. He used the force to lift it from my fingers.

"You have done well." He said. "Perhaps we will forego saber practice this evening, so if you have other plans you may...."

"I have no other plans, my lord and I could use the practice." I cut him off, surprising him. I really wanted to learn how to control the method of throwing a lit lightsaber and retrieving it. So far all my attempts at this technique had failed miserably. It was a lot harder to do than it looked. I still preferred to fight with a combat stave but Lord Vader had insisted that I continue learning to use my lightsaber. I was convinced he took a perverse sense of joy in watching me struggle with something he constantly told me small children had learned easily. I really didn't have plans, my lesson with Master Kjestyll had been cancelled and Thrawn had gone off planet early in the morning. I had no idea when he was due to return, neither did he.

"As you wish." He said with a slight shrug, "Be there promptly at eighteen hundred hours then, do not be late." He replied and then he swept out of the room.

I would never know what it was that Lord Vader had asked the investigator to uncover but he was pleased with the man's work. When I arrived, ready to train he had told me as much in his usual terse manner. Without much ado we sparred, dancing around the large airy room with the scent of burnt dust and the never ending thrum of the lightsabers heavy in the air. I both loved and hated this weapon but there was a subtle elegance to it that no other weapon I had ever seen had.

He was trying to teach me a complicated move that involved letting the lightsaber almost fly out of my hand as I spun it around. I was not getting the hang on it and it was frustrating me.

"You grip too hard, I have told you before. You need to trust the Force to guide you." He said for the umpteenth time.

I made a face. This was easier said than done but I tried again, and again failing to execute the move to his desired perfection.

"Enough!" He finally snapped. "You can watch and learn now. Tomorrow I will teach you how to submerge yourself in the force, and some measure of control, as my Master has ordered me to."

I was grateful for this, the three straight hours of rigorous training had taken their toll. I sat on the floor, and watched as he tried to show me what he could not teach me. I followed his movements and eventually saw where my mistake was, that didn't mean I would be able to correct it but now I understood what he had meant. After this he ignored

me and went about practicing on his own against the latest combat droids until he had forgotten I was there. Watching him wield his lightsaber never ceased to astonish me but in the dim light of the practice chamber my thoughts drifted to his comments about the Force.

Sitting on the floor of the training room in Lord Vader's home watching him practice was something I usually enjoyed but this evening I was tired. He had worked me hard and I ached all over. I leaned with my back against the wall and closed my eyes. In my mind I could see the lightsaber's motion to match its sound and the slight sizzle as it sliced through the metal of the droids. I knew how he moved, I had watched him practice more times than I could count, and even with my eyes closed I knew his grace and dance. He forgot I was there. I knew that because it happened almost all of the time, some part of his mind shut off as he worked himself against the droids he helped design and everything else around him melted away. I let my thoughts drift back to the night I had bumped into the Emperor at the Jedi Temple. I wondered, as I sat in the dimly lit training room, what it was the Emperor truly wanted from the galaxy he ruled.

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I had been spending a great deal of time with my birth mother's diary listening to her speak about all she had learned but there was some subtle mystery to the force that eluded me. It was as if I had learnt to sing a song in a foreign tongue well enough to pass for native speaker but had no idea what the words meant, thereby losing the meaning of the song. So it was with the force. I understood that I had a power and I even knew how to use some of it most of the time, but I was missing something, some basic element of training that perhaps would have made me a better student than I was.

She spoke of many force gifts, some, like the healing trance and force hibernation I had never heard of from Lord Vader. I wanted to ask him but never found the right time. Instead I had decided to take investigative matters into my own hands and after searching the little library that the Emperor had afforded me and found nothing, I had gone then, frustrated and curious, to the Jedi Temple. I had not been prepared for what I had found.

A couple of days before the Emperor was due to leave, Lord Vader had been in a tizzy trying to get his meeting schedule sorted out. This meant it had been a very late, very frustrating, night for me. Thrawn was away on a short fact finding mission of some sorts and was not due back until the next day. When my work day had ended I was too tired to even bother going back home and had decided to crash at the palace flat instead but this bed was now strange to me and without Thrawn's presence at my side or his scent lingering in the air I had found myself restless and edgy.

Sleep would not come so I got up and had made my way to the little library. It had been some time since I had been there. I had intended to read something but instead I had found myself inexplicably drawn to the secret passage way and before I had even realised what I was doing I had opened and it was already well on my way down the never ending stairs before I had woken up enough to be aware of what I was doing.

The Temple had been quiet, not that I had expected anything else but it had seemed to me that even the ghosts were hiding as if something had frightened them into submission and not the other way around. I had made my way through the labyrinth of corridors to the great library only to be stopped dead in my tracks once I was there.

It had been gutted. Utterly and completely. All the books, the holo books, the access terminals, everything was gone. All that had remained was dust and empty shelves. It had taken me a few moments to understand what I had seen and only when the realisation had

finally taken root in my brain did my heart thump wildly in my chest. Dry mouthed and scared I had made my way to the small records room, activated the lock with my weird power and opened the door. The room was dark and I had not needed light to tell what I had already known. This room had also been completely emptied of all its contents.

From somewhere deep inside of me a memory surfaced. I had dreamt this very scene and it scared me to the bone. There were no more answers to be found here and the urgent need to get out had never been stronger. I had left the little room quietly, quickly, watching my feet not where I was going and had bumped into someone before I had known they were standing there, waiting for me. To my good grace, I had managed not to scream and found the wits to drop to a curtsy as soon as I had figured out who it was.

"Get up child, there is no need of court formalities here." The Emperor's soft voice echoed about the empty library.

"Your Highness." I had whispered, my voice sounded small and scared to my ears. I had done as he had asked and stood up.

"You come here often, do you not." It was not really a question but I had answered him any way.

"Sometimes, yes though not often."

"What is it you seek here?" He had asked beginning to walk in the direction opposite to the main entrance.

"Answers." I had blurted out before I could think about what I really wanted to say.

"Answers," He had smiled, "But what are your questions? This I think you do not know."

It was true. I had come looking for answers but I really didn't know what I was asking any more. I knew who I was, I knew who my birth parents were and I knew the history of this place, the terrible tragedy that had unfolded here. What more could there be to learn from this place? Why had I come back? I had not known.

"All the books and records," I had said instead of answering him, "Everything is gone."

I had felt his smile rather than seen it. "Yes, I had everything moved to a more secure place. You know this building is condemned. It is not safe here and I would hate to think of such valuable information falling into the wrong hands." I had been about to speak but he had continued, "Not that I fear you would do anything wrong, my child, but there are many who would. Not everyone is as loyal to me or my empire as you."

He had answered my question before I even had a chance to ask it.

"So tell me, what has brought you here to this place in the middle of the night?" he asked.

"I keep hoping to find out more about who I am, I guess." It had been an easy lie because it was mostly the truth.

"Ah yes, daughter of a Jedi and a clone. What do you wish to know?"

I had shivered then, he had known as I had suspected, where I had come from. "Well, I would like to learn how to use the force better than I do. I have heard tales about the Jedi being able to do amazing things, like fall into trances that could heal them of wounds and illnesses, to see into the future and even come back from the dead"

"And you would learn these *tricks*?" He had asked softly.

There was a catch in his voice and I had not liked how it had made me feel, the cold goose bumps that prickled up and down my spine made my answer cautious. "I would learn control." I had replied and the tension in the room had eased, letting me know it had been the right answer to give. "I know I have some small talent but it's wild and unpredictable."

"The Jedi robbed cradles to train their kind young." Palpatine's voice was full of disgust as he spoke of the Jedi.



I didn't have anything to say to this so I simply nodded. He continued but the sharp edge had gone from his words.

"You are far too old to begin any such training now, but control could be learned if you were willing to work hard."

I had glanced at him, he had stopped walking and had looked at me with that penetrating stare which always made my brain itch. "I am always willing to work hard, your Highness."

He had smiled that terrible, broken smile of his and nodded. "Then I will have Vader instruct you on matters of control, perhaps in doing so he will remember some of his own lessons learned from before. His control over his desires has been a little lacking of late."

I had not answered this. I would not be forced to speak ill of Lord Vader no matter what I felt, especially to the man who had twisted Vader what he was today.

"Are you not tired child?" Palpatine had asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between us.

"A little but sometimes I just can't sleep." And that was the truth.

"Ah yes, and Thrawn is away." He had said more to himself than to me. I had felt a stab of loathing shoot through me. What did Palpatine know of love and longing? I was certain the man had never loved anything except power in his life. It irked me to hear him speak Thrawn's name in such a way and Thrawn's absence was not the cause of my lack of sleep. Wisely I had held my tongue and the Emperor had continued, "Well then, now would be as good a time as any to bring out that rare smile of yours, come with me." He had said. "I have something to show you."

He had bade me follow him and I had done so, walking as was protocol, slightly behind him. He was alone but somewhere in the shadows had skulked at least two members of his Royal Guard, I had not see them but I had sensed their presence. He had walked slowly, the gnarled walking stick which he had leaned on had made rhythmic tap tap sounds as it struck the marble floor. His way back to the Palace was had been and over ground via his personal transportation. I had not opened my mouth nor had he. He had sat across from me with his eyes closed. I had stared out at the passing city, my emotions in a turmoil I could not quell, my head full of questions I could not ask out loud. When we stopped he had bade me exit first. I took the hand of the young guard the offered to help me out without thinking and stood waiting as the Emperor had unfolded himself from the vehicle to continue walking.

"Come along child." He had said.

I had followed him without question. It was a part of the palace I had never been in before and I marvelled at its beauty. I knew the style to be much older than even the part I was used to being in. He had modernised much of the palace but this place he had left alone. It was breath taking.

"Not many are permitted here." He had said as we walked through the silent hallways. "This place has been left as it was at the very beginning of the Old Republic. I have always loved the architecture but it is impractical for our times, still a small part of history should remain, do you not agree, young Merlyn?"

"Yes, your Highness." I had replied. It would have been a shame to lose all of the history left behind but what good is keeping it when only one person ever got to see it?

He had smiled and continued to walk until he came to a set of doors, ornate and hand carved from a beautiful dark wood. When he had opened the door and stepped back I had gasped.

"Yes," he had crooned softly. "You may enter." And so I had.

I had gazed about me like a small child at a pallie stand. This was one of the Emperor's private collection rooms. I had heard he possessed such places, filled with

treasures from across the Galaxy but I had never dreamed to even see one. I had looked about then, taking each piece that was being displayed, each a treasure, some I had known of some I had not but in the end it had been the piece displayed on a pedestal in the center of the large room that had held my gaze.

"Yes, I told you it had not been destroyed." He had startled me with his words making me jump. I turned to look at him standing so close I could almost feel the heat from his stare.

I had only nodded dumbly then turned my gaze back to the little statue. *The Waiting Dancer*.

"Well, child would you squander your only chance? Move closer, look at it."

I had done as he had said and stepped, hesitantly to the center of the room. The piece was quite small, but exquisite in its detail. The Maquette was no more than a hand or so tall. The little girl was seated on the floor, her hands clasped over her bent knee, upon which her chin rested, her other leg tucked underneath. She looked small and vulnerable, curled into herself until one looked at the face. It was the face of a young pupil staring up at a master she adored, waiting for instruction, waiting to be shown a move, waiting to be shown how to fly. Everything lay in Tarka-Null's ability to sculpt expression. I leaned in to look at her face and saw my mother as she had been as a child. I had studied this piece from books and holograms all of my childhood life. I had dreamed of being a dancer, whisked away to fame by the Alderaan Dance Academy. A little girl's dream, nothing more, but for many years my mother had lived it. A valued pupil of that once famous school prized and pampered until a fall had ended her career long before my father had stolen her heart.

She had told me the story of sitting for Tarka-Null many, many times because I had begged her to. Divulging her secret and urging me to keep it. I had begged her for every tiny detail she could remember, in some way living through her words this small moment of time. I knew why her hair had been styled the way it had, and what colour her dance tunic had been. I knew that the constricting shoes she wore which helped her stand upon the very tips of her toes had been new and had pinched even though she had never danced in them.

I had gazed upon the small replica of the woman who had raised me and the world around me vanished. I was not even aware that I was crying. I longed to touch it but dared not. Only when the Emperor spoke, his voice so soft it was almost a whisper that I might do as I so longed did I remembered where I was, and who I was with. For a moment I had paused, mid motion wondering what his price would be for this gift he was giving, then decided it did not matter.

If he had known, he had not said. I had reached and stroked the cool metal the statue had been cast from and welcomed the shock of images it had brought. Only when the statue finished telling me her side of the story did I break contact and step away. No wonder my mother had always smiled when ever she had told this story. I had smiled then as well.

I had turned and looked into the eyes of the Emperor and meaning every word I had uttered, I thanked him.

"You are a creature of astonishing passions." He said softly, in a different age you would have made a great dark side adept.

I swallowed and glanced away from his piercing gaze, looking back at the small work of art that had made my heart ache.

There had been a moment's silence and then he had asked. "You knew who the model was?"

I nodded dumbly.

"Who was she to you?"

This puzzled me as I was sure he had known, but I had found no lie hidden in his words only idle curiosity. So I had answered him.

"She was my mother, the woman who raised me and taught me everything good and beautiful."

"I always wondered who had modeled, it is not written anywhere and Tarka himself never spoke of her name." He had said. "He would only smile when asked and comment about not revealing his muse."

"I didn't know." And that was the truth. While my mother had said not many people knew about the truth of it, I had never fully taken her at face value. My mother had been full of such mischiefs and we had had plenty of secrets between us.

"Did you learn what you wanted to?" The Emperor's voice had broken into my thoughts. Underneath his words I tasted longing. He really wanted to know.

So I had unfolded her story to him then, including some of the stories the statue had passed on to me, but not all of them. He listened with a slight smile.

"He had chosen her in secret." I said. "He wanted the statue to be about the pose not the girl. She had modeled for him in a place of his choosing, his country estate. No one had known and she had lied to her parents about it. She took great delight in having this secret. Tarka-Null had given her a gift for her troubles and time, he had fashioned a tiny necklace for her, a small flower, which she wore until the day she was killed. Who the model had been had been the school's greatest mystery, but I had not known it was also the galaxy's."

"I see you have been learning to better control your gift." He said.

"Practice makes perfect." I nodded reciting master Kjestyll's words without thinking.

The Emperor had chuckled. "You are indeed every bit as fascinating as my favourite tactician finds you to be. No wonder he bristles whenever I mention your name. Such a distraction, I think, even he could not resist. It is an interesting weakness for such a strong willed man."

Now, I had thought, we come to the truth of the matter. Thrawn. I had waited for more but surprisingly enough there was none. The Emperor regarded me for a few moments and I burned under the heat of his scrutiny, then in the blink of an eye he had seemed to grow weary.

"It is late, child, I am fatigued and I see sleep lurking behind your eyes. I will request that Lord Vader see to your training and when I return from my visit to the oversee the new space station perhaps you and I will speak some more of art."

"As you wish, your Highness." I had said and because I hadn't known what else to do I curtsied which made him chuckle.

"Yes, the woman who raised you taught you well. You may leave now and return home, he is waiting for you." He had said. Somehow he had signalled for his guard who had entered the room crimson and silent. "Escort Miss Gabriel to the South entrance and see she is taken home safely." And with those words he had dismissed me, turning his back to me to let his fingertips graze the small statue fondly. I had given him a gift; I had given him the answer to a long unanswered question. The Emperor did not like mysteries and he never left anything undone. When I had returned home, I found the Emperor had once again been right, and Thrawn had returned early. Still awake, he had waited up for me to come home. That reunion had been sweet.

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Now, half asleep on the floor of Lord Vader's training room I pondered this small piece of knowledge. Thrawn was just such a mystery and it occurred to me then that

perhaps the Emperor was hoping I would be the key to unravel it but I knew he was wrong. Thrawn was too many things, I knew only a small part of them, only a small part of him and even then I would not betray him, I would rather die. If I was Thrawn's weakness then he was my strength. It was at that moment, in the quiet of Lord Vader's training room I understood how deep my feelings for Thrawn went. The realization was daunting.

I yawned and stirred. The sound of lightsaber and droids had stopped. Lord Vader towered above me and nudged me with his boot.

"Get up, girl and go home. You are no good to me tired and I won't have you littering up my floors like common street trash." He said. "We will have plenty of work to do tomorrow, and I have no time to waste pandering to your fatigue."

I got to my feet stiffly and did as he had ordered. I went home.

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Time seemed to both drag and fly by all at the same time. I had no idea how such a thing was possible but it was. It had been nearly three weeks since the Emperor had left and a week since Thrawn had gone off planet in a hurry. His presence failed greatly. I had become spoiled with having him around so much. While I had made no complaint about his assignment he had known I was sad to see him leave. We had not spoken about it, after all what was there to say? It was his job, his duty and it came first above all else. I knew this but it did not make it any easier to let him go.

He had gone early in the morning, long before the sun had come up. I had lain curled up in the warmth of the bed we shared, aware of his quiet movements around the bedroom. He had woken me gently, whispering in my ear, kissing me lightly on the cheek as he made to leave. I was grateful for the dream like quality his going in the night always left. Good-byes were not our forte and we didn't make a big fuss. It was just easier this way.

