

**STAR**  
**DAUGHTER OF**  
**THE EMPIRE 3**  
**WARS**



**BY**  
**FIONA MESSER**



# **DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE**

**Book Three**

**By Fiona Messer**

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*Dedication*

*For fan-girls everywhere, with very special thanks to Lynne, Kirsten, Steph, and Marita for commenting, nagging, cajoling, waiting patiently, and above all encouraging. This would never have been finished without you. Thank you everyone for being a part of this journey with me.*

## Prologue

*"Become the stillness, girl... you are not finished yet..."*

A voice I knew and trusted coaxed me into the void. I slipped gratefully away from the pain, from the sorrow and the inevitability of death. For the longest time there was nothing, no dreaming, no feelings and no memories. If I was alive I didn't know it and I suppose I was grateful but such things do not last and eventually I began my journey back into the world of the living.

My first realization that I was probably not dead was the sensation of warmth and a dream so vivid I thought it was real. I found myself standing in a room of some sorts which vaguely reminded me of the great hall in the old Jedi temple. All around me was a soft white light. It was so peaceful and so calm that I didn't mind not knowing exactly where I was.

I breathed in deeply. There was a scent on the air, spicy, exotic which reminded me of someone I had once known, a man, but he seemed very far away. I struggled to bring his face to memory but all I could conjure up were eyes of glowing red. In the back of my mind there were others, shadowy figures who never fully came into focus. One in particular was dressed from head to toe in black he, too, had meant something but this memory brought sorrow and I was glad to let it go.

I wondered how long I had been here. Time was meaningless. I was not hungry nor was I tired. There was no fear either just a strange sense of calm. I stood with my arms wrapped about my chest, my face lifted upwards and my eyes closed. There was warmth here but I couldn't tell where it was coming from. I didn't jump when someone touched me on the shoulder making me turn around. It was a little like staring into a mirror. The woman who stood slightly behind me looked a lot like I did. Only when I gazed at her face for a few moments did I see the differences and understand who she was.

"You do not belong here, daughter," she said. Her fingertips touched my cheek.

"Akali L'uanna," I said, "My birth mother."

"Yes," She smiled. "You have grown up well."

I ignored her comment, "Am I dead?" I asked. It seemed only logical since I knew she was dead.

"No, but you linger in the in-between."

"The in-between?"

"You are not dead but you are not fully alive either. You are in between these two states and have been for some time."

"How did I come to be here?"

"You were injured. Bringing you here was the only way to save you."

I looked at her in puzzlement. "I don't understand. You brought me here?"

She shook her head. "No, that was another's doing."

"Lord Vader...?"

A look of pain and distaste marred the prettiness of her face for a moment. "We do not speak of him by that name, but yes," she said.

I looked around me. "Is he... can I ...?" I was a little bewildered.

She gave me a little smile. "He is not here. He has much to atone for. Guiding you into a healing state was a start. Do not mourn for him, daughter. He is more at peace now than he has ever been before."

"And you?"

"I am here to guide you also. I have always been here for you."

I shivered as a cool breeze rippled across my skin. "And what of Qui-Gon Jinn?"

"You will see him again, I am certain of that but now it is time for you to return to those who love you."

I went to argue with her but before I could speak she tapped my forehead with two fingers. "Go back to the world you belong to, daughter. Do not fear. You are not alone."

Before I could protest everything around me began to spin, the soft light vanished and I was swept away. It was like drowning in reverse, like crawling out of a darkness that never seemed to end. From very far away I began my journey back into the real world, the world of flesh and bone, blood and pain and above all sorrow and loss.

It was the sound of male voices that let me know I was still alive. At first a blurred white-noise, sounds which I could not identify but over time I began to understand as words just as I was able to pick out certain voices. How long this process took I have no idea. I faded in and out of this state of consciousness and time had become irrelevant. I was surfacing but it was a slow and painful process. When I opened my eyes the light was a shock and everything was fuzzy and out of focus.

I sensed him first before I heard him speak to someone else, but I didn't know who it was or what he had said. Hands examined me. There was a strength and surety to his touch. Doctor, I thought. I blinked trying to get past the blurred vision but I was too tired. I slipped back into the dimness I had come from. Time danced about me once more. How long I drifted in and out of awareness I do not know but each time it got easier until one day I woke up fully awake and aware.

"Fetch the Admiral, quickly." I heard a voice say. A hand brushed hair from my face and the touch was comforting. "Hang in there this time, just a few minutes, just enough to let him see you awake. Then maybe I can have a moment's peace." The voice whispered in my ear.

I tried to open my eyes, they were dry and gritty. My eyelids were not cooperating. Finger tips gently pried them open and cool drops splashed into my eyes, I winced and blinked hard. A few seconds passed and the images which had been distorted and unfocused began to sharpen up a little. I looked up into a familiar face.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, young lady."

"Dr. Thracer?" I whispered. My voice was rough. My mouth was too dry, my tongue felt thick and useless.

"You have not forgotten my name, I see," he said, his dry bedside manner still the same.

I opened my mouth to reply but before I could say anything he stopped me. "Don't try to talk just yet," he said gently as he slipped a shard of ice between my lips. "This will help."

The sensation of cold exploded in my mouth. Never in my life had water tasted so good. If I had been able to cry I would have. It was tiring to keep my eyes open so I shut them again and relished the taste of the ice as it lessened the desert like quality of my mouth. The pressure to fall back into the sleep I had woken from was very strong. I felt his hand on my forehead again, gentle and reassuring.

"Merlyn, I need you to stay with me, can you keep your eyes open?"

I nodded and fought against the drowsiness and the desire to just slip away again, to find my birth mother, the dreaming and the quiet place I had been before. No matter how many times I had tried to go back to that place it remained closed and elusive.

Doctor Thracer gave me a little smile and another little lump of ice.

"Thank you," I managed to croak out, "So thirsty."

He nodded, "To be expected. Can you follow the light with your eyes?" he asked shining a little torch in my face. I did as he asked. There were a few more questions, some feet and finger wiggling and a general check up. He didn't say much but he seemed satisfied. He had the bed raised and helped me sip a very small amount of water.

"Slowly, we've had you on fluids for ... well, you've been on IV fluids for a while, drink too much too soon and you get sick."

I nodded, glancing at the IV line in my hand. I hadn't noticed it until he had mentioned it. I sipped the water gratefully, relishing each molecule. When he took the cup away I made a face but didn't complain because my stomach was making unhappy gurglings.