I wasn't sure what part of the galaxy he was being sent to but I knew it had something to do with Zaarin, although he had not actually said anything about it. We had been together long enough that I had learned to read him well enough and sometimes Thrawn told me more by what he didn't say than the information he chose to give out. I wasn't happy about this latest assignment. I did not think there was a single man who hated Thrawn more than Demetrius Zaarin. I wasn't certain exactly how Thrawn felt about the Grand Admiral. He wasn't a man to lay his feelings out in the open but I was reasonable sure the feelings Thrawn did have did not run towards the side of being friends. My last words to him before he had slipped out of the bedroom had simply been,

*'Be careful.'*

*'Always, Tekari, always.'* Had been his soft reply.

Lord Vader concerned himself with the daily business of being on Coruscant without the Emperor's presence. He was restless and easily irritated. I stayed out of his way as much as I was able to and ducked when I had to. The only thing that seemed to cheer him up was news that came from the investigator I had hired for him. What the nature of that news had been Lord Vader never said but after the dour faced investigator had left, the mood had eased considerably. I for one was grateful because I had just about all the Vader bad temper I could deal with.

For the most part Coruscant was its usual bustling self. The day to day business of palace intrigue and courtier life made life less dull and the gossip columns ran wild with speculation about Xizor and his new love. I might have shown more interest in what he was doing had I actually cared but Prince Xizor was someone I hoped would vanish off the face

of the planet or better yet the universe. He was more often than not the cause Lord Vader's foul moods and thus also mine. It astounded me how much this one man upset Lord Vader. Even worse was the fact that Lord Vader allowed this to happen. I spent my days divided between working from my palace office and working from Lord Vader's home. It didn't really matter where I worked, Lord Vader's mood didn't change. Life at the Imperial Palace went on as usual until the day Prince Xizor's luck suddenly changed.

I was working from my office in the Palace, in the middle of answering a letter when a large resounding boom shattered the peace and quiet. It wasn't unusual to hear such sounds as kids, joy riding low in their parent's ships would skim the atmosphere at supersonic speeds, causing sonic booms to happen. The booms rattled windows and annoyed the people who lived in the upper parts of the city but were for the most part harmless. I didn't think much about them to tell the truth but that changed when ten minutes later Shiv burst into the office nearly giving me a heart attack in the process.

"Damn it Shiv, why can't you knock like everyone else!" I hissed irritated. "You scared the sandjiggers out of me!"

He completely ignored me, bounced over to the holo caster and turned it on. "You have to see what's happening!" he said. "You'll never believe it!"

I sighed as the News Net flickered on. I was about to tell Shiv I didn't have time for this when I suddenly understood why he was in such a fluster.

The holo-vid showed scenes of massive destruction and chaos. Black smoke billowed into the air and people were running around like confused eopies during a mass stampede. At first I wasn't sure where this was being filmed but then it dawned on me I knew the area well, because it was very close to where Lord Vader's castle was and not that far away from here.

"Almighty sarlacc, what the hell happened?" I asked, still staring at the images being shown. The palace Prince Xizor had called home had exploded. The area was a wreck, a lot of people had been killed and even more injured. The city was in an uproar. The last time something of this nature had happened, so the reporter said, was during the Clone Wars. There was an area wide lock down and people were being to be advised to stay home.

Shiv shook his head. "No idea." He said. "I was watching the morning show when they broke in with a special announcement that there had been a massive explosion. It's only now coming through that it is Xizor's place." He looked at me then sat down. "You don't suppose that Vader did this do you?" He asked very quietly.

I shook my head. "Not his style." I said. The images shown of the area where Xizor had once lived were beyond recognition. It must have been some explosion and then I remembered the large boom I had felt and heard

Shiv laughed. "He has a style?"

"Yep, that sneaky force choke you to death thing, definitely his style. He wouldn't kill Xizor like this, too much work, too much planning." How could I explain to Shiv that it just didn't feel like Vader's touch? This was something else. "Does anyone know if Xizor was in the building when it blew up? Anyone know if he is still alive?"

Shiv shrugged and we turned our attention back to the news hoping, like the rest of the planet, to hear more. While Prince Xizor was not the best loved member of the Imperial Court he was certainly one of the most prominent, his death would set the whole court buzzing. I wasn't sure how the Royal court or the planet would react if it was discovered he was dead. Even worse I wasn't sure how Lord Vader would react if it was discovered that he was still alive. For a moment I contemplated trying to get in touch with him at his home to tell him but I was certain he already knew. He had enough people spying on Xizor he didn't need me for that and besides if he hadn't been told he had certainly felt the blast.

The rest of the day passed in a bit of a blur. The HoloNet had gone mad with news casts, speculation and misinformation. Shiv and I ordered food in and spent the last of the afternoon glued to the holo screen. When I went home it was earlier than usual, to an empty flat. My head was still reeling from the news and when I switched on the holonet, the news was still stuck on the same subject. I sighed as I sat in the living room eating left over lunch and drinking a glass of nice wine. I had tried to reach Lord Vader before I had left the office but he had suddenly gone off planet. I suspected it had something to do with the whole Xizor affair but the man I spoke to was not terribly forthcoming about any information and I wasn't really in the mood to care or push. I figured that I would eventually learn what I needed to, so I sat and just watched the news.

I suppose it should not have come as a surprise that what ever was going on with Xizor was not over yet. Once the initial fervour of reporting had died down and some semblance of normalcy returned to the programming, I curled up on the couch and watched a re-run of *Wild Banthas*. It was a very bad show about settlers trying to make a living on Tatooine when a special new bulletin broke into the show alleviating my tedium. I was suddenly wide awake.

*-We interrupt this programme to bring you this special bulletin. We have just received word that Prince Xizor's skyhook has been destroyed. There has been no official word yet if the Prince was on board his Skyhook but it is believed he may have been as his ship, The Virago, was seen in the immediate area. It is not know at this time if the persons responsible for this are the same as the group believed to be responsible for the destruction of Prince Xizor's Coruscant home which was destroyed earlier today in a massive explosion. Coruscant Fire Patrol has issued a statement, that there is no danger from falling debris but people in the area are being told to stay indoors for their own safety... -*

The reporter continued but I stopped listening. It was two in the morning but I called Shiv anyway. He wasn't asleep.

"Are you seeing the news?" I asked before he had a chance to say anything.

"What the heck is going on?" He asked.

I shook my head. "I wish I knew." I answered.

"Do you think he's dead?" Shiv asked.

"I have no idea but he'd be lucky to survive two explosions in one day wouldn't he?"

Shiv just nodded glumly. "This planet is going to hell!" he said a bit crossly.

"I don't disagree." I said as my work comm beeped. "I gotta go, see you tomorrow." And I disconnected.

I answered my comm and the shimmering image of Lord Vader appeared on the holo emitter.

"Lord Vader, what can I do for you?"

"I take you have seen the news?" He growled.

"I have."

"When is the Emperor expected to return?"

I dug out my datapad and looked up the date. "In three days, my lord, depending on his whim." Lord Vader already knew this but I suspect he mostly wanted to gloat over Xizor's misfortune. I had to ask. "Is the Prince dead?"

"I hope so, for his sake!" Lord Vader's reply was terse but satisfied.

I had no idea how to answer this but I couldn't say I would be sorry if it turned out that Xizor really was dead. He was a giant pain in the ass. "What can I do for you milord?" I asked again, knowing he had not gotten in touch with me simply to talk about Xizor.

"Cancel all my appointments for the next two weeks!" He said.

"Yes, my lord, is there anything else?"

"No. I shall advise you of any further changes tomorrow. You will work from my residence, do not be tardy!" He said and disconnected.

I sighed as I sat back on the couch. What a fun day tomorrow was going to be, I thought and with that I decided I should probably get some sleep.

The next day I went to work prepared to deal with Lord Vader's general ire only to be pleasantly surprised, he was actually more or less cheerful.

When I asked what had happened with Xizor I did not really expect an answer but he told me all that he knew. It was quite a tale and I sat at my desk, my cold hands cupped around my mug of stim'caf listening while he recounted everything he knew.

It seemed that he had been right all along and Prince Xizor's reasons for trying to worm his way into the upper echelons of the Imperial court were not just for personal gain and power but also for revenge. Many years ago Lord Vader had been involved in a project on the Falleen home world that deal with biological weapons. There had been an accident in one of the labs causing the release of a flesh eating bacterial toxin. In order to contain this outbreak Lord Vader had ordered the area destroyed. The city which had been included in this destruction had been home to all of Prince Xizor's family and they had all been killed.

As Lord Vader told this story I shivered. He spoke coldly and without remorse. He had only been concerned with covering up the mess that had been made and not particularly concerned with the loss of life that resulted.

Prince Xizor had been off world at the time and had learned of the destruction too late to do anything about it so he had plotted his revenge. In order to hide his true identity he had had all records of his family wiped out and created for himself a new world, a new life as the secret head of Black Sun and in the open the owner of several shipping companies among other things. He had gained favour at the Imperial court and curried a place at the Emperor's side with his cunning and guile. If the Emperor knew of Xizor's true past and reasons for gaining favour at court he never once gave any hint of it away.

Lord Vader had been right all along in suspecting that the Prince had ulterior motives for his integration into the Emperor's inner circle but that it revolved around revenge was a bit of a surprise. All this had been discovered only in the last couple of weeks when the investigator I had found him had unearthed the truth. It was then that Lord Vader put two and two together and fully understood that Xizor not only meant to destroy him, take his place at the Emperor's side but also meant to take away his family by killing his son Luke.

Vader's voice shook with rage as he told me the last part and there was a deep sense of smug satisfaction when he told me how Xizor had truly believed right up until the last second that fear of the Emperor's wrath would stay Vader's hand.

I smiled grimly at these words because I knew that as I pushed Vader, Vader also knew how far he could push the Emperor and some things were worth the punishment. It had been the Executor, on Vader's command that had obliterated the prince's skyhook. As to who had destroyed the prince's palatial home Vader could only speculate. I felt the pride in his words when he murmured Luke Skywalker's name.

"The Emperor will not be happy about this when he returns, my lord." I said cautiously when he had finished speaking.

"I will deal with that. Xizor was a menace and my master is no fool but sometimes he does not see the world as I do." Lord Vader growled. "Xizor paid for his pride and we are better off without the likes of him cluttering up the Imperial Court."

I could only nod. I didn't disagree. "What about Black Sun?"

Lord Vader regarded me for a moment and I swear I could sense his slow smile from underneath his mask. "There is always a bigger fish waiting in the shadows." He replied. "A

new leader will appear, mark my words. Now, girl enough babble. I have much to do and so do you!"

And with that my work day began. I hoped that things would calm down a bit now that Xizor was out of the way but that was just wishful thinking. All bad things seem to happen in threes so when the next bit of peace shattering news interrupted daily life, I wasn't as surprised as maybe I should have been.

Despite the fact that I had known Zaarin was up to something when news of the Emperor's abduction and the attempted coup by the Grand Admiral hit I was still shocked into a dull sort of numbness.

En route to Coruscant, the Emperor's shuttle had been intercepted and the Emperor had been kidnapped. Lord Vader had moved swiftly the moment the news of this reached him. It was lucky that he was already off world at the time and could deal with directly. I was just grateful that I had not been hauled off world with him. By the time news of the attempted coup reached the public's ears Coruscant was already locked down, a curfew had already been imposed and extra security had been set in place to avoid any problems that might arise from people who might take advantage of the situation. It was a mess and the News Nets were in a frantic panic trying to get any information at all. My contact with Lord Vader since all hell had broken loose was limited. He would not be back on planet until the mess was sorted out, he said and that I should cancel all meetings and appointments until otherwise notified. When I pressed him for details he had simply replied.

"That moron Zaarin thinks he can rule the galaxy! He has no idea what the Emperor is capable of and he's not the first idiot to kidnap Palpatine either. I'll be back when this is over in the mean time I expect you to deal with your work and continue the studies I have set for you!"

I simply nodded. He had been trying to teach me more control over my force powers and neither of us were having a lot of success over this. At wit's end, he had requested that Master Kjestyll teach me more about the art of control through meditation as he seemed to have better luck with me on this subject than Lord Vader had. I did not think that it was a matter of control but rather more about master Kjestyll's ability to instil calm in me not anger or fear as was usually the case with Lord Vader. No matter what the reasons, my lessons with Master Kjestyll had gone from being combat related to control related and had done nothing to ease my sense of frustration. I was not a very good student in the art of being patient and calm.

It was a dark time for everyone working at the palace. Security was on high alert and anyone not wearing their identity badges was in for a nasty shock. I was glad to work in the quiet part of the palace and I wasn't the only one. More often than not Shiv and sometimes Ynyth would come and join me, to hang out under the guise of being on official business. We mostly sat watching the HoloNet news, amazed at the level of disinformation that was given out on the public broad-wave, comparing our own news to that from the HoloNet.

There was nothing we could do except watch the story unfold, taking bits and pieces of news from every source we could. Luckily for us, as palace workers with good clearance and a lot of friends with even better clearance the story unravelled itself pretty swiftly once the information began to flow.

The kidnapping attempt of the Emperor had not been as successful as first believed. Someone named Arden Lyn had actually been the one to capture the Emperor's shuttle and was in the process of bringing it to Zaarin's Flagship the *Glory*. I knew when Lord Vader had engaged in battle because Jorae had sent me a quick priority message telling me. In the all too frustratingly infrequent updates that followed I learned that, despite the fight which had ensued, Zaarin and most of his fleet had escaped.

Shiv and I had sat in my office glued to the in-house reports, cups of tea growing cold in our hands as we watched and waited for more news. As much as I feared the



Emperor, I could not imagine a galaxy without him and along with many others whispered quiet prayers for his safe return. There was a silent sigh of relief when the official News cast finally announced that the coup had failed, that Lord Vader had recovered the Emperor's shuttle with the Emperor still on board and that he was safe and well. When the Emperor returned to Coruscant it was a quiet affair. There was no parade and no large celebratory festivities.

I knew that all was more or less back to normal when Lord Vader summoned me to meet him in the office in his home in the middle of the night. The driver who came to pick me up was quiet and terse. I sat in the back of the speeder, wrapped in a heavy shawl. It was late, I had been asleep and I was not happy about being hauled out of bed.

The sentry on duty merely nodded to me as I passed through the great doors. I was expected. "He's waiting for you in the small library." He said.

I merely nodded and drew a deep breath. The small library was probably, next to my office, the most inviting room that I had seen in his home. It was situated on one of the upper floors and had a stunning view over the city. Despite the fact that he had filled the library with enough reading material to last me a life time, it was a room he rarely used and a room I was not often permitted to enter without his express permission. I knocked on the door and it opened on its own.

"Come in girl." His voice seemed too loud in the quiet of the night.

I did as he had asked and shut the door behind me. He was standing with his back to the door, staring out over the night skyline of the city.

"Is his Excellency alright?" I asked quietly, unable to gauge his mood.

There was no sound except the rhythmic in- out of the mechanical breathing and I did not know what to do, if I should approach or stay put.

"Yes, he was never in any real danger." Lord Vader replied.

I nodded. "What can I do for you, my lord?" I asked. It was late, I was tired and I wanted him to get to the point so that I could go back home to bed.

"Thrawn has gone after Zaarin and his fleet." He said simply.

I drew a deep breath and let it go slowly. This was not news I wanted to hear though it was not really a surprise either. I just stared at his back wondering why had he called me all the way out to his barren home to tell me this news that he could have given me at any time, could have given me in the morning so why here? Why now?

"Well, I am certain that if anyone can catch Zaarin it will be Thrawn, my lord." I said carefully.

"Your faith in your lover is commendable." Lord Vader said more to himself than to me. His words lacked their usual bite but they annoyed me anyway.

"Why am I here?" I asked crossly. I was irritated. I was tired. I was cold.

He turned around to regard me carefully. "I thought you would want to know what is happening before it gets blown out of proportion by the News Net." There was truth in the words he spoke but also a lie behind them.

"Thank you my lord." I said, puzzled by his demeanour. I couldn't read him tonight although I tried.

"Master Kjestyll has informed me that you are finding your current studies with him difficult." He replied, utterly changing the subject.

"You've been speaking with him recently?" I was surprised.

"He keeps me informed of your progress, or lack thereof." He said vaguely, gesturing for me to sit on the floor. I was grateful this room was carpeted. I sat down, cross legged; my hands folded one into the other in my lap and waited.

"Why did you ask the Emperor about learning more control over your talents?" He asked.

Ah, I thought, now we get to the point. He was angry that I had talked to the Emperor about my training, about wanting more than I was getting yet Lord Vader did not seem angry to me, he seemed resigned.

I sighed as I answered him. "I don't know. He asked a question and I answered it but it's the truth." I said. "I have this power but I don't understand it. I feel as though I am missing something. I've read about the Jedi being able to do amazing things, how they could run faster, jump higher. I have even heard it said that they could even meditate so deeply that they could put themselves into trances which could help them heal. I didn't think it would be prudent to talk about learning Jedi abilities with the Emperor so all I told him was I thought I needed to learn more control, which is also the truth. When it comes to the Force I feel as though I am just running around in circles and I have no idea what I am doing."