"Doctor?" I heard another familiar voice ask. Thrawn's voice. My heart quickened at the sound.

Doctor Thracer patted my shoulder and turned away from me, blocking my view. "She's conscious and aware but don't expect too much," he said quietly. "She's still very groggy and very weak. And before you ask, it's too soon to tell about any permanent damage but so far she is responsive and coherent, which is a good sign. I will give you five minutes." And with that he left the small alcove where my bed was.

Thrawn simply looked at me, his expression unreadable and distant as though he was seeing me in a different light and wasn't certain he liked what he saw. "Why is it, Miss Gabriel, I seem to spend so much time watching you recover in a med lab?" he asked quietly.

"Bad timing?" I whispered. It was an old joke but it didn't make him smile.

He was silent as he pulled the chair as close to the bed as it would go. I struggled to move, I wanted to sit up a little more. His hands were warm as he helped me, slipping an extra pillow behind my head. I shut my eyes for a moment and a barrage of images flashed through my mind.

"Endor..." I began.

He placed a finger tip on my lips, always his way of keeping me from speaking. "We know all about Endor," he said, "It is no longer your concern."

I glanced around me. This med lab was not one I was familiar with. "Where am I?"

"Nirauan," he answered. There was something in his voice that made me look at him.

I asked, "You did not take me back to Coruscant?"



"Your condition was too grave. Doctor Thracer did not want to risk moving you until you were more stable, then it was a question of waiting to see how well you responded to the treatments, mostly it has been about waiting for your body to heal itself." He was not telling me everything and the lie behind his words was so strong I could taste it but it was too much effort to call him on it.

I glanced at the IV line in my hand. There was no bruising. "How long have I been here?" I asked.

A look of sadness and something else I had no idea how to decipher flashed momentarily in his eyes. He stroked a finger across my forehead, brushing away a strand of hair but he didn't answer my question

"How long?" I pressed, catching his hand in mine.

When he hesitated I got agitated. It wasn't like Thrawn to be evasive or lie but I sensed both in what he wasn't saying. I asked the question a third time and he sighed.

"You've been here for seven months and five weeks," he finally replied. "But it's only been in the last few weeks that you have... come back to us."

My heart seemed to stop. That was just sixteen weeks shy of a year. I had lost almost a year. It didn't seem possible. I looked away from him feeling the prickle of tears in my dry eyes.

"How? What... how?" There were so many questions and I could not articulate any of them. My words tangled on my tongue. Images of Endor flooded back to me, the exquisite pain of Lord Vader's death sliced into my belly and now Thrawn was telling me all this had happened nearly a year ago. What had happened to me? The world swam around me and little black spots of light pricked at the edges of my vision, I felt my heart pound in my ears and I couldn't seem to catch my breath.

"Doctor?" Thrawn's voice held a touch of concern in it.

Doctor Thracer was at my side. "Too much too soon!" he growled at Thrawn, lowering the bed again. "Merlyn, listen to me. Just breathe slowly. Don't you dare pass out on me now!"

I did as he asked and the dizziness passed. I guess some colour returned to my face because both men suddenly looked relieved.

"She needs to rest, no more agitation." The doctor's words were directed at Thrawn and they were sharp. I reached over and grasped Thrawn's arm.

"No," I whispered. "Tell me. I need to hear it." I didn't want to fall backwards into that terrible abyss that had swallowed so much time and I was afraid if I let go of him I would. He didn't pull away. I watched the silent communication between the Doctor and Thrawn as they looked at each other for a moment, then when the doctor nodded slightly Thrawn turned his attention back to me.

"The *Grey Wolf* picked up your signal almost immediately; luckily we were fairly close to your co ordinates at the time. When we reached you, your ship was badly damaged and drifting." He paused. I watched as the muscles in his jaw clenched. This was not easy for him to speak of. I could feel emotion rolling off him in waves, sorrow, frustration and above all anger.

The doctor broke in continuing the explanation. "You were found in the cockpit, wrapped in blankets; there was blood on your skull, matted in your hair. You had a severe concussion and a very nasty skull fracture. Your ship's life support had failed and

your battery power had run out. The atmosphere in the ship was ...unhealthy but no one was certain for how long the atmo was at toxic levels. At first we thought you were dead but the instruments in the med lab showed that you had slipped into some sort of extraordinarily deep coma."

I looked from one man to the other. "How...?"

Thrawn pulled his arm out of my grasp and pinched the bridge of his nose. "The doctor thinks it was the cold which saved your life," he said quietly.

Doctor Thracer nodded, "The cold dropped your metabolic rate right down, all of your body functions had been slowed to nearly nothing. You were in a death like state. To be honest, it isn't something I have seen in my life time although I have heard tell of Jedi Knights being able to do such things at will in times of physical danger. We had no way of knowing how to pull you back out of it so we treated the physical wounds and let you heal, hoping that you would eventually waken on your own... which you did."

Thrawn drew a deep breath, "I suppose that some of the training you underwent under Vader and Taisto Kjestyll helped out. In the end it was probably what saved you but for the life of me I cannot figure out what you were doing out there." He looked away from me then back again when our eyes met I knew he was holding himself in check. His expression had gone from relieved to hard. "I cannot believe you would be so stupid...," he began, his voice laced with fury. The concern he had shown just a few minutes earlier was so swiftly replaced by anger that I didn't have time to think, or to defend my reasons for flying hell bent to find him, luckily I didn't have to.

"Now is not the time, Admiral," Doctor Thracer interjected placing a hand on the Admiral's shoulder. I understood then that something had happened between these two men to create some sort of a bond. They had become more than just Grand Admiral and Doctor, they had become comrades and perhaps even friends. Whatever it was, Thrawn heeded the Doctor's words and shoved his anger with me back into the place he kept all his emotions in check. He glanced up at Doctor Thracer's face and nodded. The doctor was right, no matter how angry Thrawn felt I was not ready to be on the receiving end of it. His shoulders heaved as he sighed; sitting back in the chair he pulled away from me from me, folding his arms across his chest.

"I was attacked," I said defensively. I remembered bits and pieces of it. I remembered being flung against the bulkhead and winced involuntarily at the memory of it.

"Yes. I read the ship's logs. Your shields were down," Thrawn said coolly. "We also found debris floating in the same area. One of the local pirate ships we believe."

I just nodded and sighed. "Endor...?" I asked again.