"That would be because you don't know what you are doing." He shot back. I just glared at him.

The silence between us was long and hard I wasn't certain if he was going to get angry and stalk off or turn violent, he did neither.

"Why control?" he asked staring out of the window once again.

I shrugged. "I didn't really know what else to say. He scares me when he talks to me about what I want because it always comes with a price." I said. It was the first time I had ever said that out loud to Lord Vader even though I was certain he already knew this.

"Of course it does. The Emperor always has a motive." He retorted, "But that still does not answer my question."

I sighed. "I feel I need it. Maybe if I fight Jyrki again it would help me beat him, we are so evenly matched and he knows me too well." I said. It wasn't exactly the truth and I wondered if for a moment he had figured that out. Lord Vader was many things but he was not stupid and after nearly four years of working with me he knew me too well.

"He knows the girl you once were, not who you have become. I have told you before you give him too much power."

"Yes, you have but that still doesn't change the fact I need to learn control or that it might be useful to know how to do more than just move 'caf cups across a table."

"These abilities require years and years of training. You are too old for this now." He replied casually.

"Then why teach me at all?" I countered, my anger surfacing. I was too tired and cranky to care about whether or not I was being rude.

"I have been asking myself that question for several years now," Came his terse reply. "But the Emperor's will is not to be questioned."

I sighed. "My lord, why did you call me here in the middle of the night?"

"You knew what Zaarin was planning didn't you." It was not a question. He did not bother to answer mine.

"I had an idea he wanted to take over the government but nothing concrete." I told him. "The night he attacked me, he let his ambitions slip, but I didn't know that he had planned to kidnap the Emperor. If I had I would have told someone," I said and then I looked up at him, "I would have told you."

He stood still and stared out of the window. "Admiral Thrawn mentioned that he thought Zaarin might try something to harm the Emperor. When I spoke of this to my Master he had simply smiled. He said everything was going according to his plan."

I swear that in that single moment I knew a hatred of the Emperor like I had never known before. "Did he mean for this to happen? Did he know what Zaarin had planned?" I asked. "Did the Emperor plan this all along?"

Lord Vader shook his head slightly. "I have no idea but it would not be the first time he has put such a plan in motion to serve his own needs. Zaarin was becoming a problem

but to remove him would have been ... difficult." He paused for a second. "Demetrius Zaarin has powerful friends, enough of them who could make things annoyingly difficult for my Master."

"So the Emperor set this up. He knew?" I pushed. I could not keep the bitterness or anger out of my voice.

"I believe he put certain events in motion." Lord Vader agreed.

Suddenly I understood. A piece of puzzle fell into place. I felt my mouth go dry. "The Emperor made Thrawn a Grand Admiral but he didn't tell anyone because he has no idea who will come out of this alive does?" I said through clenched teeth.

"No." Lord Vader replied. The word sounded terrible to my ears. "The Emperor can see many things, predict many things but not everything and both Zaarin and Thrawn are evenly matched."

I hissed and looked up at Darth Vader who had turned to look back at me. "I hate him." I said very softly.

Lord Vader nodded. "I know." Was all he replied. There was so much bitter emotion laced in those two words that I didn't know what else to say. He knew better than anyone what games the Emperor played. Perhaps more so than anyone else in the entire galaxy, he had reason to loath Palpatine. I just brought my knees to my chest and hugged them, my chin resting on them while I looked up at Lord Vader.

"So now what?" I asked. "We just wait until someone wins?" I was furious.

"There is nothing else you can do." He said simply. "Except your work, your training." He added with a growl.

"If Thrawn dies...." I began.

"If Thrawn dies you will know heartache and sorrow which the Emperor will use." Lord Vader said simply, cutting me off. "You have a strong, stubborn will which amuses my master but make no mistake you will be broken and then you will be his obedient and compliant servant." There was a sorrow deep in his voice which he could not hide but I wasn't sure the reason for it. "And what is more, you will be powerless to stop it from happening."

"Why does he do these things?" I asked suddenly.

Lord Vader simply shook his head. "Because he can." I was certain he had been asking himself this same question for as long as he could remember. "He manipulates people into doing his will all the while thinking they are doing it all on their own."

"He did the same thing to you!" I blurted out suddenly, anger ruling over common sense.

"Of course. He wanted an apprentice who was powerful in the force so that he would have the strength to overthrow the government."

"He did more than that to you; he twisted everything you loved into something he could use. How can you still serve him after what he did?"

The air rippled slightly. "What do you mean?"

"He toyed with you, lied to you!" I snapped. "He used how you felt for Padmé and he twisted it all around into something terrible and ugly!"

For a moment I was certain he would lash out and strike me. Usually any mention of his long dead wife brought about a sudden and violent anger. This time he held himself in check. "He did not kill her, I did." He said bitterly.

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

That caught his attention. "Explain yourself!"

I told him about what I had seen at the compound of Wayland, what his lightsaber had shown me, the terrible fight with Obi Wan, his own anger at Padmé. As I spoke I could feel the room charge with his terrible sorrow and self loathing but before he could lash out I said. "But she wasn't dead when Obi Wan left that planet."

Vader whirled around so suddenly I flinched back from him in reflex. "My master told me she was dead, he told me I had killed her!"

I drew a deep breath. "That may be part of the truth but it wasn't your force choke that killed her. She gave birth to your son afterwards, so how could she have been dead on that terrible planet?"

The galaxy seemed to hold its breath. He had never thought on this before, he had been so utterly convinced he had killed his wife that he had never questioned it. What he had thought in that moment I could never have said. He had a son and Padmé had been alive to deliver that child, she had to have been. I had seen in the lightsaber's memories, because Obi Wan had held it in his hand while he boarded her ship to leave Mustapha, that when he had taken off she was still living. He must have put the weapon away after that because this was the only secrets of this nature it had revealed to me and I had kept them hidden, not daring to tell to Emperor what I knew of his lies.

There was a long silence and I pulled my shawl closer around my shoulders. The library was cold and not well lit, the one light that was on was mainly for my benefit. I wondered if I should get up, go home. I had no idea what it was I was actually doing here. When Lord Vader summoned me I did not refuse but usually he had work for me to do, especially when it was this late at night. This odd conversation was unusual and unnerving. He turned his back on me once again and stared out of the window. The air was heavy between us.

I wondered, then, if he also got tired of Palpatine's manipulations and found some small solace in my company. As far as I know I was the only person in his life who did not judge him or try to play him and while I feared his anger and his temper I was not afraid of him the way most everyone else in the galaxy was. I would never ask him about these things, so I doubted I would ever know but in all the time I had known Lord Vader, I had never felt closer to him than at this moment. It was a peculiar sensation considering who he was, given all that he had done but it was not discomforting. So, I just sat and looked up at him.

"My lord?" I asked in a voice that sounded very small to my ears.

He stayed statue still and I wondered at that moment if he would kill me for the sheer audacity of speaking my mind. He hated to be reminded of the past but it was a false past, created memories built upon lies from a man who wanted to own him and manipulate him like a puppet. I tried to get a sense of his thoughts through the force but he shut me out so hard it hurt. Still there was a bond between us, something that had been created from almost the first moment I had begun working for him and that was hard to break away from. I could sense on the edge of things his terrible burning anger and hate but now there was something else, something I could not define. It felt as if some of the weight he had been carrying around since the moment he had turned to the dark side shifted and I felt his rage recede.

I realised while sitting on the floor of his awful castle that I had given him some tiny measure of reprieve as well as something new to think about. I have said it before, he was not a stupid man but sometimes he was an awfully linear thinker and he had been so focused recently on his son he had forgotten the woman who had given birth to the boy. For a long time we stayed like that, he staring out of the window lost in thought and I seated on the floor looking up at him.

It was he who eventually broke the dreadful stillness. "You mentioned the Jedi skills, deep meditation. This is what you really wish to learn is it not." It was not a question. He knew me enough to pick through my words and find the truth of things. The tie between us was strong, I didn't understand it but I could not fight it either. Neither, it seemed, could he.

I nodded when he turned to look at me. "Yes, I think it is important."

Surprisingly enough to me he did not argue with me or offer up and sarcasm. "Very well, I will tell you what I know, but you will not learn this technique in one night, it takes years to perfect."

"Thank you." I said relieved without knowing why.

"Master Kjestyll has taught you to center, to meditate?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Then do so and listen to what I have to tell you."

"Yes, my lord." I said. "But before we start can I ask you a question?"

"If you must."

"Why am I really here?"

He looked at me for a moment. "Because I wished it." He said simply. It was the truth, although not the entire explanation. I doubted I would ever really know the whole of it but the answer satisfied me enough to leave it alone.

"Now, are you ready to learn or do you wish to return home and wait for news of Thrawn's fate on your own?"

I had no desire to return to the flat I shared with Thrawn and wait alone, awake all night to hear if he lived or died trying hunt down the man the Emperor had deliberately set up. I sighed and nodded and with that gave myself over to the meditation techniques that I had been taught, listening to Vader's voice as he began to instruct me on a long forgotten ancient art. I wasn't sure why I felt a driving need to delve deeper into these Jedi techniques but something in the back of my mind told me it was important. So far that nagging voice had not steered me wrong so I wasn't about to stop listening to it now. I drew a deep breath and began to find my center. It wasn't as difficult as one might think, given the current circumstances.

Thrawn sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows resting on his knees, his face resting in his hands. I stroked his bare back with my finger tips.

"Are you really alright?" I asked.

He turned his head to glance at me. "Yes, I am just exhausted, Sji'u' Tekari. This has been a difficult campaign." He said.

"So he's finally dead?" I asked, getting up to curl about his back, pressing my cheek against his skin. When I kissed him on the shoulder he reached back and caressed my hair then continued to undress.

"Yes." His reply sounded so weary it almost broke my heart.

"I am so glad you're home." I told him quietly.

I hadn't seen him in what seemed like forever and even though the boys in the spook room had done their best to let me know what was going on the details were greatly lacking. I got snippets of information mostly with the tag line – *he's alright*- tacked on for good measure. Sometimes, when he was actually on planet Lord Vader would tell me more but mainly the time together, which did not involve work, was spent with him teaching me.

It became a pattern of his to roust me out of bed and send for me to meet him at his Coruscant home. Most of the time he would instruct me in methods he had learned from his masters long before the mask and the anger, often we would spar and sometimes we would talk. It was a strange time and there was an odd sense of limbo, of waiting for something to happen. The strange restlessness that had permeated the Imperial Palace seeped its way into daily Coruscant life. Despite his annoying habit of waking me up at odd hours, I didn't mind, especially since Lord Vader never did this when Thrawn was on planet only when he was away.

Oddly enough, I welcomed Lord Vader's presence and the peculiar hours he kept didn't really bother me, I was used to them. If he felt the same for me he never said, he was not a person to speak over how he felt but I got the impression he was happy to have

someone to wake up in the small hours of the night, to keep him company. Loneliness comes in many guises, who was I to question this? I suppose it was a compliment that he allowed me such a place in his private life. I knew more about him than almost anyone else, while I could never condone the terrible things he did, I understood, maybe just a little better than most, why he was the way he was. He also understood about fear, about worry for someone else.

Despite the fact that I tried to keep my feelings about Thrawn and what he was doing to myself, Lord Vader knew anyway, how could he not? So he would impart knowledge of Thrawn's work in small careful nuggets for which I was grateful. He knew things no one else would tell me. I supposed it served his own purpose to keep me informed and up to date. Worried, I was not much use to him and my work suffered, my studies suffered. Much of the news I heard never made it to public channels so I was glad I had my own resources. Still, when the conflict with Zaarin was finally over I was relieved beyond belief. I knew that Thrawn was on his way back to Coruscant because Lord Vader had let me know.

It had been just past three in the morning when Thrawn had finally returned home. I had not been sleeping well so when the door to the flat opened I had woken up instantly. I had turned on the small side lamp to let him know I was awake and that there was no need for stealth. I had not been prepared for how worn out he looked when he had walked in the bedroom. He had motioned for me not to get out of bed and had begun to undress right away; stripping out of his uniform, stripping away the vestiges of the battle he had been instrumental in winning. I was glad he had returned safely.

"Do you want a cup of tea." I asked as he got up from the bed, moving away from my embrace to go to the refresher.

"No, but a brandy would not be unwelcome." He said before he closed the door. "I'll join you in a few minutes."

I got up, pulled on a robe and padded, barefoot, to the kitchen. Two glasses of brandy in hand I went into the living room, set the glasses on the table and lit a couple of candles. I could hear when he finished showering and I smiled when he joined me, wearing the long robe I had bought for him to replace the one I had stolen from him, the scent of his damp hair and soap filling the air.

"I suppose you will want to hear all about it then?" He asked touching his glass to mine.

"At least the *Daily Digest* version." I replied. "But I don't really need all the gory details and only if you want to talk about it."

He nodded and caressed the side of my face gently. "How much do you know?" He asked sipping his drink slowly.

"Well, after Zaarin's kidnapping attempt failed he vanished and then there were reports that he had begun to rain Imperial facilities, I am guessing he wanted to slow production of the TIE advanced. I heard that the battles were pretty vicious. I also heard there were rebels adding to the mix and that Zaarin actually used an interdicator against you while you were on board the *Sceltor*. I heard that your ship took heavy damage but everyone I talked with went to great pains to let me know you were okay."

He smiled. "I see your friends in Intel have been keeping you informed."

"They said you had come back to the Core but it was a quick turn around." I told him.

He nodded. "That is true, though I stayed onboard while we were in space dock to supervise the repairs. I did send you a message to let you know that I was alright."

I smiled at that memory, a bouquet of white Corellian roses mixed with pale blue lilies and tiny bright red poppet-blossoms. "I got it." He had sent me flowers, much as he had once before letting me know that he was not so easy to kill, still I had been a bit

freaked out. "But seeing you alive in person would have been nice." I added. "I was worried."

"Duty comes first, Tekari." He chided gently.

I rolled my eyes at him. "I know that." I said and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek.

"So do you know that when we returned to go after Zaarin he was trying to destroy the TIE Defender project?"

I nodded. "Yes, but didn't you get a couple of prototypes out before he destroyed the place?"

"Three in total," he said, "Which we shipped in separate corvettes to Coruscant but one was stolen by pirates while en route."

I gave a short, mirthless laugh, "I heard about that, the pirates tried to auction it off to the highest bidder, which turned out to be the Emperor." I said. "I suppose it's a good thing the Emperor is so wealthy he can buy back his own technology." I added. "And didn't Zaarin have some involvement with the pirates?"

Thrawn drew a deep breath. "Yes. He used everything available to him to try and keep us from finding and using the prototypes. It got very messy." He said quietly. "I lost an ISD and a lot of good people. Fighting Zaarin was sometimes like fighting a ghost. It was very challenging and sometimes very frustrating."

"Bet you almost wish I had done away with him when I had the chance!"

He just gave me a hard look and did not dignify my question with an answer "It was a jax and mouse game for a while and most intriguing to do battle against someone with such a keen mind."

"They announced your promotion, by the way." I said when he stopped to take a sip of his drink.

"Yes, there was another ceremony done out in the Eva-T system; you know how the Emperor likes things done properly." He said with a touch of disdain. "However, I felt it was inappropriate given the circumstances."

"The Emperor could afford to let everyone know I suppose, after all it was official that Zaarin was a traitor and you would probably win." I did not bother to hid the bitterness I felt.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow at me. "So you figured out Palpatine's game then? Clever girl." He said softly.

"He really is evil."

Thrawn simply shrugged.

"Well at least now I get to call you Grand Admiral for real." My words made him smile. "So what finally happened?" I asked.

"We attacked his convoys based on information from prisoners, it was mostly a success except when Zaarin ambushed us and we lost the ISD. After this we used missile boats to lure him out of hiding. I suppose he must have begun to feel desperate because it ended up that he stole the corvette with the cloaking device. He thought he could use it to escape but he did not realise there was a major design flaw. When he tried to make the jump into hyperspace the cloak became unstable and exploded. He was killed instantly."

"Well, I can't say I am sorry to hear that he is finally dead."

Thrawn looked at me for a moment. "Nor can I, Tekari, nor can I."

"What about the cloaking technology?"

"Gone. The Emperor decided that it was too unstable to continue with the project for now and he has his mind on other things these days."

I made a face. "Right, the new battle station and his nefarious plan to trap the rebels."

"You disagree with this plan?" he asked mildly in that manner which let me know I wasn't the only one and that he was just interested in knowing why.

"I think it is stupid." I snapped crossly, echoing Lord Vader's sentiments. "He's underestimated the rebels before and look at what happened."

Thrawn nodded. "He is taking a risk, I agree, but the rebellion's fleet is limited as is their technology. If the battle station's weapon is fully operational which is the plan, the rebels won't stand much of a chance."

I sighed as I swished the last of my brandy around in the glass. "You said so yourself, the rebels have nothing to lose, they will fight like cornered animals and the Emperor is too sure this plan will work. Lord Vader on the other hand..."