His reply was firm, "We can discuss Endor when you are better. You have a long recovery ahead of you. It is pointless to waste your energy worrying about things that no longer matter, about things you can do nothing about."

"But what happened?" I pressed, "Coruscant? The fleet? Who is in charge now?" I did not need to have the Emperor's death confirmed; I had felt it as surely as I had felt Lord Vader's. Thrawn looked up at the Doctor again, who shook his head.

"When you are well enough, we'll talk," Thrawn repeated. "You'll learn everything you need and want to know but right now all you have to worry about is regaining your strength."

"Lord Vader...." I started to say but the words choked in my throat. It hurt to say his name.

Thrawn sighed and his expression softened. "I am sorry, Tekari," he said and he meant it.

I just looked up into his face. I didn't know what to think. For me, what had happened at Endor was crystal clear and far too raw. He must have seen that on my expression. He reached over and caressed my face gently, the anger in his eyes receding.

"What about papa, does he know?" I asked.

Thrawn nodded. "Yes, we have been keeping your family apprised of your condition." He curled his fingers about my hand. It was a small gesture but it spoke volumes. I could feel tears start to prickle in my eyes.

"Has it really been that long?" I asked Thrawn in a whisper. It just didn't seem possible. I felt waves of weariness wash over me.

Pain flicked across his features and he opened his mouth to say something but Doctor Thracer spoke first. "She needs to rest."

Thrawn nodded and went to stand up but I wouldn't let go of his hand. "Don't go..." I sounded like a lost little girl, but then again this was exactly how I felt.

He leaned down and brushed his lips against my forehead. "The doctor will take good care of you," he whispered in my ear as he eased his fingers out of my grasp. "Now please, just get well."

"You'll be here when I wake up?"

His fingers caressed my face. "Sleep, A'myshk'a," was all he said.

He had not answered my question but my brief time awake had worn me out and I was too weary to argue with him. I was grateful to drift back into whatever dimness I had surfaced from, away from the biting sense of loss.

The next time I woke up the doctor had the job of telling me that Thrawn had returned to duty on the *Grey Wolf* shortly after speaking with me and it was not known when he would return. I was not surprised by this news but it hurt all the same. When I didn't press him for details, Doctor Thracer seemed relieved and began to explain what exactly had happened to me and how he planned to help me recover. It would not be easy but concentrating on the work ahead of me helped me avoid thinking about everything else. The memories of what had happened at Endor left me hollow and empty and not for the first time would I wish that I had just stayed put in the deep oblivion I had come from.

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As I recovered and began the tedious business of getting back my life I discovered that the base on Nirauan was not a particularly friendly place. The mix of Chiss and humans made for a tense work atmosphere, added to this tension was the language barrier which almost everyone seemed to find difficult to overcome. There were a couple of Chiss who were fairly fluent in basic and perhaps a few of the Imperials who knew enough Cheunh to get by but on the whole communications were limited. The Chiss kept to themselves shunning the humans and the humans did the same, it was very odd.

I kept quiet about my ability to speak Cheunh. It was a skill I didn't feel the need to reveal because I suspected I would have ended up as a glorified translator and I didn't have the energy to do that, so I kept myself to myself which wasn't hard. It didn't take long for it to become clear that I was like a ghost on the base. If people knew who I was they didn't say and I wondered if they had been given orders to, at best leave me alone and at worst, utterly ignore me. In the end it was just as well. The process of getting well was hard work, much harder than anything else I had ever done and much of the time, when I wasn't involved some gruelling sort of physical therapy I was asleep or at least, trying to rest. Although the medical droids had made sure that my muscles had not atrophied while I had been in my coma, my body still required a lot of work to get back to its former shape. Time in the bacta tank had repaired the damage to my skull but no medical wonder could heal the pain of loss.

My grief for Lord Vader's death was a lonely thing. It was hard to justify in many ways. How could one mourn for a monster? How could a person even begin to love or admire such a man? I spent many hours thinking on all he had done while I had known him, his swift anger and sudden brutality. He had not suffered fools lightly and they had always paid the ultimate price. To the outside galaxy he had been, quite simply, evil but I knew that had not always been the case. I would never have called him truly evil but he had been twisted and angry. He had been a child torn away from the only person who had really loved him into the arms of a group of people who had, for the most part, viewed him with mistrust and fear.

He had been named the Chosen One, lauded as the One who would bring Balance to the Force but he had been treated as though he were a deadly time bomb waiting to go off. I knew, I had seen just how the leaders of the Jedi Council had acted towards him, particularly the one Called Mace Windu. Not for the first time did I wonder if this treatment was borne out of jealousy rather than fear. After all Anakin's power was the stuff of legends, as was his courage and brilliance in battle and with all things mechanical. The Jedi Order had made him what he was, not the other way around. In treating him the way they had they had fostered the very nature they all feared. Palpatine had seen this and had used it to his own advantage. It had been Palpatine who was truly evil.

Palpatine, who had manipulated everyone and everything around him, amassed his dark side power as though he was hoarding sand in his arms, but sand, like power, is slippery and elusive. Hold on to it tightly enough and it slips away, grain by grain. I did not mourn the Emperor's passing at all. I was greatly relieved that the evil old bastard was dead but this was something I told no one because in contrast to Lord Vader, a great many members of the Empire did mourn for Palpatine and to speak against him was considered at best an offence at worst heresy.

Lord Vader's death had left a gaping void in my life which was as devastating to me as it was bewildering. There was no one I could speak to about it because there was no one who would ever understand it. *Bound*, Navaari's word for what lay between Thrawn and I would come back to haunt me again and again, had I not also been bound to Lord Vader? When he had severed the tie between us he had severed something inside of me so deeply, so utterly I thought I would never know what it was like to be whole again. I wondered how it was possible to bear such grief and still breathe in and

out every single day, still get up out of bed and move on, move forward. It was as if I had become a droid, mechanically moving through time and space while my soul watched from some other place.

It was made all the more difficult by the growing whispers amongst the men that it was rumoured it had been Lord Vader himself who had killed the Emperor and not Luke Skywalker. Many in the Empire now viewed Lord Vader as a traitor not a hero but they were few. For the most parts, especially amongst the grunts and the pilots, there were many who genuinely mourned his death. He had been one of the few Imperial military leaders the majority of the ground troops and pilots had truly respected and he had been one of the few who got into the fight right alongside his men. It had been the officers who had despised his leadership skills or lack of them. I often wanted to point out when I heard these debates that it was stupidity and greed Lord Vader could not stand and his loyalty to his men was something well established long before he was forced to wear the mask, but I wisely kept my mouth shut. There was no point in arguing since in the end, no one really knew for certain the real truth of what had taken place that fateful day, not even I knew what had actually happened and it ate at me from the inside out yet, as sad as I was, I found I could not cry.

I was thankful that the doctor had taken on the majority of the work as physiotherapist. I suspected this was in part because his job at the base was a fairly quiet one but also because he felt in some way responsible for me especially in the wake of Thrawn's absence. In contrast to the medical droids he was someone I could speak with while I worked to regain my form. He was a constant in my life when Thrawn was not. The doctor, trying I suppose to explain Thrawn's noticeable absence, had told me he thought it was difficult for Thrawn to watch me struggle to recover but that was not really the entire truth. Thrawn was angry with me, angry that I had come looking for him and placed myself in danger, angry for many reasons not all of which were clear to me. I knew this and part of me even understood it but because I could not speak of it, the issue stayed unresolved and my own resentment and anger at him festered.

The weeks came and went. The pain and struggle of the physical rehabilitation eased as I got stronger and I was happy when I could finally resume the Bunduki style training and find some sort of peace through the movements and meditations I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. I missed my Bunduki teacher greatly and longed for his gentle guidance. I had tried to find out news of what had happened to my friends on Coruscant but here on the base I had no rights, no clearance and no friends to pester. Despite asking repeatedly if I could contact my home or even leave I was adamantly refused permission to do either but when I pressed for reasons no one could give me any.

"The Grand Admiral's orders Miss," was the only answer I was given when I asked 'why?'.

Even Doctor Thracer could not explain to me the reasons for the security and my resentment at Thrawn grew. Slowly it dawned on me that I was more a captive here than a guest. I had no idea what to think about it and the one person who could do something about my status or explain to me why I was cut off from the outside was not around to ask or change the standing orders. Perhaps I should have pressed further or found a way to bypass the excellent security but Thrawn was angry enough with me I didn't want to give him more fuel for that particular fire even though it fanned my own at him. If I was

denied access to the rest of the galaxy then I supposed he had a good reason for this but this didn't make it easier to accept. It was the first time in my life that felt truly alone.

In-between my physio sessions, once I was well enough I spent a great deal of time on my own wandering around the huge facility. No one seemed to notice or care where I went. At times it felt as though I was truly invisible but I began to look at this as an advantage rather than a slight. It allowed me to learn the lay of the base, discover the secrets and find all manner of hiding places, finding the quiet spaces to work out, meditate or just read. I knew all the ways in and out and some of the hidden passages as well, but by far my favourite was a small room that had an even smaller balcony attached to it, a look out of sorts I guessed. It was there I would go with a book in hand, taken from the library I had been given access to, to hide away from everything else. Eventually one day, after I had been gone too long and missed an appointment, Doctor Thracer had become worried. I wasn't sure how he had actually found me but I suspected the security monitors in the base were far better hidden than I had originally thought. He had found me sitting huddled against the balustrade reading a book, it was cold and windy but I needed to be outside, to see the sky. He had watched me for a few moments and then quietly retreated leaving me alone. I had discovered he was a man who understood silence and the need for it.

It was the doctor who eventually became my source of information. I suppose he took pity on me or perhaps I finally wore him down with my questions. Whatever the reason he was the one who told me about the fallout after the second battle station had blown up taking Lord Vader and the Emperor with it. Telling me how the remainder of the Imperials had retreated. The death of the Emperor had shattered the cohesion which had held the fleet together. It was his rare and powerful force gift which had allowed the Emperor to control the massive fleet and with its sudden disappearance the fleet spiralled into a sort of chaos which the Rebels took full advantage of.

Coruscant as well as many other planets had gone mad at the news of the Emperor's death. There had been mass celebrations in the streets, Statues of the Emperor and Lord Vader had been pulled to the ground and fireworks had lit up the sky. The news of the Emperor's demise seemed to be license to riot and let loose the pent up anger and frustrating of nearly thirty years of Imperial rule. It had taken twenty four hours for martial law to be declared and a total military clamp down on Coruscant to stop the massive celebrations. The people believed responsible for starting the whole mass party and fireworks were executed. Resentment festered and grew. There was no longer a beloved Emperor in place but an underling for which the majority of the Galaxy's denizens had no respect. Underground movements to aid the Rebellion and its fledgling government were growing.

As the Emperor's chosen, Sate Pestage had taken control of the Empire with Ysanne Isard officially as his second in command although I suspected it was actually she who was really running the show. She had not been nicknamed 'Ice heart' for nothing and under her thumb people knew a terror which had only been guessed at before. Still, life on the core worlds returned to some semblance of normalcy but nothing was really normal, the once vast and mighty empire was slowly but surely beginning to slip from Pestage's fingers. Without the Emperor's mighty will and dark side powers there was no one who could maintain the tight control which he had held over

everything and bit by bit the rebels were nibbling away at strategic points and heading towards Coruscant.

I overheard rumours from the men working on the base about the prowess of the rebel fleet, the daring of its pilots and above all the courage and audacity of one man, Luke Skywalker, whose name was whispered in the same manner people whispered about ghosts and demons. I suppose to people who had never seen or known a force user he was something mighty, someone with super natural powers but I knew better. He was the son of the man I had worked for. He was a Jedi's son with Jedi powers. That he was capable of amazing things was to be expected.

I wondered sometimes what I would ever say to him if we were to meet. I also wondered how he felt about his father, knowing all the terrible things that Anakin Skywalker had done. I often lay awake at night imagining what might have happened that last meeting between the two in the Emperor's throne room on board the Death Star but I was fairly certain that whatever my mind could create, it was nothing compared to the reality of it all and I found it odd that despite the terrible grief I felt I could not hate Luke Skywalker for what had happened. He had chosen a side and done what he thought was best. He and his friends had won the biggest victory they could have ever hoped to get. He was directly responsible for Lord Vader's and the Emperor's death but instead of hating him I only felt a vague sort of pity.

The anniversary of the Battle of Endor came and went. There was a small memorial service held on the base and everyone wore black armbands for the day except me. I didn't want to sit through the hour long ceremony knowing what I knew and I did not mourn for Palpatine so I hid, spending the day tucked up in the small private library Thrawn had permitted me access to and tried desperately not to think about what had happened ten months prior. For the entire Galaxy it had been a year but for me it was still less than two months fresh in my mind. That wound was still too raw and attending a memorial would have been like rubbing salt and sand into it.