"I know how Vader feels, believe me I have heard plenty about it. He even asked me to speak to the Emperor on the subject, which I tried to do but was told on no certain terms to leave it alone. The Emperor does not like to be told he is wrong and I have done that one too many times it seems." Thrawn said softly. "I was not part of the planning for this particular trap so I don't know all the details and I also have my reservations but I cannot argue against the amount fire power the Empire has."

"As I recall, that is what everyone thought the last time one of these huge battle stations was built and look at what happened to that one!" Vader's words echoed in my head. *I told them that ridiculous weapon was nothing in comparison to the power of the force but they just laughed. Never underestimate the power of the force and never underestimate a force user.* He had said.

Thrawn merely nodded and changed the subject. "So, my dear, how have you been?" I knew better than to try and fight him when he did this. If there was more to say about the episode with Zaarin, when he was ready, he would tell me. I had meant what I had said, the details were not important I was just glad Zaarin was dead and Thrawn was home.

"Busy, mostly even though Lord Vader left a week ago to go and over see the lagging construction on the new battle station. He keeps me on my toes with all the stuff he needs done. And when he is in space his schedule is nonexistent so he wakes me up at the weirdest times to get stuff sorted for him. I am kind of surprised he hasn't asked me to come out and join him on board the *Executor* yet, to be honest, not that I mind." I said. "Oh and I had an interesting run with Mara Jade a few days ago." I shrugged. "Mostly I just work and that has been insane especially since the death of Xizor, you heard about that right?"

He nodded. "I did, bad news travels faster than light speed. Although I cannot say I am sad to see the back of him. If I understood the story correctly all his plotting was to get revenge for something Lord Vader had done years ago." He said.

I nodded and filled him in on the details.

"I can understand Xizor's wrath and I have to say I am impressed by his patience and planning but once again it seems everyone underestimated young Skywalker."

"Yep and Xizor underestimated Lord Vader. He thought that Vader's fear of the Emperor's wrath would keep him safe enough. I wish I could have seen the look on Xizor's face when he realised that was not the case."

"Was Vader punished?"

I shook my head. "Not that I know of. I personally think the Emperor found it all very amusing and couldn't really care a wamp rat's ass if Xizor lived or died. I think he just enjoy baiting Lord Vader."

"That guess is probably more truth than any of us will know." Thrawn replied. "What happened with Mara Jade?"

"Oh, well I was in the training room trying to work on a particular move Lord Vader was teaching me when she came in. I haven't seen her around much to be honest. I just figured she was off saving the galaxy from evil doers or something along those lines so I



was kind of surprised. Anyway, she didn't waste much time in getting to the point and wanted to know what working as a dancer for Jabba the Hutt was like."

I smiled at the reaction on Thrawn's face. "Really?"

I nodded. "It was a little odd, but since she asked I told her what I knew. Then she started asking me about the palace and the people who worked there and dancing there. Her questions were pretty pointed so I knew she was on a fact finding mission. I haven't worked there in a while but things with Jabba don't change a lot. I am pretty sure it's same old same old, if you know what I mean."

He nodded. "Do you know what she needed the information for?"

"No. She likes to gather intel not give it out. Although, I did get the distinct impression that asking me had not exactly been her idea. I suspect the Emperor had a hand in that and he knows well enough where I worked before I came here." I replied. "It could mean anything from the Emperor wanting to blow up Jabba's palace and sending her to do it or she's fed up with working for the Empire and wants to try her hand at another profession. I really don't know. She didn't lie to me about anything but she didn't give much away either but what ever she is doing it made her a little nervous so it must be big." I shrugged. "I wasn't going to press her either because to be honest, Za'ar, I just don't care. She is just another one of the Emperor's pawns and I have no desire to get tangled in her business."

"That was probably wise, Tekari. The Emperor does like to play his games." Thrawn said with a sigh, quietly, drinking the last of his brandy, setting the empty glass back on the table. "I guess we will know what he was up to when we see how it all plays out." He said getting to his feet, offering me a hand up.

"So now what?" I asked as he tugged me up out of my seat, wrapped his arms about my waist and pulled me in to hold me tightly. When I looked up into his face I could see the fatigue etched on it. I suppose he read the concern in my eyes because he smiled then and kissed me lightly on the forehead.

"Now, we go to bed." He said quietly, caressing my face with his beautiful hands. I was not about to argue with him on this at all. I looked at him for a moment and felt my heart suddenly skip. I know he noticed. He could see it in my eyes, the flush on my cheeks, he always noticed. Despite the fact we were both tired, the desire between us blossomed and he smiled *that* smile. He moved my hair aside to kiss the side of my neck.

"I thought you were tired?" I murmured. I could sense his own waking need. I had tuned into that a very long time ago, and now I could feel it almost before he could.

His hands swept the robe off my body and then grazed up under the shirt top. I gasped.

"I am," He said. He lifted the top over my head and my bare skin prickled as nothing but air brushed against it.

"I was wearing that." I whispered.

He gave me a feral smile. "Not anymore." And before I could argue he swept me up and carried me to the bedroom. "Sometimes, Tekari, even I need to lose myself in the good to forget about the bad." He said as he laid me on the bed. He disrobed and I smiled. His own interest was more than apparent.

"Well, welcome home." I whispered in his ear when he lay down in the space I made for him as I moved my legs. Any more words spoken were lost in the urgency of his mouth meeting mine and after that the conversation was of a vastly different nature. How I treasured these bedroom discussions.

I was not at all surprised when two days after his return Thrawn told me he had been ordered back to the Unknown Regions to continue the task he had started. Unspoken but implied the Emperor's command was telling him to stay away from Endor. It also did

not surprise me that the day he gave me this news Lord Vader summoned me to join him on board the *Executor*.

Luckily for me, I had enough time to pack carefully but this time I decided on leaving almost everything I usually dragged with me, including his letters and gifts, behind. Mostly it had been his doing. I had been sitting on the bed in the room that was mine agonizing over what to bring when he had come in to ask if I wanted tea and then just stared at me with that raised eyebrow look.

"Why do you do this every time you get called off world?" He had asked.

"I hate leaving my things behind."

"They are safer here than anywhere else, Tekari." He had said. "Especially the letters, I will write more, you know."

I sighed. "I know, it's just that I just miss you, I miss ...well I miss home... and the letters are like having a part of you with me. Great sarlacc that sounds so sappy." I had said with a shrug, the fact that I caressed the letters which lay on the bed with trembling finger tips had not gone unnoticed.

His expression had softened then and he had sat down beside me on the bed. "Leave these things here, take only what you need. This flat is safe, your treasures are safe. I would not like to know what would happen if these letters should end up in the wrong hands." He said.

"No one can read them!" I said, "At least most of them anyway, they are in Cheunh."

He had looked at me then, "Are you willing to take that chance?" his voice soft, dangerous.

He was of course right. "No." I had said, making a face. It touched him, I think, that I dragged these things around with me every time I went off world. That his letters meant so much to me, of course he had mine hidden away as well. So in the end we were as bad as each other.

"I promise, I'll write and send books enough to keep that curious mind of your busy." His finger tips grazed through my hair. "I doubt you'll be away for that long anyway. After all Coruscant is the seat of power and once this latest battle is over with hopefully there will be some semblance of peace. You won't be gone long enough to miss me." He had said with a smile. He had meant his words to be reassuring but they sent a shiver down my spine.

In the end, I had taken his advice and packed up my little treasures in the box I kept them in and tucked them away in the back of the closet under a pile of blankets. This amused Thrawn to no end who just watched me shaking his head in silent laughter. How could I explain to him that if I had found Jyrki's secret hidden away in the Jedi Temple that I was sure someone, if they tried hard enough, could find mine. Call me paranoid but I wasn't taking chances.

I had not realised that I had made a home in his flat on Coruscant. But when I thought about it, it seemed silly to keep dragging my stuff everywhere I went. The *Executor* was not my home, there was no need to try and make it into one. The only thing I hesitated over was the lightsaber and in the end I reasoned that I could tuck it in my satchel and carry it with me along with my ident cards and my datacard reader.

"Don't spend all night in here sorting out the past, Tekari; I just opened a rather nice bottle of wine." He had said, cupping my face to kiss me. His smile had told me all I had needed to know and he caught the blush that coloured my cheeks. "I want to spend the last evening we'll have together for a while ... *together*."

The rest of the evening and night had been filled with enough pleasurable memories to last a life time. Chiss, he had once said, have amazing stamina, and this was true but I had been well trained in the Bunduki martial arts and so did I. We teased and

played each other in way I suspect would make his people squirm. In between the passion were pockets of subtle and gentle affection, words and stories, memory and thought. I knew as I lay in the safe circle of his arms that as he had been the first man to truly love me, to bed me, he would also be the last.

I hadn't lied before when I had told him, there was no other. If I had known what was to come, know how things were going to change I would have told him truly how I felt, that which I kept so close to my heart, words we never ever spoke for what was between us. As it was, I was certain he knew anyway, how could he not, but I would wish I had told him. Our passion for one another could have rivalled the fire from the twin suns of Tatooine but somehow passion is never enough when everything else around you is broken.

With our goodbyes said quietly and in private, once again I left Coruscant on board a shuttle headed for the Outer Rim Territories to the Endor system. I sat as a passenger this time and was oddly grateful for it.

The journey was long and quiet; the shuttle was mostly empty save for a couple of Imperial Intel officers who ignored me completely. I was glad of the large selection of electronic books Thrawn had given me before I left but for much of the journey I could not actually concentrate on reading, instead I spent the time either staring out into the hyperspace lane, absently playing with the necklace I always wore, the small round ma'arilite stone with the hidden star in it, or sitting on my own in the tiny galley drinking tea.

So much had happened in what seemed to be such a short time that I had barely had time to put it all together. Xizor was dead, Zaarin was dead, two men who had caused so much trouble for such a long time suddenly gone. I wasn't unhappy about their deaths but it all seemed so surreal.

Thrawn had spoken sparingly about the details in the drawn out battles Zaarin had caused. I knew better than to push him. He was angry with himself for losing an ISD, for losing so many men and women and decent pilots. He was also angry with himself for not seeing everything play out the way he usually could. I had to remind him that it was he who had told me often enough of Zaarin's intelligence and tactical genius. That in spite of Zaarin's intelligence Thrawn had still managed to out-think him on more than one occasion. It had not helped to ease his mind.

Like Xizor, Zaarin had had an axe to grind and his hatred of the Emperor as well as Thrawn had burned deeply inside of him driving him to do what he did. I didn't understand why he had loathed the Emperor so much. I knew why I hated Palpatine but Zaarin had no obvious reason to and the only thing I could put it all down to was Zaarin's lust for power. In the end it was his own greed that did him in, that and the fact that Thrawn knew something he did not. My uncle had once told me that in the end everything always came down to details. When I had repeated this to Thrawn he had just laughed bitterly. I toyed with the pendant around my throat and sighed. In the end I closed my eyes and dozed fitfully until we landed on board the *Executor*.

I stood at the window in my office on board the *Executor* and gazed out at the planet we were orbiting. Endor was a huge gas giant with nine satellites including the life sustaining forested moon, known as the Sanctuary Moon because it had once been a protected nature reserve during the time of the Galactic Republic. During the rule of the Empire the Sanctuary Moon had been surveyed many times with mixed results.

The moon itself was home to several indigenous species of sentient life including Ewoks, yuzzums and Duloks. While the reports had down played any dangers any of these species posed I had heard rumours that on one expedition the Ewoks had managed to run circles around the first scouting party that had been sent down to explore the moon yet there had been nothing noted about this in the official reports. It would not be the first

time that Imperial surveys had completely discounted the intelligence of the local species and I was certain it would not be the last.

Thrawn often spoke of the arrogance rampant in the Empire leading to the silly belief that humans were far superior to all other sentient species in the galaxy. *One of these days this misguided belief will come back to haunt the Empire, believe me. It is very unwise to underestimate a species simply because they are physically and mentally different.* He had said and I guessed he ought to know as he had experienced this first hand, being alien himself.

Still, as I had looked at the image of the furry little creatures called Ewoks I could see how people, particularly Imperial men would be quick to dismiss them as harmless. They reminded me of small bears and they were more cute than threatening. Still, visitors to Tatooine often thought that wamp-rats were cute in their own way and soon found out the hard way this was as far from the truth as possible.

From where I stood I could also see the new battle station which was still under construction. I had not been allowed to accompany Lord Vader whenever he went over to converse with the Emperor so I had no idea just how far along the construction actually was. I found it strange that no one would even speak about it and when I had asked Lord Vader about all the secrecy he had been less than kind in his answer so I left it alone. In the end, I didn't actually care.

Two days after I arrived, the rest of the fleet began to amass and by then I was busy enough with work for Lord Vader that it didn't occur to me to ask questions. The *Executor* was the command ship for the fleet so every operation was run from her bridge. I lost count of the number of drills that occurred and eventually learned to tune out the ear splitting alarm that shattered the peace and quiet. I was pretty certain that what ever the rebels were preparing for it wasn't this and they would be outnumbered and out gunned beyond their wildest dreams.

It was a good thing that I had brought my lightsaber because in the small pockets of down time, in between the drills and the work Lord Vader had decided that I was the perfect distraction. Despite the fact that his battle droids were an infinitely better challenge than I was, he seemed to enjoy sparring with a live being and I know he enjoyed teaching even though he would never in a thousand years admit to that. For my part I was also grateful for the distraction. If I was trying to concentrate on not losing any limbs and keeping out of the way of his evil little remotes I was not thinking about the up and coming carnage that was sure to happen. It was going to be a slaughter if it worked out the way the Emperor had planned it. The waiting drove me mad. When it ended it was almost a relief.

We were in the middle of a lesson when Lord Vader was suddenly summoned to the bridge. I knew that this was the beginning, the signal he had also been waiting for, but there was something else. He had felt something, a ripple in the force. I had felt it too. Like a slight caress to the back of my neck, making all the hair on my arms stand on end.

"What was tha...?" I started to ask.

"My son." He spoke with a quiet hush. This was what he had been waiting for even though he had never voiced it.

"He's here?" I asked. It seemed so surreal to me that this Luke Skywalker would deliberately walk into a situation that would surely mean his death.

Lord Vader suddenly looked at me as though seeing me for the first time. I could have sworn he was smiling. "Of course." There was such pride in his voice that I suddenly hated Luke Skywalker but I bit it down.

He didn't say anything else and swept out of the room as though I no longer existed.

With nothing else to do and the desire to continue my own workout gone I went back to my quarters, showered and then wandered down to see if Jorae was working.

I lounged in the extra seat beside Jorae who was busy at his work station. I had brought him a cup of stim'caf and his grin had been worth it.

"So what's going on?" I asked impatient for news, bored and frustrated all at the same time.

He took off his head set, sipped his 'caf and drew a deep breath. "Well if I understand it right they just let a shuttle go through the blockade to the moon."

I made a face. "That's news?"

He nodded. "Yeah because they were using a really old pass code, probably one of the ones the Emperor let slip. We think it's *them*." He said dropping his voice to a low whisper.

I arched an eye brow doing a good Thrawn imitation and said, "Them?"

Jorae grinned. "You know, rebels." He said. "Probably the scouting party, you know, come to check out the lay of the land and report back to their control."

"You've been watching too many holo war dramas!" I told him with a laugh.

"Do you think they know this is a trap?" Jorae asked looking at me.

I shook my head. "No, I am fairly sure they don't. I am fairly certain they have no idea what is waiting for them."

He looked at me then. "You sound like you feel sorry for them!" He could not keep the incredulity out of his voice.

"A little. It will be a slaughter. A lot of people are going to die and for what?"

He shrugged. "They are the ones stupid enough to want to try and take down the government and the Emperor." He said.

I nodded. "I know but it doesn't change the fact that a lot of people are going to die." I said, "That includes a lot of Imperial pilots and ground troops."

Jorae made a face. "Boy, you sure know how to ruin the mood, don't you." He said and slipped his headset back on. "I gotta get back to work, you should go and get some sleep or something, you look like hell."

He was right and I could not disagree with him. "Yeah, sleep sounds like a good thing." I actually could not recall the last time I had a good night's sleep. My nights had been filled with strange dreams full of mixed messages I could not decipher and nightmares that had me waking up screaming blue murder. The images were so jumbled that upon waking I usually had no clear memory of what I had dreamt but the lingering fear of something awful about to happen remained.

"I'll ping you if something happens." He said cheerfully as I got up to leave.

"Thanks." I said and gave him a little wave, leaving him to his work.

As I wandered through the corridors of the *Executor* I was clear that the tension level on the ship had risen up several notches. Everyone was waiting and it was driving me crazy. Nothing seemed to ease it. I could have exercised until I dropped from exhaustion and still I would have felt the stress.

Restless and frustrated I resorted to the one thing I knew would keep my mind occupied. I went down into the hanger bay where the shuttles were docked and asked the deck officer if he minded if I worked on the *Sigiri* which had been unofficially dubbed my ship because I used it so much.

"Be my guest, Miss Gabriel." He said. Preoccupied with other problems the last thing he wanted was to deal with me whining at him, which I would have given half a chance.