Four months after leaving the base, the *Grey Wolf* returned to orbit. I knew this news even before the doctor because I had overheard the comm officer talking about it in the mess. I must admit my stomach dropped at the mention of Thrawn's return. I had neither seen nor heard from him since his brief spell at my bedside so I had no idea what to think, no idea how he felt about me anymore and for all his murmured words of being bound to me by Dantassi law his more recent actions said something else. I had never thought of myself as insecure but I worried now about my place in his life.

I listened covertly for news of his actual return to the base and was eventually rewarded for my patience. Thrawn's shuttle landed in the middle of the night. The ship's graceful wings folded up as she slipped into the landing bay, touching down gently, quietly. From my place high up on the upper gantry I watched, my heart racing and my palms sweating, as he along with several of his senior officers disembarked. As I laid eyes on him for the first time in months I ached with a sorrow I could not explain yet at the same time I was furious with him for leaving me alone in this dreadful place. Even from my high up vantage point I could see they all looked tired. They had been out in the Unknown Regions for longer than usual and rumours had whispered of difficult skirmishes with alien races and pirates unhappy with Imperial presence in the area.

I closed my eyes for a second, stretching out with the force to touch Thrawn's presence in it. I found him easily, such was the connection between us, but he sensed me too and looked up sharply to where I sat, half hidden in the darkness. I knew he could see me, he had extraordinarily good vision and for a split second our eyes met and then he turned away sharply to speak with the deck officer on duty. My heart pounded in my chest as I sat on the gantry way, my arms resting on the lower barrier rail, my chin resting on my arms and my legs dangling over the side. I did not move for a very long time afterwards until one of Thrawn's men finally found me.

"Miss Gabriel? The Grand Admiral sent me to fetch you. He wishes to speak with you," his voice was young. I looked up into dark brown eyes and an expression of nervous earnestness. Backwaters of Corellia, his accent told me, still new enough and young enough to smile and be polite. I just stared at him.

"Please miss, the Grand Admiral was most insistent that you come immediately."

I sighed as I got and wordlessly followed him to Thrawn's private office. The door opened and the young man gestured for me to enter. He did not follow me in and when the door closed behind me I felt the *wuff* of air it displaced on the back of my neck. I smiled a little as a second ripple of air caressed my cheek.

"Hullo Rukh," I said as I felt him stand slightly behind me.

"Lady Gabriel. It is good to see you well," the Noghri mewled. I turned to look at him and smiled. At least someone was pleased to see me.

The office, situated high up in one of the towers of the base, was dimly lit. Thrawn had no real need of bright lights at night and neither did Rukh. The soft glow from the desk lamp was for my benefit. I had never been here before and looked around at the tasteful furnishings and the artworks displayed about the room and walls. Some of them I knew from his home on Coruscant others were new to me, a pleasant mix of holograms and real. I didn't need to ask to know that this room was his sanctuary. Not many people, I wagered, had actually ever been in here. It was not his work office but the place, much like the study in the flat on Coruscant, where he came to think, to meditate and maybe even to relax.

"Rukh, leave us," Thrawn commanded quietly, his back was to the door as he stood facing the window standing much the way Lord Vader used to. The sight of him and the memory his stance evoked made me ache with sorrow.

The Noghri nodded once and then vanished as eerily as he had appeared. The silence that filled his wake was heavy and stifling. I could not break it and stayed rooted the spot waiting. An age seemed to pass until Thrawn broke the impasse, not moving as he spoke.

"Doctor Thracer tells me you have made a full recovery."

I waited because it was not a question I needed to answer and I didn't know what he wanted to hear from me. For another long moment there was silence in the room and then he turned around to look at me. The white Grand Admiral's uniform made him seem cold and austere. It contrasted vividly with the blue of his skin. I didn't need to touch it to know it would be stiff and unyielding. I wondered briefly if its wearer was now the same.

He looked me up and down and, for a moment, an expression I couldn't decipher flashed in his eyes then passed. Some of the stiffness seemed to edge its way out of his



body and to my surprise he undid the fasteners and shrugged the jacket off, as though he had read my thoughts about it. Suddenly he seemed weary. I glanced at the chrono on the wall; it was nearly two in the morning planetary standard time.

"You sent for me?" I asked not really knowing what else to say, not wanting to ask the single most important question which would surely lead to argument or discussion. I was in no mood and too tired for either.

He nodded as he placed the jacket over the back of the desk chair. "I saw you were still awake or else I would have waited until morning," he said. On the desk was a small box, he picked it up, considered it for a moment then offered it to me. "I thought it best to keep it safe until you were well enough to wear it," he explained.

I came close enough to accept what he offered, taking the small plain box from his outstretched hand. A sudden rush of sorrow washed through me when I opened it and saw what it held. I blinked away the tears which had filled my eyes unwanted, unbidden. I looked at Thrawn but his face was unreadable.

"I thought I had lost it," I said. My voice sounded small to my ears. I stared at my necklace, the small round ma'arilite stone with the star of colour in it. My hand trembled as I took it from the box to let it dangle from my fingers. I had asked the Doctor about it when I had gathered enough of my wits to do so but his answer had been a shrug. He could not recall me wearing a necklace and could not say what had happened to it. I thought it was lost for good.

"I took it off you while they prepped you for the bacta tank," he said simply as he moved then, closing the space between us and took it from my hand. He gestured for me to turn around and without word I did as he bid, lifting my hair as his deft fingers fastened it around my neck and I felt as if something locked had broken loose inside of me. I bit back the sudden rush of emotion and my shoulders shook from the effort. This was the third time he had returned my necklace to me. I drew a deep breath and bit my sorrow back. I did not fight him as he pulled me around to face him. Two fingers tucked under my chin, raising my face upwards to look at him. There were a thousand things I wanted to ask but I could not find the words. I saw from his face that neither could he. I pulled away from him and he let me go.

"You are still far too thin and pale," he said quietly.

"The food here is awful and getting outside to enjoy the sun is insanely difficult," I replied with a shrug. "At least your security is good."

"Still you found a way to get by it."

I looked at him for an explanation.

"The doctor has kept me informed about your activities here while I have been gone. He mentioned you had found the North Tower sentry gate."

"What did you expect? That I would stay cooped up here like a caged rill?" I asked sharply. "Did you imagine I would enjoy imprisonment in this place?"

"No, but I imagine it is better than dying in space," he said more coldly than I think he had meant to.

I nodded, backing down. "Dying in space was not high on my list of things to do," I said. I did not want to go down this path now. I was exhausted and wrung out. I didn't have to dig too hard to know he was also tired and on edge but it was too late, that line had been stepped on. His manner changed and I felt his anger creep into his voice.

"Then why did you fly out into the worst possible part of space alone? What were you thinking?"

I sighed. For a split second the memory of what happened at Endor flashed through my mind. "I don't know," I answered then I sat down on the couch covering my face with my hands. "The Emperor made me ... he betrayed Lord Vader, he wanted to use me ...he ... I was trying to warn Lord Vader when the Death Star blew up, Lord Vader ...," I could not put a single sentence together and the memory of Lord Vader's last words to me and his severing the bond between us was as sharp and as painful as the moment it had happened. I shook my head to wipe away those thoughts. "I don't know what I was thinking. I don't know that I was thinking anything," I said and that, at least, was the truth.

Thrawn sighed, "What happened to you? What did he do to you to make you act in such a reckless manner?"

"I left a recording for you, I told you what happened," I said. I didn't want to live through it all over again. I had done my very best to shut it all out.

Thrawn gave me a filthy look. "Yes, I suppose you thought you did but the message that I received was garbled and nigh incomprehensible. You were delirious and incoherent. I had an idea of what had happened but trust me what I heard was most unhelpful as to unravelling the story that brought you out here. So you tell me now, what did he do that made you completely witless enough to fly out into a known hotspot without an escort?"

I knew who he meant and as much as I wanted to never think about what had occurred in the Emperor's throne room just before all nine Corellian hell's had broken loose I knew that Thrawn would not back off until I answered his question. So as best I could I told him what had happened, what the Emperor had done to me, what he had planned on doing to Lord Vader and everything that had occurred afterwards. He listened in silence, arms folded across his chest. I could sense his anger but I wasn't sure at whom it was directed. The silence that hung, once again, between us was sickening but I held my tongue. I had told my story now he needed to deal with it.

He released the breath he had been holding very slowly. "I will never truly understand the power that man had but I am grateful, for your sake, that he is gone. I have never known a person more skilled in the art of manipulation than Palpatine but your rashness and stupidity rival this every time."

"You're angry with me?" I looked at him.

"Of course I am," He replied with a frightening calm. "I found you cold and lifeless in the cockpit of a dead shuttle. You left goodbye messages for everyone which I had to listen to in order to figure out what the devil you were doing there in the first place. You took the most terrible of risks, nearly paid the ultimate price for no good reason at all. You never think! You just act. For as long as I have known you it has been this way. I had hoped that you would learn some measure of self control but your emotions best you every time. You are reckless!" He waited a moment to let his words sink in then he continued, "It is simply sheer dumb luck that keeps you alive. I hope you thank whatever gods you usually pray to on your home world for their constant protection because I don't know how else you survive these ridiculous situations you manage to get yourself into."

I swallowed hard and gritted my teeth. His words rang true but they stung and made me angry. "I thought you needed to know what had happened. Of all the people I know you were the only one who could have done anything about it."

He regarded me for a moment then said, "Your faith in me is astonishing, my dear, but how could I have changed things? Palpatine and Vader were dead. I could not turn back time to undo these events."

I shook my head, "I told you. I don't know what I was thinking. It seemed logical at the time." It was a half truth but I didn't want to get further into my act of desperation.

An eyebrow arched at me. "And now?"

I looked up at him and shrugged helplessly. What was there to say except to apologise for my actions? I didn't want to but I understood that he needed to hear it. "It was rash and stupid and I'm sorry." And as I said it I realised just how sorry I was. I had lost nearly a year of my life for nothing. Acting on impulse had almost killed me and no good had come from it at all. I wondered in that moment if he was right, if I would ever learn to think things through before I acted. I got up to leave. He was angry and I was at a loss for what to do or say next but before I could make it two steps he caught my arm and pulled me to him. His embrace was as fierce as it was unexpected and it broke my heart. I fought him a little, struggling to be free of his hold, afraid of his kindness, afraid it would undo me completely. He didn't speak nor did he let go, he pressed me to his body tightly until I stopped fighting him. With my head held against his chest I could hear his heart, its strong steady beat grounding me. He kissed the top of my head and loosened his hold on me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered again, this time without the defiance of before and had to swallow down the terrible anguish which threatened to rise up and shatter me completely.

"So am I," he replied in a voice that scared me.

When I looked up into his face I could not read his expression but in that moment I understood that while he had accepted my apology he had not forgiven me. I pushed away from him, turning to sit back down on the couch, clasping my hands together so that he would not see them tremble. For a second he regarded me with that cool calculating gaze I had come to understand was his way of not only analyzing situations but also hiding his emotions. I watched in silence as he went over to the other side of the room. He pulled out a glass from the small cabinet which he filled with something from a bottle I couldn't see.

"Crackerberry liqueur," he said handing it to me. I took the glass gratefully, noting that he did not join me. Here, I thought ruefully, he was always on duty. The drink was as heady as I remembered it to be, warmth tingled down in to my belly as I sipped it slowly.

Thrawn sat next to me, elbows resting on his knees. He rubbed his face with his hands. He, too, was exhausted. "Doctor Thracer tells me you have trouble sleeping."

I nodded. "I slept like the dead for a long time. Now it seems that I am afraid if I close my eyes I won't wake up again." There was truth in my words but what I did not tell him, though I suspect he knew, was that really I was terrified of my dreams. I had

dreamed while I was in my coma but they were nothing in comparisons to the nightmares that haunted me now.

"This place is not good for you," he replied. "I'm sorry but there were precious few other options, especially given your condition when we found you."

Again I just nodded; a sudden drowsiness was making my eyelids heavy. I wondered for a moment if he had drugged the drink but knew better. Crackerberry liqueur always had this effect on me and he knew it. If we were going to argue over what had happened to me it would not be tonight. I finished the glass in one gulp and set it down on the table beside the couch, then tucked my feet up under me, jax like, and rested my head against his shoulder.

"I want to go home," I told him.

I felt him nod. "I know you do," he said.