I often spent time tinkering with the *Sigiri's* engines and ship board systems. It was the one place I felt truly at ease and out of the way. When Lord Vader was busy and did not need my services, there wasn't much else for me to do on board the *Executor*. So one day, in the throes of absolute boredom, I had begged the deck officer on duty at the time to give me some mechanic work. I was certified and had papers so it wasn't as if I wasn't actually

qualified to touch a ship's engine. It had taken some convincing and only when I had complained about it all enough to Lord Vader had I actually been granted clearance to go into the pits and work. I didn't get to do it very often but when I could it was a relief. No matter what else was going on in the Empire, ships engines always needed looking after.

I had started seriously looking after the *Sigiri* after the trip with Thrawn. This had not gone unnoticed by Lord Vader who essentially had the shuttle signed off to me exclusively unless no other was available. I had been so delighted by this I had almost hugged him, but thankfully had managed to restrain myself from this impulse at the last minute. The bad thing about this arrangement was that because the *Sigiri* wasn't really mine, other people used her when I was not around which was often enough. The good thing about this was that afterwards there was always something for me to do because despite of the fact that the Empire hired good mechanics, the shuttles were the least cared for. It was the TIEs and the rest of the fleet's ships that got the brunt of mechanical attention. Only the Emperor's and Lord Vader's personal shuttle received such good care, the rest were given a cursory once over to make sure things were working and that was that.

I changed into the coveralls I kept on board the shuttle and vanished into the engine room. As I had feared the last person to use *Sigiri* had left a mess and before long I was cheerfully up to my elbows in hydraulic fluid and engine bits.

Time always passed differently when I was working on engines. It seemed that while the rest of the galaxy continued on at it's own pace, my world sped up. I could spend hours tinkering on a ship and never notice how late it had gotten. I could not count the number of times that my father or Jyrki had had to almost physically haul me away to eat supper or go to bed because time had just spun away from me.

By the time I was satisfied that the *Sigiri* was in peak running order again, nearly six hours had passed and I was actually exhausted. It struck me as odd, when I cleaned off the grime in the shower that fixing engines would tire me out even more so than a stressful physical workout with Lord Vader but I didn't question it. With a sigh of relief I slipped into bed and fell asleep. If only my dreams were as peaceful as working on a ship's engines were.

*Qui Gon Jinn stood at my side. We were both standing on a hill with a landing pad someplace I had never been before. It was not a world I recognized but this was a dream so that did not mean very much.*

*"There will be much change." He said.*

*"Change?"*

*"All things change in their time, young Merlyn." He said gently.*

*"Where are we?" I asked changing the subject.*

*"At the beginning. At the end." He replied cryptically.*

*"That is not helpful!"*

*He laughed. "You always want the straight answers where there are none." His tone of voice was kind, not chiding.*

*"Why are you here?" I asked, impatience leaking into my voice.*

*"I see much potential in you but like Anakin you have a wild streak, you will need to watch that. The Dark side is seductive and you are at a turning point."*

*"What is that supposed to mean?"*

*"Be mindful of your emotions. Be mindful of the living force, let it be your guide not your fear or your anger." He paused for a moment then added, "You cannot go where he is going; you cannot follow in his footsteps." Qui Gon said gently, laying his hand on my shoulder.*

*I frowned. "I don't understand what you are telling me, as usual!" I snapped.*

*"I can only serve as a guide, nothing more." He laughed and then drew a deep breath. "Everything is going to change." He said and then shimmered into nothingness. "Remember all you have learned, it will save your life."*

*I shivered as the air suddenly grew cold and the sky dark. I looked up expecting to see storm clouds but instead saw the Executor plunging down towards where I stood. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out. Instead I suddenly found myself in an EV suit out in the vacuum of space. It was the strangest sensation and as the stars whirled about me I felt my stomach churn. I knew I was going to be sick if I didn't get out of the suit but when I tried to move around to catch my tether line I realised there was none and I was free floating in space and there was nothing else around me, no ship, no safety line nothing. I was utterly alone. The panic I felt swelling in my chest was so great I thought for certain the entire galaxy could hear my heart beating. I had no idea what to do and just when I thought it could not get any worse a loud alarm started to sound in my helmet. I looked at the gauges on my wrist and saw I was running out of oxygen. When I opened my mouth to scream I realised I could not breathe, the alarm in my helmet sounding louder than anything else I had ever known. As the stars spun around me all I could think of was Thrawn and that I did not want to die.*

I woke up nauseated and gasping for breath, soaked in sweat and shivering. The alarm in my dream was the comm by my bed and when I answered it I was anything but polite. The young voice on the other end sounded nonplussed and bored as he told me that I was to take the *Sigiri* to the Battle Station. The Emperor wished to speak with me.

I wasn't sure what was worse. The dream I had just had or going to see the Emperor. With a sigh I got out of bed, showered and dressed. I grabbed my satchel with my lightsaber, my ident cards, and a couple of books tucked in it, threw a shawl across my shoulders and made my way to the landing bay. I shivered, despite the warmer clothes I was wearing, as I sat down in the pilot's chair and started the engine warm up sequence.

I had not been to the Battle station before so the docking procedure was interesting. As I navigated my way around the superstructure I could see where it was still unfinished and under construction, but I was certain this was just for show and that the station itself was more than battle ready. It was an awesome sight. I might have spent longer staring at the technological wonder except traffic control broke into my thoughts requesting clearance codes then giving me my landing instructions.

Once the ship had touched down on the incredibly shiny floor and I had shut the engines down, I slipped my ident cards over my head but left my satchel onboard the shuttle in the cockpit under the pilot's seat. I didn't think it was a good idea to visit the Emperor with a lightsaber tucked away on my person. I was so nervous that sandjiggers squirmed in my gut. I had to work hard to calm myself down. I was sure that whatever it was the Emperor wanted from me, it was not good, nothing he did was good. When I walked down the ramp, two stone faced officers were waiting for me. I was a little surprised when they requested to see my identity tags because usually no one bothered but they were not taking any chances.

When I asked what was going on I was given no answer only a filthy look. Once my tags had been cleared I was told to follow them, so I did. I had a terrible sense of foreboding in my gut and the nausea I had experienced in my dream became very real. I had to fight to keep my breathing steady and remain calm. My palms were sweating and cold shivers ran the length of my spine. I wondered if everyone felt this terrible sense of doom whenever they were summoned before the Emperor or if it was just me being paranoid.

To distract me from the sense of impending doom, I concentrated on remembering the way I had come from the docking bay and the land marks along the way. The battle station was indeed huge and full of people as well, most of whom did not even bother to

glance up as I passed by. We entered a turbo lift which was so fast I thought that my stomach had fallen out of my belly. When we reached the top and the doors opened I knew a real sense of fear without any reason. At one of the Officer's insistence I got off first, they followed close behind me.

One of the Royal Guardsmen who was standing at the side of the closed entrance moved slightly and the officer on my left said. "The Emperor will see you now."

The doorway to the Emperor's observation chamber opened and I walked into almost darkness. I stood for a few moments while my eyes adjusted. The pause was enough to allow me to see the vastness of the area I was in and take stock of the astonishing view that was being afforded by the huge round picture window.

"Come closer, young Merlyn." The Emperor's voice drifted out of the darkness. "I have something I wish you to see."

The room, although huge felt claustrophobic to me. I shivered. I knew or felt that Lord Vader had been here recently. I opened up my senses and searched for him but all that lingered was a vague ripple of his presence along with someone else and nothing more. I took a deep, steadying breath and walked from the turbo lift to where the stairs which led up to where the Emperor was seated. His throne was very much like the one he had in the Imperial palace and it seemed to swallow him whole.

"Yes, my apprentice was here, child. I see your talents are growing stronger." He murmured but his voice sounded too loud in the darkness. I tried to shut out the sensation of spiders crawling across my brain but I couldn't. He was far too powerful for that. I shivered and surrendered to his force touch. When I reached the bottom of the steps I genuflected and bowed my head, waiting for his permission to move, to look up. I felt rather than saw his smile. He let me wait for what seemed a very long time before he told me to rise.

"You wished to see me your Excellency?" I asked as I stood, my voice sounded small and child like in the vast room.

"Yes." He said. "So tell me, what do you think of this new battle station?"

I shifted my stance and placed my hands behind my back. "It's very ... big, your Highness."

He laughed. He actually threw back his head and laughed. I shuddered. "Yes, child it is, but that is merely a description of how it looks, I asked you what you thought of it."

"I don't know what to think." I told him quietly. "It's designed for massive amounts of destruction. It could annihilate a planet in the blink of an eye. It scares me to death. That's how I feel about it." I was angry without any real reason. This room, this place was making me edgy and nervous.

"And so it should, child." He said satisfied. "Come, I wish you to see this." His hand waved at me to come forward. As if pulled by some invisible rope I climbed the steps until I was standing near him, near the throne.

"Look out of the window what do you see?" He asked, waving his hand vaguely in the direction of the large viewport.

I did as he asked. "The fleet, stars...space." I said. "But people are going to die out there aren't they?"

He nodded and sat back against the throne, melding once more into the shadows. "You have witnessed space battles before have you not?" He asked.

I turned to look at him, the cowl of his cloak hid most of his face but his eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own. They frightened me. "I have, Excellency."

"And you feel them do you not? You feel the deaths?"

I swallowed and nodded.



"Lord Vader should have taken better care with you." He said softly, "For that matter, perhaps so should I. You have many talents you have kept well hidden from us, from me."

I looked away. I wondered how much deeper he would dig into my soul. *You have a strong, stubborn will which amuses my master but make no mistake you will be broken and then you will be his obedient and compliant servant. And what is more, you will be powerless to stop it from happening.* Lord Vader's words echoed through my mind. I wondered what it was the Emperor wanted of me but now I was scared to ask. I used the quiet moments to find my center, to breathe and find strength.

"Come closer child." He beckoned. I did as he asked and came to stand before him.

"Sit." He said, motioning to the space on the floor at his feet.

I moved as though in a dream, doing as he commanded without thinking about it. I sank to the cold stone floor, one knee tucked under the other which was pressed close to my chest. Without even realising it I was echoing the position of the little statue he had allowed me to see. I watched as he pushed a button on the armrest of his throne, a small compartment opened up and he withdrew something from it. In the dim light I saw the glint of silver, a slender cylindrical object. I knew what it was right away and I looked up at him puzzled, I had already read a lightsaber for him once and I couldn't tell if this was the same one as before.

"You did so well with the last one Lord Vader brought me....," The Emperor purred as his fingertips caressed the lightsaber as though he were stroking a kitten, "I thought I would share this one with you as well."

I could feel my pulse quicken and the knot in my gut tighten as fear shot through me. I knew without asking what he wanted just as I knew this was not the same weapon he had handed me after Bespin on Wayland, deep in the mountain complex. I held my breath without realising it. When he leaned forward to hand it to me, I hesitated, shrinking back from him. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a flash of red, a Royal Guardsman had shifted ever so slightly ready to make certain that I obeyed. Palpatine made an almost imperceptible gesture with his free hand and the guard sank back into the shadows.

"The young lady knows her place; she will do as she is told." The Emperor said in a quiet voice as hard as durasteel.

I shut my eyes tightly for a second, drew a deep breath then looked up into his face. I had been trained to get past this fear, Master Kjestyll's words echoed in my head almost as if he were at my side. I gave a slight nod and the Emperor's eyes seemed to glow. I did not like what I saw in the expression on his face, glee, satisfaction, and triumph. It reminded me so sharply of Venthan Chassu's last painting that I had to look twice at the throne to make sure it was not made from bones.

"No disobedience, child. You work for me." His reprimand was sharp edged and left a bitter taste in my mouth.

When I reached out to him my fingers were trembling visibly. With a soft chuckle he placed the weapon into my outstretched hand.

"Tell me what you see," He commanded, "As you see it. I know you can do this now. Do not hold anything back as you did the last time."

I bit my lip. How he had known I had not spoken of every detail was beyond me. I was certain the Emperor could not read minds but he always seemed to know, his ability to read people was uncanny. I nodded and held the lightsaber in both hands tightly, opening myself up to its memories.

At first I wasn't sure what to think. These memories were new, just like the weapon. I watched them unfold, like the way Thrawn undressed me, slowly, carefully, bit by bit. I watched as Luke put the weapon together, and then as he tried it out, feeling his trepidation then triumph and relief. I saw as he made his plans to get back his friend, to

rescue Han Solo, slipping the weapon into the little R2 unit. The memories jolt forward to a battle on Jabba's sail barge. Jumbled, chaotic. I saw flashes of imagery, Boba Fett falling into the pit of Carkoon. I know I gasped out loud. Boba Fett was part of my life and being fed to the Sarlacc was one of Jabba's favourite punishments but Fett's fall was an accident. I gasped for breath as the fight continued until the sail barge was destroyed taking Jabba with it. After that were only snippets, faces and a space journey to a planet I had never seen before. There was a terrible sense of sorrow then. Luke had lost someone he had loved and admired but I couldn't tell who it was. I could feel the tears rolling down my cheeks as I spoke of what I was seeing out loud to the Emperor. He was right, I had learned some measure of control and despite the overwhelming sensations that accompanied the memories I could describe them almost as they unfolded in my mind. It was like describing a holo-drama to a blind man.

I saw the journey to Endor, vague flashes mostly of fear of getting caught, worry about his friends. Something in Luke had changed from brash young boy to thoughtful young man, bound and determined to right a wrong. He knew that Lord Vader was his father and had accepted it, more or less. He had also known that Lord Vader had sensed his presence. *I'm endangering the mission, he had said, I shouldn't have come...* but he had come anyway because he believed he could turn his father back towards the light, that somewhere deep inside Lord Vader's soul there was still good, and because it was his destiny which he could no more back away from it than I could let go of his lightsaber. I took a breath and gathered my thoughts trying to sort out the jumble in my mind. What happened next was confusing, small furry creatures, the Ewoks, had taken them hostage. The images were unclear because Luke's own mind had been on something else, something more serious, more frightening, confronting Darth Vader. I felt it, the moment Luke decided to give himself up and perhaps save his friends. His naïveté and his arrogance were astonishing to me. Even as I said this out loud I heard the Emperor's soft reply.

"That was the failing of all the Jedi." He said. "What else do you see?"

Lord Vader had known. He had felt Luke's presence and there had been no surprise when the young man had shown up, turning himself into the guard at the Alpha base on the Sanctuary Moon. For the first time Father and son faced each other in a quiet sort of calm. When the guard had handed Lord Vader Luke's lightsaber I felt the flash of pride as sharply as though I had been struck across the face. *Your skills are complete, you are as powerful as the Emperor has foreseen...* Lord Vader had said when he had ignited the weapon. It shone with a brilliant green light. For a moment the two men regarded one another, Luke looking for the good in the man he stood before, the father he had never known but had yearned for and Lord Vader contemplating the past, watching, his own emotions in turmoil, as the guards had taken Luke away for the final confrontation. Dawn was slowly beginning to break. For a few moments Lord Vader was torn and then he moved, ready to present his son to the Emperor on the Death Star. His loyalties decided, his path chosen, his downfall complete.

I sat on the floor, my breathing coming to me in short gasps, the lightsaber still clasped in both of my hands. I looked up at the Emperor to tell him I was done when suddenly a new set of memories flashed through me making me whimper. Lord Vader had passed Luke's weapon to the Emperor. I had not expected to see this and what came next shook me to the core. I did not speak the memories that came to me, short and crystal clear. When they were finished I trembled violently but not out of fear, out of anger.

I scrambled to my feet suddenly. I felt the Royal Guardsmen move, a subtle shift in stance. I had a weapon in my hands and I was unpredictable. The Emperor laughed softly. He knew exactly what I had seen; he knew because this was what he had truly wanted me to see. I backed away from him, my knuckles white from gripping Luke's lightsaber so hard.

"Yes." He said, nodding. The word came out as a long slow hissing caress.

"How could you?" I asked so quietly I wasn't sure I had spoken the words out loud.

"It is the way of things, young Merlyn, surely you must understand that." He explained to me the way a father would explain to a small child that fire burns.

"You can't...! Not after all he has done for you; after all you have done to him!" I shouted. The guards behind me tensed, shifted their stance and readied their weapons.

The Emperor laughed. "Anakin Skywalker would have been the most powerful sith in the galaxy had he not let his pride, his fury better him. He lost power when he lost his limbs, he is *imperfect*." Palpatine hissed, leaning forward to emphasise his words. "His son is stronger, almost whole and primed to take his father's place. Lord Vader knows this to be true."

That was a lie. Lord Vader did not expect this betrayal. Lord Vader thought the object of this game was to turn Luke so that he might serve them both. Vader had no idea that the Emperor was planning to replace him.

"No!" I screamed defiant, angry. This was so unfair that I had no words to express what I felt.

Palpatine sat back in his throne and laughed. "Now you see the way of things, little one. Oh I have such plans for you." His voice was a sigh, "Your talents make you valuable, your gift of psychometry is so rare. Honed to perfection, what a weapon you will be, reader of things, keeper of secrets...."

"I will never work for you, ever!" I spat out defiantly.

The Emperor chuckled softly. "Oh I think that you will. I think that you would not want to see your adoptive family hurt because you refuse to do as I ask."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You leave my family alone they have done nothing to you!"