Something in his voice made me raise my head to look at his face but his expression was, as always, unreadable. I did not resist as he drew me to him, his fingers holding my chin. When he kissed me tenderly I thought then maybe everything would be alright between us again but he was exceptionally good at hiding his feelings. Not for the first time did it occur to me that he would make an excellent sabacc player. I curled into the warmth of his body, truly sleepy for the first time in a very long time. I knew a small amount of peace in his arms. If he felt the same I didn't know but I could no longer sense the brilliant fury I once had from him, if he was still angry he no longer showed it. Still, a sliver of doubt rippled through me making me glance up at him again, trying to read beyond the mask of calculating cool he always hid behind. There was something he was not telling me, something important he was holding back but I was too tired to dig for it. He regarded me thoughtfully for a moment then, pulled my head back to his shoulder.

"I am here," he said as if he could read my mind. "You will be safe, I have seen to it personally so go to sleep."

It didn't occur to me to ask what he meant, I just nodded and did as he had suggested.

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The sound of voices woke me. An argument low and fierce, whispered in a language that was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. I stirred slowly, finding my way out of the dreamless sleep the way a drunk finds his way home after a hard night on the town. Someone had put a cushion under my head and laid a blanket over me. I must have made a sound because whoever was speaking broke mid sentence as the other hissed, "Quiet, you'll wake her."

"I'm already awake," I mumbled sitting up slowly. Still groggy, I rubbed my eyes and yawned then looked to who was speaking.

"Navaari?" I could not quiet believe it. Tall and fierce looking, he was an imposing figure but his smile was like sunshine and before I could move he strode across the room to hoist me up in a bone crushing hug.

"Tjällh!" He exclaimed half squashing the breath out of me. When he set me back down Thrawn, who was at his side, held a cup of fresh stim 'caf out to me. I took it gratefully and sipped it, welcoming its bitter warmth.

Thrawn said something to him quietly in Dantassi-Cheunh and Navaari smiled at me, but shot Thrawn a look. "Yes, I know," he replied, "But she is still young, still rash and still doing incredibly foolish things, so to me she is still an'tjällh'ech." The word meant beloved little child or simple fool depending on how it was used. I didn't mind. I was so happy to see him that the slight insult that word offered washed over me like sand across the desert. He sat down beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder.

"You are well, yes? Recovered from your death sleep?" he asked.

I nodded mid sip, my eyes watching him and Thrawn from over the rim of my cup. The sleep induced fog in my brain receded and I began to sense a tension in the air between the two men. They had been arguing. It was what had woken me up. Terse words spoken in hushed tones. I finished my stim 'caf and handed Thrawn the cup.

"Another?" he asked. I nodded and turned back to look at Navaari. He had not changed. Unmasked he was less intimidating but no less fierce. Red eyes stared into my own and waited for the question he knew I had to ask.

"Why are you here?"

I watched as he glanced at Thrawn. "You did not tell her did you." It was not a question, he had known and it hadn't impressed him much.

Thrawn stopped mid pace, my empty cup still in his hands and sighed. The look he gave me was mingled with sadness and defiance. What ever was coming next he knew I would not be happy about it.

"No. I thought it best if she did not know until you were here."

Navaari shook his head and pursed his lips, disagreeing with Thrawn's logic.

"Know what?" I asked, loathing that he spoke about me as though I was not in the room at all.

Both men looked at each other, the hardness from the earlier argument that had woken me returned to fill the silence between them. I asked my question a second time.

"I am here to fetch you," Navaari said eventually when Thrawn remained silent.

I looked from one to the other again. "Fetch me?" I asked raising my eyebrows.

He nodded.

"Fetch me where?"

"You are to come with me to Hjal."

I stared at Thrawn as realisation dawned on me. "You're sending me away?"

He gave me the barest of nods. "You cannot stay here. I thought it best if you were to go some place safe, be with someone who is far better at curbing your impulsive idiocy than I am."

"Am I not in the safest place in the galaxy?" I asked ignoring the last bit.

"No," he said quietly.

"If you cannot bear the sight of me then why not simply send me back to Coruscant?" My words were cruel and angry.

"Coruscant is also not safe," he said plainly, ignoring my barb. Now the sadness in his voice was unmistakable.

"So your answer is to send me away to an ice planet on the edge of the galaxy with a chaperone?"

"It seems the best course of action given your propensity for running off blindly into the unknown. You would not have spent almost a year at death's door and months afterwards trying to recover your strength if you had used some common sense."

"And you're letting him do this?" I turned to Navaari. If I had hoped for an ally to my own cause he was not it.

"It seemed to be the best way to be keeping you out of trouble, Tjällh," he replied seriously.

I opened my mouth but had no idea what to say. "No!" I hissed angrily, standing up. "Absolutely not!"

My defiance threw a switch and Thrawn's anger flew. "Seven and a half months, Merlyn!" He spat, "For seven months and three weeks I watched and waited while you hovered in and out of death." The bitterness, anger and pain in his voice sliced into my gut like a blunt knife. "You have no say in these matters any longer. You forfeited that right when you flew out of here on your own without an escort into certain danger on a whim or rash, instinctive impulse. You don't think! You never think! So now I am removing your need to think and acting in accordance with Dantassi laws which bind me to you, which also, I might add bind you to me as you acquiesced."

I stared at him in astonishment. I had suspected that at some point not knowing what I had agreed to during the unmasking ceremony would come back to bite me. I opened my mouth to protest but he held up his hand for my silence. The full extent of his anger which he had held in check the night before now stunned me into submission.

He continued, his voice now ice cold and unforgiving. "You will go with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and you will, for once in your life, do as you are told. No more headstrong disobedience. Do you understand?"

The air went still, the way it sometimes was before a terrible storm. I stared at Thrawn for a full minute in utter disbelief at what I had just heard and then not knowing what else to say or do I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room. I heard Thrawn move to follow me but out of the corner of my eye I saw Navaari stop him, a broad hand at Thrawn's shoulder. "Let her go, Kej'son, give her some space to digest the news that you...."

I did not hear the rest because the door shut and I was already running down the corridor to get away. There were a few places I knew where I could escape to, quiet places where no one went. One was the small room which had a doorway to a small outcropping that served as a sort of ledge or balcony. I often went to sit out on it and breathe the fresh air. It was one of the few places I felt free to sit and think. I stood leaning back against the wall of cold stone and tossed small pebbles over the side. I gulped for air, feeling as though I couldn't breathe. I was too angry to cry but the tears were not far away. All I could think were the things I had lost. It all seemed so terribly unfair and I ached with a deep sorrow that would not go away. It did not take Thrawn terribly long to find me. Doctor Thracer had filled him in on all the places I went to hide; there wasn't much that escaped the doctor's notice and I didn't have that many hidey holes anyway.