His hand waved in a dismissive manner. "On the contrary my dear, shall I reveal your father's controversial smuggler's past to you? Tell you of some of his less appealing qualities? He should have been arrested and executed long ago for the crimes he has committed and continues to commit against this Empire. And do not think I do not know about the Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh, his actions during the clone wars alone merit my wrath. If you wish to protect them you will serve me."

"So you use my love for my family just as you used Vader's love for Padmé." My voice was low and cold. Hatred for this man who sat before me coursed through my veins.

"Vader's passion made him easily pliable but he has become old, useless to me. He defies me to suit his own needs. His son will replace him as my apprentice and stand at my side as I bring order to this galaxy and crush this ridiculous rebellion once and for all! You will comply because you do not wish to see the people you care for hurt. You are not quite as easily manipulated as I had hoped but I do believe you can be coerced and perhaps this will actually have the desired effect." His words were a snarl competing with my anger which buzzed in my brain like angry hornets. I saw his hand twitch and felt the Guardsman closest to me move. "You may go now, we will speak later. I have much for you to do and you have much to learn about being in my service, girl, first of all, obedience and compliance. I shall enjoy watching you take these lessons to heart."

I didn't think then, I simply acted out of rage, out of desperation and whirled about igniting the weapon in my hand. Green flashed through the air as I swung out at the guardsman behind me but before I could even strike the lightsaber was swept from my hands by Palpatine's force pull. His laughter filled the room.

"Yes, your anger is a powerful thing. How your Jedi mother would weep to see her daughter turning to the dark side. In time you will make a fine addition to my stable, but not yet, I think. You still have too much defiance but we will break you of that when the time is right...." He told me, patting the weapon he now held in his hands.

I was so angry I was shaking. Somewhere inside of my head a voice I knew from dreams was shouting at me to calm down, to think but I ignored it. Fury raged through me, a blinding storm of terrible emotion that would eat my soul whole if I let it. "I hate you." I hissed and I meant it.

"Yes, I know," He replied almost tenderly, "And I will use that emotion wisely, I can assure you."

"He will never forgive you for this." I hissed through clenched teeth. *Neither will I*, I thought.

"His forgiveness is not sought nor will it matter. He will be dead and I will have a new apprentice at my side, a more powerful apprentice." He replied softly.

Bereft of words I simply shook my head slowly. I had not expected this; I had not thought him capable of such betrayal. As deeply as I loathed him in that moment a tiny part of me deep inside sensed he was wrong but I was too stunned, too angry to voice it. He just smiled at me then, almost lovingly, the way a master will smile at a trained pet which has finally learnt the lesson being taught.

"Escort Miss Gabriel to her shuttle, see that she arrives safely at the beta landing pad. She is of value to me, keep her from harm... until it is over." Palpatine said as two uniformed guards stepped out of the shadows. They both gave curt precise military bows and the Royal Guard who had come up behind me gasped my arm tightly.

I have never liked being taken by force and the Royal Guard's touch shoved me over the edge. I struggled wildly, screaming at the Emperor, berating him for what he was about to do, hating him for the betrayal of Lord Vader, hating him for what I knew he wanted to do to me. I was beside myself with fury and utterly out of control. I wondered briefly if this is what it felt like to go mad. Somewhere in the bottom of the darkness a gentle voice pleaded with me to find calm, to back down and while part of me ignored this voice another part listened. Slowly I came back to some semblance of sanity. The Guardsman who held me was very strong and I could feel his fingers digging into the flesh of my arm but the pain helped to clear my head. No matter how hard I struggled I knew I didn't stand a chance against these men or the Emperor and there was nothing I could do prevent what came next but it didn't stop me from railing against it.

I was all but dragged to a second turbo lift, struggling all the way. I could feel Lord Vader's presence so close it was as if he were standing next to me but I could not reach out to him with the force, there was something blocking me, he was shutting me out. It's a trap! I screamed at him with my mind but my mental warning fell on deaf ears. In the scope of his world I was no longer important, all that mattered to Lord Vader was turning his son and pleasing his Master. For the first time in a very long time I felt very small and very alone. It was only the vague hint of Qui Gon Jinn's ghostly presence in my mind that brought me back from the brink of utter despair. I stopped struggling then and the Guardsman released my arm when we reached the docking bay where my shuttle was.

The two officers followed me onto the *Sigiri*. I was shoved into the co pilot's chair, a blaster held tightly to my head by the shorter of the two men while the other piloted the shuttle off the Battle Station to the beta site on the Endor moon. Neither of them spoke a word to me. I could feel their disdain and dislike of me coming off in waves. Had it not been for the Emperor's words to take care that I was not harmed, I wasn't at all certain what else they would have done to me. I had seen looks like they gave me before and it made my skin crawl. As it was they did nothing except maintain guard. The trip took no more than thirty minutes and in that time I had formulated my plan. I drew a deep shuddering breath and began the process of calming down to find my center. *Be the stillness you seek....* I would need all of my wits about me if what I wanted to do when we landed was going to work.

The shuttle came down on the small landing pad with a rough bump. The officer at the helm did not have an easy touch with her. I sighed as I watched him shut the engine down and then add a landing lock code on the consol computer. It made me smile a little, Jyrki had taught me all about basic locking codes and the one the Imperials generally used were simple to undo.

I unbuckled myself from the seat and stood up, pushing the blaster that the pinch faced officer still held to my head away from my face with the back of my hand.

"Relax; I am not going anywhere." I said coldly. I augmented this with a not so subtle force suggestion that he might want to put the gun away before it blew up in his face. It seemed to work and he holstered the weapon slowly, as if in a dream.

"How long do you intend to keep me here?" I asked calmly.

"Until my orders state otherwise, *little girl*." He spat. He wasn't happy about being on guard duty.

"Well then, can I at least get something to drink?" I asked, ignoring his insult. "I'm not going anyplace and you have the gun."

The man looked at his companion, who simply shrugged. "She's just a girl what can she do, like she said, Sijac, you're the one with the blaster." He said and unbuckled the straps as he got up from the pilot's seat. "I could use a drink myself." He added glaring at me, "Babysitting is thirsty work."

We left the cockpit and made for the small galley. On the way I feigned nausea and begged to open the main ramp for fresh air. I planted a subtle suggestion in both men's minds that being covered in my vomit would not make the Emperor happy. Fifteen minutes later, a cup of tea in hand I sat on the bottom of the *Sigiri's* ramp watching the sky above. The guard named Sijac was pacing restlessly on the ground in front of me. He did not like waiting and he was unhappy with this particular assignment. The other, whose name was Egann, was calmer, more stoic and like me had taken a seat to drink his tea.

I sat with my hands cupped around the mug staring out at the view. This moon was lush and green, beautiful in an untouched sort of way. It was completely different to my own home world but there was something oddly familiar, as though I had been here before. As I tried to understand why this was, I suddenly had to fight from choking on the mouthful of tea I had taken as I gasped in surprise. I had felt a tremor in the force, a very subtle shifting of power. It rippled about the galaxy the way wind plays with a gauzy curtain and felt for all the world like a cold caress on the back of my neck. I shivered and wished I could see what was happening above the moon on the space station. What ever it was it didn't *feel* good.

The beta site was several kilometres away from the alpha post and was little more than a small secondary landing site with an automated monitoring station. We had landed on the further most landing pad, on top of a small hill which allowed me to look over the valley below. There wasn't much to see, except forest and over in the distance the generator dish that kept the Battle station's shield in place. I could hear scattered shots of blaster fire off in the distance. The fighting had begun. I sighed as I stood up. The sensation that I had been here before nagged at the edge of my mind and I couldn't shake it but I could not place it either.

"There is supposed to be a big space battle, do you mind if I turn on the comm to hear the chatter?" I asked.

Neither men objected, nor, as I had hoped did they follow me into the shuttle. I was reasonably sure that Egann, the one who had piloted us down and put the lock code on the console had no idea of my pilot and slicer skills. He wasn't worried about me trying to take off without them because he was certain I couldn't. It made me smile when people underestimated me.

Once in the cockpit I dug out my satchel from under the pilot's seat and slung it over my shoulder. I also took a few minutes to get a look at what kind of land lock I was dealing with. I smiled at the simplicity of it but left it in place. I didn't want to give either of the two men a reason to distrust me or want to either lock me up in a cabin or secure me somehow. Undoing Egann's work would take only a few minutes once I had dealt with the two of them. I turned on the comm to listen to the chatter, loud enough that the two officers could hear it from outside. There was surprisingly little being said. It was as if the entire fleet were holding its breath waiting for a signal, the Emperor's signal. His plan was to give the rebels enough rope to hang themselves then pull the noose even tighter laughing as he did so.

I desperately wanted to reach Lord Vader but even calm and clear headed I could not break through his silence. He knew I was there, reaching out to him but he was busy, his mind was elsewhere. There was nothing else to do except wait. I just did not know what I was waiting for. After a few minutes I went back outside, with the wrap slung about my shoulders my satchel was hidden. Both men glanced at me, they were bored, if they noticed anything different about me they didn't mark it as unusual.

I went back to sitting on the ramp.

"So, you hear anything?" Egann asked.

I shook my head. "The comm is quiet. I guess the Emperor ordered radio silence." I replied.

"Gonna be a slaughter for the rebs!" Sijac snorted. "Good thing too!"

I simply nodded. Each death was like a pinprick on my soul, I was glad I wasn't close enough to feel it or see it happen. Our heads turned when blaster fire sounded closer now. I could hear shouting and the sounds of AT STs and AT ATs tromping about the forest below. There were screams not all of them human. I shivered and pulled my wrap closer about my shoulders.

In my lessons with Master Kjestyll we had often discussed fighting and battle techniques. One of the questions that had been first and foremost on my mind was timing. How did one know when the time was right to strike? I had asked.

"Some people never know, they do not tend to live long." He had replied, "But others, like you have an instinct. You listen to your inner voice and you simply know. It is a moment when everything aligns and you see the path before you clearly, you see the moment to act. It is then you either do or do not. In that singular point in time and space all is decided, life or death. You will know." He had reassured, then added with a sly grin, "Or you will die. Either way, the choice is made and the outcome known. It is the waiting that drives men mad."

I didn't mind the waiting part as much as I probably should have. I had refilled my cup on the way out the shuttle and for all appearances seemed calm, content to sit and sip tea while all around us a battle waged. It was very surreal. I knew that Egann did not mind being here with me too much, but his companion, who was impatient and angry, itched to be in the thick of things and resented the task he had been given of watching over a stupid girl. I ignored him and spoke to Egann instead, engaging him in light conversation, asking about his life. Most people are only too happy to talk about themselves and he was no exception. In the half an hour that we sat there I learned he had a wife and two daughters. That he enjoyed his job and was content to make his way slowly through the ranks until he retired. He had trained as a TIE pilot but his eyesight was not perfect and so he had been placed elsewhere.

Through him and Sijac's interruptions I learned enough to know who I needed to take out first now all I needed was the perfect moment in time. It came when the shield generator blew up, the explosion rocking the ground around us. None of us had been expecting this but I took advantage of it and slipped my lightsaber from my satchel. I

would only get one chance so it had to be perfect. As the fighting in the distance drew closer, both of the men, sent to watch over me, forgot I was there and had turned their attentions to the forest.

"We should go down and see what's going on!" Sijac said.

"And do what?" Egann had asked.

I got up quietly and walked to where they stood, at the edge of the landing pad trying to see the battle below. They didn't notice me move, Master Kjestyll had trained me well. I struck Sijac first, hitting him hard at the base of the skull with the butt of my lightsaber. I heard bone crack and I wasn't sure if I had actually killed him but I didn't have time to see because Egann had turned around, whipped out his blaster and had it trained on me. What stopped him from simply shooting first and asking questions later I will never know, but in that split second hesitation he had lost. In the seconds between his hesitation and then action, I ignited the lightsaber and deflected the blaster bolt that came at me back to him without even thinking about it. It hit him squarely on the right shoulder and he went down in agony. It was almost too easy. I stood over him and put my foot on his chest.

"You have a family; do you think they want to see you dead?" I asked as I pointed the lightsaber's tip near Egann's throat. He gritted his teeth against the pain of the blaster burn and shook his head. He didn't need to be told to toss away his gun.

"I'm leaving now." I told Egann. "I expect that eventually someone will find you both or you can go and get help, but the rebels blew up the Death Star's shield generator so some part of the plan to trap them has gone very wrong. If I were you I'd start thinking up a story, one that uses the word rebel rather than little girl."

"Who are you?" Egann asked.

I just smiled. "Lord Vader's personal assistant."

He gave me a look of utter disbelief and grunted in pain. The blaster burn to his shoulder was bad but not life threatening. I reached over and, as my uncle had once shown me, put pressure on a certain spot on his neck.

"Wha...?" Egann began but his eyes rolled backwards into his head before he could ask his question and he lost consciousness. I reasoned it was better to have him unconscious than to leave him lying in pain and this way I didn't have to worry about him trying to stop me while I undid his handy work.

I bent down to Sijac's side and touched my fingers to his neck, there was a pulse. Some small part of me was grateful I had not killed but another part of me, the part that was still angry and wanted revenge, wasn't. I didn't need to kill, I just needed to get away.

I went inside the *Sigiri*, hitting the ramp switch to close and made my way to the cockpit. If Egann had thought his lock out would stop me he was wrong. In a matter of moments I had helm control and as the engines began to whine in warm up I strapped myself in. Though it only took a few minutes before I was lifting the shuttle off the landing pad, it felt like an eternity. I flew away from where the bulk of the fighting seemed to be taking place and set the ship's shields to maximum. The last thing I wanted was to be blown out of the sky by stray fire, enemy or friendly. I set course for the Death Star.

Darth Vader had to be warned about the Emperor's treachery and since I could not reach him through our usual, unconventional communication channels I would go the conventional route and show up in person.

As I began to clear the moon's surface, sweeping low over the beta command post I could see the flashes of battle being fought on the ground below. I set my system and adjusted the instrument panel so that I could see the battle which was being waged in the space above me as well. It was strangely contained. The rebellion had moved in close to where the fleet was stationed and the dog fighting was tight between x-wings and TIEs. I frowned when I realised that none of the command ships were firing at all but when a sudden burst of brilliant green light shot from the battle station I understood why. They

did not need to fire their weapons; the Death Star would do that for them. I was still too far away to see any live details, but the blips of light that vanished on my screen as ships exploded caught my breath and made me queasy.

Despite her fast engines and all my extra tinkering, no prayers or wishing would make the *Sigiri* faster than she was, trying gain altitude and break from the clutches of the moon's gravitational pull. She rattled and shook as she flew through the upper atmosphere and only when a sudden silence engulfed me did I know that I was flying free in space. When I saw the battle and how uneven it was, even from as far away as I was, I gasped. The Emperor's plan was a bold one and I shivered involuntarily. He had not meant to simply beat the rebellion at their own game he meant to wipe them all out. I caught my breath and fought to stay calm. I needed to reach Lord Vader and warn him. I opened myself up to the force, feeling its strange warmth flow through me, around me and in its wake I felt Lord Vader's presence, mingled with that of the Emperor's and a third touch which I could only assume was Luke Skywalker's. It was a strange thing to feel their presence and know that up on that terrible unfinished ball of destruction someone's life hung in the balance. I mentally called to Lord Vader but either I was just too far away to be heard or he was deliberately blocking me.

All around I felt conflict and agony. As I drew closer I began to see the shape of things and I felt that shift in the force again, this time not so subtle. I also felt surprise ripple through me but the surprise was not my own. I didn't understand it but I knew urgency when I felt it and cursed the fact that no matter how hard I pushed her, the *Sigiri* was not going to be any faster.

It has been said that a single misstep can change the fate of a man from fortuitous to disastrous and so it was in this instance. Even though I did not see what happened, I sensed it. A great wave of sorrow washed over me and something else, anger hatred and a sudden release of fear. There was an astonishing shift in power as though a great spring which had been pushed as tightly as it could go had suddenly snapped back shattering everything in its path as it did so. Something in the force broke. I clutched at my chest and gasped at the pain of it, an invisible shockwave spun out all around us with the battle station at its epicentre. Something had happened, something in the force had shattered, something that would change the face of the Empire forever. The terrible ever present power of the Emperor had suddenly vanished.

I had to force myself to take a deep breath, willing my nerves to be steady. Even at my ship's top speed I was too far away from the battle station to make any difference so when the *Executor* plunged into the battle station I was dumbfounded by the sight of it. Still heading toward the Death Star some part of my shocked brain registered what I was seeing and I changed course. At that very moment I felt a presence touch my mind.

*Lord Vader.* I whispered both out loud and in my head.

I had never felt him so strongly before and something had changed. There was no more anger.

*Go!* He said telepathically. *Go now!*

*My Lord, it's a trap... the Emperor...*

*Too late for warnings now, girl.* His words echoed in my head, sounding strange almost calm.

*My lord, I can help, I am coming!*

I felt his smile even from such a distance, I felt it. *I release you from my service, Merlyn Gabriel; now go before you also die here, go!* His voice in my head was full of peace but before I could say anything back to him I felt him sever the tie that had bound us for over four years.

I felt his life force ebb and then vanish. In that moment I understood he was dead but I could not comprehend it. There was a terrible tearing of my soul, a physical pain that



hurt as nothing else ever had. I know I screamed in denial but my voice was drowned as the comm channel exploded with frantic voices screaming that the battle station was about to explode. Rebels and Imperials alike scrambled to clear the immediate area and I was no exception.

I swung the shuttle around, heading away from the Death Star so that when it blew up I was mostly ready for it and half the calculations for a hyperspace jump had already been computed. The blast and the light from the explosion were beyond anything I had ever seen, but I didn't feel that. What I felt was death, the Emperor's, Lord Vader's and a part of my soul. The *Sigiri* lurched and rocked violently, if I had not been strapped in, I would have been flung across the cockpit. My instrument panel went wild and alarms screamed at me. Years of training took over and I numbly went through the motions to fix the problems and sort out the damage the explosion's shock wave had done to my ship. As fast as I could, I got out of the planet's gravity well and hit the hyperspace jump switch. I had no idea where I was headed I only knew I had to leave.

*Go!* Lord Vader had said. It was the last order he would ever give me and because there was nothing else for me to do, I obeyed him one final time.

The *Sigiri* came out of hyperspace shuddering violently. I woke from my doze disoriented and confused. I had been dreaming but the images in my head made no sense to me. For a second I had no idea where I was and then everything came flooding back. The emptiness I felt in the pit of my gut was so physically painful that I had to fight the urge to throw up. I would have cried if there had been time but alarms were screaming at me. My sorrow could wait and I shoved it deep down inside of me.

The *Sigiri's* engines had over heated and there had been more damage done by the shock wave from the Death Star's explosion than I had thought. I wasn't sure if I could fix it but I was pretty sure I could nurse the hyperdrive until I reached a safe place to set down and get repairs. I patched up the engine as much as I could then I consulted the star charts to see where I was, grateful the nav system was functioning properly.

I had flown quite far and according to the charts I was somewhere out on the edge of the Mid Rim past a planet called Rakata Prime. I didn't know much about this planet and there was very little in the database so I made the decision to avoid it. I had no desire to find myself on a rebel friendly planet in an Imperial shuttle. I sighed as I ran through the data-base looking for Imperial friendly planets and found a name I knew. Nirauan.

I sat back in the pilot's chair with a sigh. *Thrawn*, I thought. He had told me about this planet, he had built a secret base of operations on it. I wondered where he was and if news of what had happened had already made its way out to the Unknown Regions. I had tried to contact any Imperial ships who would have been close on the emergency frequency but there was nothing but static. Long range communications in that region of space were unreliable because the HoloNet system was not fully set up so far away from the core. I punched the coordinates to Nirauan into the nav computer and prayed the engines would hold until I got there.

I was truly tired but I couldn't sleep. I should have tried but every time I closed my eyes all I saw was the *Executor* as it crashed into the Death Star and the sensation of being torn apart from the inside out as Lord Vader had died. I couldn't bear it so I buried it and spent much of my time in the engine room babysitting the engine and the hyperdrive. I was grateful for the small mercy that I was at least on a ship I knew well and had spent many hours in. I forced myself to think rationally and concentrate on what I would tell Thrawn when I finally found him. I wasn't sure he would be at the base on Nirauan but I had to try. It never even occurred to me to go back to Coruscant or to make contact with any of the other ships in the fleet. I had been so torn apart by the Emperor's planned betrayal of Lord Vader that I had not thought about anything else. When the hyperdrive alarm beeped to let

me know I was entering normal space I was curled up on the engine room floor, numb and exhausted.

Nirauan was a small arboreal planet, the second of three, which orbited a weak red star. Thrawn had spoken of its strange terrain, beautiful vegetation and natural lakes. The base itself had been built over an existing structure and vaguely resembled an outstretched hand. *They call it the hand of Thrawn*, he had said jokingly as he told me about some of the people who he had stationed there. As I approached the planet I broadcast my Imperial security clearance codes on the Imperial emergency channel. It did not take long to get a reply. I was asked for more identification and I gave it, after a moment's pause I was given landing instructions. I followed them to the letter not wishing to make what I was sure would be a difficult meeting any harder.

As I styled the shuttle to land I could see why the place had been nicknamed the Hand of Thrawn, there were five towers which reached up out of the base. It did, from a certain angle, resemble like a hand. All they needed to do to make it perfect, I thought wryly, was paint it blue.

Once the *Sigiri* had touched down, her engines shut off and the boarding ramp lowered I gathered my courage and went to meet who ever was waiting for me. I was shocked to see a friendly face and even more so to see no armed guards or angry troopers waiting for me.

"Miss Gabriel? This is a pleasant surprise, did Lord Vader send you?" Voss Parck stepped forward to meet me, motioning the two Chiss at his side to relax. His smile was genuine but he could not hide the puzzlement he felt.

"Commander Parck..." I began but suddenly lost the ability to speak. Emotion swept through me like blast fire and I had to cover my mouth to stop the sob that threatened to spill out. I fought to calm myself and stay steady on my feet.

"Are you okay? You are as white as a snow lily." He asked taking me gently by the arm and leading me out of the landing bay into the facility itself.

I shook my head. "No, no not really."

"Your shuttle shows signs of damage, there's a lot of carbon scoring, were you in a fight, some sort of skirmish or an ambush?"

"Endor." I whispered.

He gave me a quizzical look and a slight shake of his head. "Endor?"

"Have you not heard?" I couldn't believe that he did not know.

He shook his head. "There has been no news from the Core for the last twenty-six hours, apparently the Holonet is having technical difficulties. We have been in a long range comm blackout and the secondary channels are all silent. Has something happened?"

I choked back a strange urge to giggle and glanced at the two Chiss who eyed me with suspicion. "I think we had better speak in private." I said.

He did not argue against it and led me to a small meeting room, his hand on the small of my back. His familiarity was comforting despite being a breach of decorum. I sat down hard on the nearest chair, grateful for the solidity of the conference table. With my elbows on the table I buried my face in my hands. Park turned to the two Chiss and asked them to leave. One of them went to argue but Park held up his hand. "Miss Gabriel is Lord Vader's personal assistant. Grand Admiral Thrawn trusts her, so should you. Please wait outside."

They didn't like it but they did as they were asked.

"Now," He said, "First things first, you look awful can I get you something to drink, to eat?"

I shook my head and drew a deep breath. "Where's Thrawn?" I asked, getting to the point.

Parck shook his head. "We don't exactly know. He goes out into the Unknown Regions and he's out of contact range. We are still trying to establish solid Holonet links but there are pirates and traders, as well as several alien species that disapprove of this technology have a tendency to destroy the emitters. Communications at long range out here are difficult. The Admiral generally goes out for two months and unless there is a serious emergency we don't hear from him until he returns." He said.

Miss Gabriel, if I may ask, what is going on? Why are you here?"

I drew a deep steadying breath and said, "They're dead, Voss."

He stared at me blankly, not understanding.

"The Emperor and Lord Vader, they are both dead. The *Executor* was destroyed. It crashed into the battle station." I was amazed at how steady my voice sounded while I told him the news.

He paled visibly and sat down in the chair beside me. He leaned towards me, his face hard and angry. "If this is a joke, it's in very poor taste." He said.

Tears welled up in my eyes and I had to fight from breaking down. "Joke?" I asked, now my voice did tremble. "You think I flew all the way out here in a damaged shuttle to joke with you about this?"

"Forgive me, but this news, it's difficult to believe."

I just nodded, blinked away the tears. "I know. I was there, I saw it with my own eyes and I still don't believe it. Download the *Sigiri's* logs; you'll see it to be true."

"The Emperor is dead? How do you know, did you see him die?" He was still trying to process the unthinkable.

I shook my head. "I felt it. His presence in the force vanished, violently. It was the same for Lord Vader...when he died... they are both dead. They were on the battle station when it exploded. There was no way anyone could have survived that."

"The battle Station? The new battle station? It was destroyed? How is that possible?" He ran a hand through his hair, visibly distraught by the news.

"The Emperor laid a plan to trap the rebels and destroy them by feeding them the technical data to the battle station, he hoped to lure them to Endor and wipe them all out but something went wrong...", I stopped to steady myself. "Something went dreadfully wrong." I hid my trembling hands under the table.

"What happened?" He asked gently.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I have no idea." I said. "I was not on the *Executor* or the battle station at the time, I had been doing a...a job for the Emperor and I was on the Sanctuary Moon, waiting." I didn't think he needed to know the whole story. I wondered if he would even believe it if I were to tell him. "By the time I was in the air to return to the *Executor* all hell had broken loose. I was about half way to the station when I saw the flag ship plunge into it. After that word came down to clear the area because it was about to blow up. The *Sigiri* was caught in the shockwave when the death star blew. I didn't stick around to be captured by rebels; I just got the hell out of there. I don't know what happened to the fleet or anything. I don't know any more than this, the Emperor is gone, everything has changed." The words caught like hooks in my throat and I clenched my teeth tightly to the sob that wanted to escape from doing so.

"I just don't know how to believe this, I don't know what to do, ...I ...."

I looked up at him so sharply he stopped mid sentence. "The Emperor is dead and so is Lord Vader. Nothing, no one could have survived that explosion." I said. "I have to tell him, I have to tell Thrawn! He's the only one who can sort this out; he's the only one who can make sense of it!" I could feel the hysteria rising in my voice and fought hard to back it down.

Parck leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "The only way to get a message to him is to go to a rendezvous point where they will still be within

standard long range comm distance, drop a booster beacon and wait for them to hear the signal."

"Give me the coordinates. I'll find him." I said firmly. I had it in my head that Thrawn could fix this terrible mess and I was not going to be dissuaded from this. That perhaps Sate Pestage, who was technically now in charge of the Empire, would have a back up plan for just this scenario had not even occurred to me.

He gave me a thin smile. "Merlyn, you look as though you are running on vapours, your shuttle is badly damaged and you are in no shape to go anywhere...."

I waved my hand at him and stopped him from speaking. "There is no one else who can tell him what I know. I have to find him and every minute I sit here talking about it is a minute wasted that the rebels gain. Thrawn has to know, I need to find him. Please, Voss, you know I am right." I could have pushed with the force but I didn't, I didn't need to. He could see by my expression that I would not back down. I didn't give him time to reconsider either. "Please...."

I knew he wasn't happy but that he had no counter argument. I had won. "Okay, but you will take a different shuttle, one that isn't damaged, with an escort."

I shook my head. "No, no escort. I do this on my own. I'll accept a different shuttle, that way if there are rebels out here and I get caught I can lie about who I am, say that I stole the ship to escape. I won't compromise your work out here and an escort of Imperial pilots will do exactly that. It would raise too many questions if I were to get caught. This place needs to stay a secret. You need to trust me, I am a good pilot and I know what I am doing. I won't risk anyone else's life for this, there has been far too much death already!"

He didn't like this but he wasn't going to argue either. If the news I had told him was correct, then I was right and Thrawn had to know but the secrecy of this base had to be maintained.

"Well, I guess we should get ready then but I insist you get a decent meal and at least an hour's rest. It will take that long to prep a ship and copy over the data from the *Sigiri*. One hour will not make much of a difference now." I knew from the tone of his voice that he would not budge on this so I nodded, oddly grateful.

He got up and opened the door, spoke to one of the Chiss guards and then motioned for me to follow. "Kshar will show you to guest quarters, I'll have the quarter master send you clean clothes, and toiletries. I'll arrange a wakeup call in an hour and then you and I will share a warm meal."

I wanted to throw my arms around him then and hug him for his open kindness and for taking me seriously. Instead I just nodded and followed the Chiss Parck had called Kshar. It was a short silent walk and the small guest area was sparse but serviceable. I thanked Kshar in basic, not wanting to give it away that I spoke his native tongue. A few moments later a knock at the door told me the clothes and toiletries Parck had promised were delivered. I took the pile gratefully and then locked the door. I lay down on the bed and let go of the breath I had been holding for what seemed like forever. I didn't think I would sleep, but I did. An hour later a knock on the door woke me up.

Showered and wearing clean, unmarked coveralls, I sat at the table in the small Officer's mess eating the first warm meal I had in ages. I had no idea what I was eating but it was filling and hot. As I soon as I had finished my meal, Parck explained how their communications system worked, showed me on a small data pad where I was heading and the codes I would need to activate the enhancement beacon.

"It's a very bad area of space though; I would feel better if you were not going alone." He said as he handed me the datapad. "We have had trouble with hit and run attacks from unknowns."

I shook my head. "You know I'm right. I stand a better chance on my own." I did not want to have to worry about someone else. I did not want to be responsible for anyone else. I needed to do this alone. "Did you get the data off the *Sigiri*?"

He nodded. "Yes, and just so you know, your hyperdrive motivator is shot among many other things, it's a miracle you made it here alive. The gods must smile on you, I think."

I wasn't so sure about any smiling gods that but I wasn't going to argue with him. "Did you read through the data?"

His business like expression changed to one of sorrow. "Yes. We are trying to establish communications with the Core now, to see how bad things really are but I suspect that whoever was left in charge initiated a total HoloNet lock down and placed Coruscant under martial law until some of this mess can be sorted out. I hope we'll know more in the next forty eight hours or so."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "This is such a terrible mess."

"Well, if anyone can sort it all out the Grand Admiral can." He said optimistically. "I've had the crews ready a lambda class shuttle called the *Aeolian*. She's a solid little ship, used to be an ambassadorial shuttle so she's more comfortable than the transport shuttles but Thrawn had all the older ships' weapons upgraded, as well as their nav systems and star charts. She may look like an old girl but she's feistier than she appears. She's also unmarked and has a set of fake ident markers if you need to run under the radar, so to speak. The chief mechanic assures me she is in excellent running condition."

"I need to get a few things off my ship and then, if everything is set, I will leave." I said getting up. Time was running out, I felt it even though the unimaginable had already happened. I needed to find Thrawn.

Parck nodded. "I've had the quartermaster stock the *Aeolian* fully and added couple of changes of clothes for you; I don't know how long it will take the Grand Admiral to respond to the signal, could be anywhere from an hour to three days so I thought it best to be prepared. Come on, I'll escort you."

On impulse, before he could open the door, I leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I don't know how to thank you."

He blushed furiously. "I think you just did. I just hope that I haven't signed your death warrant by letting you do this." He said a little gruffly. He had deep misgivings about letting me go on my own and there was no way for me to alleviate them. I wasn't sure that he was wrong either but the drive to tell Thrawn was stronger than my common sense and I was far from thinking clearly.

The *Aeolian* had seen better days but Parck was as good as his word and she was a solid ship that had been well taken care of. I took my tool kit and my satchel off the *Sigiri*, when I had flown from the *Executor* I had not exactly planned on what had happened next so I didn't have much in the way of belongings on board her.

"Take good care of my shuttle!" I said to Parck as I turned to board the *Aeolian*, "She saved my life."

"I will see to it myself." He said. "You have all you need? All the data and codes? How to activate the signal booster beacon? And you know what to do if you need help from me or you run into trouble?"

I nodded to each of his questions feeling a little like a kid heading out on her first trip alone. "Voss, I'll be fine. I'll find him and tell him what has happened and he'll come back and fix this mess. It will be fine." I spoke the words calmly but on the inside I wasn't so sure. What had happened at Endor had shaken me to the core and what I was about to do made the hair on the back of my neck prickle and stand on end.

"I don't have to tell you I don't like this one bit. The area of space you are heading into is known to be a hunting ground for scavengers and pirates." He frowned. "If anything

happens to you Thrawn will have my hide." He said almost whispering. The worry in his voice spilled out into his features. "He's not a man to speak of his private life but I know him well enough to understand you are someone precious to him. I do not want to be the one who let you go to your death."

I nodded. "Well, I will just have to make sure nothing bad happens then." I said more firmly, more confidently than I actually felt. "A little trust, Commander." I said. Thrawn's words not mine and I didn't really believe them but I didn't know what else to say. Parck nodded and I knew he had also heard these words before. I turned to leave.

"Good luck, Miss Gabriel." He said softly. I turned around and looked back at him. I nodded and then shivered as Navaari's words echoed through my mind. *It is bad luck to look back.*

According to the data Parck had given me, Thrawn and his fleet were at least thirty-six hours away from Nirauan at the shuttle's top hyper-speed. With the co-ordinates for the beacon drop punched into the nav computer and the automated pilot there wasn't much else for me to do. Falling back on old patterns I spent a lot of time in the engine room. I was nervous about being on a ship I was unfamiliar with and the only way I knew how to deal with that was to get to know her from top to bottom. It also kept me busy and being busy kept me from thinking too much about what had happened.

The worse moments came when I found myself idle, when I was making something to eat or trying to sleep. Most of the time, when the memories would flood back, my hunger would vanish and the sight of what ever I had cooked made me sick. I found it odd that I couldn't cry. There was a giant knot in my gut waiting for some trigger, some escape but there was no release. There was just felt a terrible emptiness that gnawed at my soul the way hunger ate at my belly. Sleep, when it came, was fitful and filled with dreams of things I couldn't decipher. Gone was the gentle guiding voice of Qui Gon Jinn, almost as if he had never existed. All I remembered when I woke up frightened and sweat soaked, were vague images of things I did not understand and the Emperor's dreadful laughter.

Time seemed to move the same way the hyperspace field did, strangely in whorls of light and shifting matter. I lost track of it. I lost track of myself and spent a lot of time just sitting in the cockpit staring out into hyperspace. It was terrible loneliness here to be but I didn't care.

Many people could not travel in space alone. It made them go crazy. All that empty blackness, some people just couldn't handle it. There were stories about ghost ships and haunted moons, dead zones where, if you flew in, you would never come out. I had heard them all as a kid at the docking bay, listening with rapt attention to the stories the spacers told, sometimes paying the price with terrible dreams of lost souls and scary monsters. As with most childhood demons these passed when I grew older but the fascination with space did not.

I had never flown out beyond the Outer Rim before; the furthest away from the Core I had ever been was to Hjal and then Nirauan. This was different. I was in uncharted territory now. There were no official maps of this part of space only what Thrawn and his people had charted and those maps were basic and sparse because, while Thrawn liked to do a thorough job, his fleet was not large enough or set up to do a proper surveillance and cartography. Still I studied the charts Parck had given me carefully. So much uncharted territory, a few planets dotted here and there along with an occasional marked anomaly.

I wished I had brought Thrawn's letters with me. I desperately needed his voice, his words but instead, at his insistence, I had left them behind as I now felt I had left my life behind. I didn't know what to do. The minutes passed like hours and hours moved like months. The space around me was endless and empty, even in the swirls of hyperspace I knew there was nothing out there except more space and for the first time in my life I was

afraid of it. So, I sat in the pilot's chair of a ship that I didn't feel at home in and stared out of the cockpit window, unable to cry, unable to mourn, unable to let go.

When I finally dropped out of hyperspace into the area Parck had given me as the designated communication zone, I was beyond tired and I couldn't recall the last time I had actually eaten something solid. Despite the good store of provisions Parck's quartermaster had laid in I had no appetite. I slowed down the impulse engines and came to an idling stop in the specified coordinates.

It was vast, this area of space. The pin pricks of light indicating stars and maybe solar systems were very far and few between. It almost seemed as though someone had spilled a giant bottle of black ink but it had not quite covered everything. I shivered. I checked the long ranger sensor but there was nothing else out there, at least nothing that could be picked up. I was utterly alone. I set the long range transmitter to the frequency Parck has given me and put it on repeat. There wasn't much else to do except deploy the booster beacon and to do that I had to get it ready to drop from the cargo bay which was a manual job.

The beacon booster was small and unlike anything I had ever seen before. Different technology, Parck has explained, which Thrawn had 'borrowed' and tinkered with. Parck had shown me how to activate and deploy it, not a difficult procedure but fiddly. I was just setting it in the drop cradle when the proximity alarm started beeping loudly. It scared the sand jiggers out of me, but I figured, I hoped it was actually Thrawn's fleet. Despite Parck's warning it never occurred to me to think otherwise. I set the beacon in the cradle and closed it up. Maybe if I had been less tired, less self absorbed, thinking more clearly I would have sensed what was coming next but as it was I didn't and it took me utterly by surprise.

I was half way back to the cockpit when the first blast struck. I was flung hard into the bulkhead, smashing my head violently against the durasteel. For a moment I saw blackness and a burst of stars, accompanied by a shard of pain so sharp it sucked my breath away. I stood trying to find my balance with one hand braced against the bulkhead the other holding my head. I could feel blood ooze between my fingers.

Before I had time to consider the consequences of what had just happened, a second blast hit and the shuttle rocked violently again, more alarms began to scream at me. Without thinking about it, I ran then because I hadn't put the ship's shields up. Shields drew a lot of power and I hadn't thought I needed them here, the sensors had said I was alone. I had not been thinking at all and now, through a haze of pain, I was cursing my stupidity. I had truly thought there was nothing out here, just me and a whole lot of space. Rebels, I whispered to myself but in truth I wasn't so sure. Parck's words about pirates and scavengers were coming back to haunt me.

By the time I was seated in the cockpit who ever had been firing had done so again. I didn't think they wanted to blow this ship up because they were targeting mostly non essential areas but I wasn't used to being fired on. I had never been trained as a combat pilot and my heart was racing. My anxiety changed to fear when I tried to activate the shields but couldn't, the second blast had been well aimed and the shield generator had gone down. The *Aeolian* didn't have a back up. I flipped switches and revved the sublight engine up to full power because my attacker was two steps ahead. The targeting computer showed me where the enemy was and I strapped myself in bringing the weapons on line. I could not recall ever being so afraid or feeling so alone before. In that single moment I knew despair.

*Use the force...*

The voice suddenly washed over me so clear, so close that I thought for a second someone else was standing in the cockpit behind me, whispering in my ear. I must have banged my head harder than I thought. I was hearing voices now. The voice sounded

similar and I gasped at its touch, which was both reassuring and painful. I looked around me to make certain but there was no one else, other than me here along with an awful lot of empty space and someone trying to blow me up. I was over tired and jumped up on adrenaline plus I had more pressing things to worry about than hearing voices or seeing ghosts.

I swung the Shuttle about, following the blip on the targeting computer to try and face my opponent. When it came into view, I was breathless. It was a design unlike anything I had ever seen and I understood then that this was a species I had never come across before; they were not part of the Emperor's galaxy. I targeted the ship and fired. Park had not been kidding when he had said the weapons had been upgraded and who ever had been firing at me was not expecting my ship to have teeth. But they still had a shield and mine was down.

We danced, a waltz done with ships against a backdrop of darkness with silence without music. We swung around each other, firing our weapons, hitting and missing, only to back off and then reengage. At some point I stopped being scared, there was no time to be scared, no time to consider what might happen there was only the now. I stopped trying and simply did. The sensation of being watched was stronger than ever and for the second time I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

*Merlyn, use the force....*

I felt a subtle nudge and I stopped thinking.

The shuttle took hard hit to the portside and I knew before the dash board began to light up that something vital had been damaged, I could hear it in the sound of the engines. Alarms screamed at me but I didn't hear them. I drew a very deep breath and found the stillness. In the last weeks that I had spent training with Lord Vader, reaching that core and finding that part of me connected to the force had become easier. Everything I had ever been taught was coming into play, right here, right now. I saw in my mind's eye the ship that was attacking me swing around to disable the engines and I knew they wanted my ship more or less whole, they didn't care about the beings inside, they were trying to disable the shuttle not blow her up. Pirates or scavengers, I didn't know. I didn't care. I was beyond tired.

*Merlyn...*

I closed my eyes just as the ship fired at me again, sparks exploded from the consol. The *Aeolian* shuddered terribly and spun out of control. I battled with her and brought her back into line just as another shot hit me. The main engines began to fail. There was a back up hyperdrive but I couldn't access it, something on the main consol had shorted out in the last volley of fire. I swore violently as the ship that was after me began to swing around to make its final move.

*Now girl, now...!*

Whose voice whispered in my ear I didn't know but it held an urgency I couldn't ignore. I didn't think, I didn't breathe I just fired. I had hit the unknown ship many times during this skirmish, and because the *Aeolian's* guns were just better I had weakened my opponent's shields. The voice in my head guided me even as I fought to keep my ship steady, the terrible scream of engines about to blow sounding louder to me than anything else I had ever heard. *Just a little more, old girl*, I whispered, *just hang on a few seconds more...* Without looking I knew I was dead on target and I fired again. Guided by an unseen hand, my aim was true. I hit the one weak spot my enemy had. The explosion was huge and momentarily blinded me.

The *Aeolian* was tossed about, a grain of sand in a storm. I just gritted my teeth and shut my eyes tightly, holding on to the steering control for dear life. I felt it as the main engine failed and the ship spun aimlessly, uselessly. I felt the momentary lurch as the gravity plating lost power then reversed as the backup generator kicked in but even from



the cock pit I could tell it wasn't functioning right either. The screaming of alarms, the stench of burning cables and wires brought me back to reality sharply. When I shook off the shock of what had just happened I realised that my troubles were only just beginning.

My head throbbed savagely, all the jerking and spinning about had not helped. As a wave of nausea swept through me I wondered if maybe I had a concussion but there wasn't much time to do anything about it. I stumbled down to the engine room, bracing myself along the bulkhead because the shuttle was listing badly. My worst fears were confirmed when I began to assess the damage. The main engine was a mess, and the shield generator had been completely fried. Main life support was failing and the backup generator wasn't in good shape. Whoever it was that had been attacking me had known exactly where to strike. My guess was that they had either attacked lambda class ships before or had scanned me without me knowing about it. Either way, it didn't matter anymore, what mattered now was getting power back on line, without it I was dead in space relying solely on battery backup and that had a very limited life span.

After half an hour I knew. No amount of tinkering or fixing would sort out the main engine and the backup was failing fast. A vital part had been badly damaged and there was no way for me to repair or jury rig a new part. I was so frustrated I screamed out loud. I had spare parts onboard of the *Sigiri* but I had not thought to bring any with me. I never occurred to me I would need them and I was going to pay for that now. I was well and truly screwed.

I turned my attention from fixing the engine and the generator to seeing how best to conserve what power I did have left so that at the very least I had breathable air and some warmth. Space was very cold and with minimal internal heating the ship would turn into a giant freezer, not something I looked forward to. I didn't deal well with cold.

I knew the moment the backup generator died. It spluttered spewing sparks all over the place and the gravity plating went offline again until the battery backup kicked in. All I could do was hold on and pray. My head ached and my guts churned but when I tried to throw up there was nothing in my stomach so there was no mess but it didn't make feel any better. Low gravity came back online, enough to give me weight. I knelt on the engine room floor, my head down to try and stop the dizziness and suddenly remembered I had not deployed the booster beacon. At least I thought ruefully I could still do that and whispered a silent thankful prayer that the manual release still worked.

I shut down as many non essential systems as I could, anything that I did not require I took off-line until the only things left were heat and life support. I turned the heat down as far as I dared and closed off as much of the unused areas of the shuttle that I could. What didn't need to be heated wasn't. The batteries had an approximate life span of six or seven hours and I hoped I could increase that to ten. When I had done all I could do in the engine room I made my way back to the cockpit, picking up a bottle of water and some blankets on the way. Already the shuttle was cooling down and I shivered. In a few hours it would be very cold, not enough to kill but more than enough to make me uncomfortable. I grabbed the med kit and scavenged it for pain killers. My head throbbed violently now and it was making me miserable.

Once in the cockpit I settled into the pilot's chair hoping no more strange ships or pirates showed up, if they did I was dead. I double checked that the signal I was broadcasting on the frequency Parck had given me was still being sent out, noted that the booster beacon was also online and then because there was nothing else I could do I waited.

I flitted in and out of a doze and time passed slowly, oddly. Memories and dreams jumbled together as I sat huddled under the blankets, cold enough to reconsider my decision to drop the heat but I knew I had made the right choice. I could live without heat

for longer than I could live without air but I wished I had brought my Dantassi clothes, especially the warm ones Navaari had given me on Hjal.

Thinking about Navaari made me sad. It occurred to me in this moment that I might not actually survive this. I had no idea where Thrawn and his fleet really were, as Parck had said it could take them up to three standard days to reach the signal point if they were on the outer limits of its range. I didn't have days; I had hours. So I began to record letters. I wanted the people I loved to at least know what had happened. I should have felt fear even anger or sorrow at this but I didn't, instead I felt nothing. As I spoke my words to my family I wondered how they would take it. It didn't seem right somehow to die so far away, so alone but it was somehow fitting.

I spoke to my father as though he were with me, telling him how much I truly loved him and how sorry I was for all the fights, all the pain I know I had caused. I addressed Bel and Bedi as well. I left a similar but shorter version for my uncle but it did not seem like enough. What was there to say? I didn't really know so I babbled a little and then said a quiet goodbye. As the pain in my head grew worse, it became a struggle to concentrate.

With the letter to my family done I began to dictate my letter to Thrawn. I spoke in his native language because what I had to say to him I didn't want anyone else knowing. I told him what had happened at Endor, everything I could remember from the moment I had been summoned to the Emperor's chamber on the battle station to escaping the blast from its destruction. I tried to be clear and clinical about it but I wasn't sure how I came across. I kept forgetting what I had said and had to back track to pick up the thread of it. My mind was having trouble focusing and the cold was starting to get to me. When I had nothing more to report on that incident I started a second letter, a personal one but I didn't know how to tell him what I felt for him, I couldn't utter the words I carried in my heart because it seemed to me that if I did, then I really would die and in that moment I knew I didn't want to. Not like this, all alone in a region of space so far away from my home that I could not even see the planet on the chart. I decided then, that if I could not tell him what I felt in my heart to his face, I would not speak the words at all. Silent unwanted tears pricked my eyes, rolled down my cheeks and splashed on the broken consol. These tears brought no relief and did nothing to ease the terrible pain I still felt inside, they only made it worse.

In the end I gave up trying so all that was on the data recorder for him to hear was that I was sorry, my voice a trembling whisper as I spoke. I didn't know what to say. How could I express the extraordinary grace his gifts of passion, and caring had given to me? All that he was to me could never be spoken in words. In my mind I could see his smile, sense his warmth and remember the power of his touch. His voice was a caress in my soul I would carry with me until the moment I died, I clung to its memory, but it wasn't enough. *I am bound to you...* he had said and the memory of his words made me ache with sorrow.

Here, now all alone on this broken ship I could not show him what he meant to me, I could not even speak it. I wished at that moment that the force or what ever this gift was that I had would allow me to pour these sensations into the data chip so that when he touched it he would know, there was only him and no one else but I knew this was useless effort. In the end all I could hope for was that Thrawn would understand because he always understood. When I was done I put the data recorder where it would be found, the messages were protected by an Imperial code which only he would know. I had every faith that he would find me, just not that he would come in time.

I closed my eyes. I was so tired and my head hurt so much that all I wanted to do was get away from the pain. None of the meds I had taken seemed to work and the cold was making me sleepy. In the back of my mind I knew this was wrong, that falling asleep was the very worst thing I could do but I no longer cared. A part of me had died at Endor, when Lord Vader had severed the tie between us something within me had broken.

He had been a terrible ruin of a man who had done unspeakable things in the name of an Emperor, in the name of a master who had twisted his soul. But at one point he had been a person who had loved, who had given freely and cared deeply about those around him. He had not been born evil he had been made that way, betrayed by the one man he had admired and looked up to above all others, betrayed right up until the bitter end. How I hated Palpatine for this. Lord Vader would forever be reviled throughout the galaxy, even though it was the Emperor's evil that had made him what he was. No matter what lay behind it all, Darth Vader was the symbol of all that was terrible.

But I ached for a loss that I couldn't comprehend. As much as I had feared him, had been frustrated with him and hurt by him I understood that part of me had also loved him and now he was gone. It hurt more deeply than I could have ever imagined. I did not understand the thing that had wound our two lives together and neither had he or anyone else. Not even the Emperor could sever it and he himself had said as much. I remembered his words clearly... *I sense that you have formed a bond with him that will be difficult to break...* well, now it was broken. And so, it seemed, was I.

I was certain the rest of the galaxy would rejoice Vader's loss and they had a right to for all that he had been. But I would mourn his passing. I would probably be the only one. I was one of the only people who knew who he had been before the dark times. I had seen when he had been the hero of the galaxy, their beacon of hope in a terrible war. I had seen him love unabashedly, willing to die in order to preserve what he held dearest. As he had hated so he had loved. If he had one true fault it was that he was passionate, too much so and it had ruled and ruined him. No one would remember him as a hero only as a vile demon who had done terrible, terrible things but I had known him better and the pain of it broke my heart. I didn't try to stop the terrible sob that broke free from my chest. I simply buried my head in my hands and wept.

When the crying stopped, my head ached so fiercely that I wondered briefly, if this was punishment for caring so much about a fallen man. Sick to my stomach, I closed my eyes and began to drift into a deadly sleep. I felt it creep up on me warm and seductive and I welcomed it. As the world of troubles around me began to slip away I could have sworn I heard a voice, a man's voice whisper in my ear. Telling me to breathe deeply, to concentrate and find my center.

*"Meditate and find peace there...."* He said gently.

I remembered similar words from a recent lesson. It seemed strange to hear the same advice from an unfamiliar voice, a kind voice. I whimpered, sorrow and fear creeping into my consciousness. I could have sworn I felt the subtle brush of someone's hand warm and gentle on my cheek but I opened my eyes there was no one there. I was hallucinating or dreaming or both.

*"Become the stillness, girl... you are not finished yet..."*

I did as I was told. I drew deep steadying breaths and meditated. I found that center, that quiet place deep within and it was there I settled my mind. Nothing else existed, only this place, only this warmth, only this strange sense of calm. If this was death then, unafraid, I was happy to accept it. I no longer felt the throbbing ache of my head, the nausea or the terrible sorrow of my heart. I slowed my breathing right down, as I had been taught, becoming the stillness. Everything around me melted away and as I drifted further into the darkness that called to me I knew only peace and nothing more.

To be continued...