I sensed him before I heard him so I didn't turn around. "Go away," I said.

"I shall do as you ask but only after you hear me out," he replied coolly, the anger gone leaving only stillness in its wake.

"You have more to say?" I asked nastily turning around to look at him. "I thought you didn't want to speak to me, that's why you are sending me away isn't it?"

"Stop being difficult and listen to what I have to say," he said wearily.

In answer I folded my arms across my chest and glared at him defiantly. He took it for compliance and continued.

"I need you to leave because it isn't safe for you here. It isn't safe for you with me or anywhere within the Empire and it is especially unsafe for you to return to Coruscant or your home."

I rolled my eyes. "And just why is that?"

"Because Ysanne Isard has put out a warrant for your arrest and there is a bounty on your head," he said simply.

That was the very last thing I had been expecting. "What?"

He drew a deep breath, "She and Pestage wish to rid themselves of any they fear would oppose them. Isard had your young friend Mara Jade imprisoned. You know too much, you were too close to Vader and held the Emperor's favour. She and Pestage are eliminating anyone from the Emperor's coterie who might be trouble. You, as Lord Vader's trusted personal assistant are considered trouble. I still do not know of all the details but I am working on this. Things between Isard and me are strained." He paused for a moment. "While I trust my men and the Chiss stationed here under my command, it would only take one careless whisper to put everything done here in jeopardy. It would only take one person to report that you are here to create some serious problems for me. I have enough to deal with as it is." He looked at me to make sure I was getting the message. "You are not safe here and I cannot protect you all the time. Your home on Tatooine is being watched as is your family so I cannot send you there either. I did not think that you would wish to spend the rest of your life in an Imperial jail, so I contacted Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and asked if he would be willing to take you out of harm's way until I can clear up this current issue."

I just stared at him not believing what I was hearing. What had happened to the Empire that I had worked for and believed in that its loyal citizens and workers were now being condemned and hunted by its own leaders?

Thrawn continued, "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii has wanted to teach you the ways of the Dantassi ever since he learned that I have failed in this particular duty. I cannot do what I need to do here and worry about you at the same time. I have much work to do and you no longer need medical attention. It seemed a good way to accomplish two things at once."

"So I am just in your way?"

He looked at me, annoyance flashed across his features. "Believe what you will but you cannot stay here and I mean to see that you are safe. I promised this much, so you will go."

"Promised? Promised who?"

He took a deep breath to steady his slow blooming anger. I knew all the right buttons to push and I was pushing them now. "Your family, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and all

those who care for you. It is a promise I intend to keep, A'myshk'a, whether you like it or not."

"And this suits your purpose just fine to get me out of the way?" I asked angrily. "You are just pissed off and annoyed with me and this is how you punish me for it!"

I watched as he clenched his jaw. I was winding him up but he was working hard to keep it in check. I wished he wouldn't. This Chiss coolness was alarming to me. I wanted him to explode at me, rail and be furious so that whatever it was he was holding inside would be released and we could go back to what we had been before all nine Corellian hells had been let loose. "I am, as you say, pissed off and yes, I am, to put it mildly, annoyed with you. I have been for some time but my feelings hardly enter into the picture do they? You go charging off where ever you will without considering the consequences to yourself or others."

Now we were getting to the heart of it. "Why didn't you talk to me about this last night, then?" I asked.

"Because, my dear, it is pointless to discuss your actions with you. I am quite certain in your head you had a perfectly good explanation for doing what you did but I cannot for the life of me think of one."

"I was trying to tell you what happened at Endor."

"Risking your life to do so when I would have learned of it soon enough. You are not the only messenger in the galaxy and we are not so backwater as one might think. What did you imagine you could accomplish?"

I opened my mouth for a second and stared at him but I did not know how to respond to this. I thought, had hoped that he had forgiven me, last night it had seemed that way, now I understood it had been his way of saying goodbye and softening the blow. It been just under a year and a half since the battle of Endor but it seemed that there was little I could say to him that would ease this anger which had stayed strong and fresh in all this time.

"Have you no answer?" His eyebrow arched and for a single second I hated his arrogance.

"I told you last night, I don't know."

His voice turned icy. "Do not lie to me behind half truths."

That was all it took and my anger came loose like a spitting jax. "I came to tell you so that you would know, so that you could salvage the fleet and do what you were supposed to do!" I stamped my foot.

"And what would that be, my dear?" he asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"To lead the Empire!"

He laughed then, it was the last thing I had expected him to do and it was a biting sound. "Sate Pestage and Ysanne Isard lead this empire now. I am in exile, or had you forgotten?"

"That was a ruse!"

"Yes, which only the Emperor, a few others who are now dead or here with me knew about. As far as the rest of the galaxy knows I am the alien in disgrace. It suits Isard's purpose well to have it stay that way and I am in no mind to challenge her at this point." The bitterness in his words as he spoke was palpable.



I just looked at him in total disbelief wondering if I even knew him anymore. What had happened to him in the time I had been in the coma?

"You, my dear, almost lost your life for nothing and I had to stand by and watch." The flash of cold fury in his voice made me take a step back from him. For the first time, for as long as I could remember, I could not meet his eyes. When I didn't say anything he continued.

"Parck was beside himself with guilt, I spent hours trying to tell him that short of throwing you in the stockade there was nothing he could have done. He could not bear to be on base while you lay at death's door so he is currently in some sort of ridiculous self imposed exile on one of my ISDs. He is one of my best men, one of my friends and he hates himself for what happened to you. So answer me honestly, did you use your mind tricks on him?" Thrawn asked barely bothering to keep the viciousness out of his words.

"No!" I shouted hotly and shook my head. "I did not, I just asked. I told him what had happened and he let me go, he didn't disagree with my reasoning!" The truth was I couldn't recall what had happened. I remembered only a terrible sense of urgency and panic but I was fairly certain I had not used my force powers to push Parck into any decision.

"Your reasoning...", he spat the words out shaking his head slowly and drew a deep breath. "Your reasoning almost got you killed. You don't think! You don't reason, you just act! Your carelessness and your passions will be your undoing, A'myshk'a."

*And also yours*, I thought but wisely I held my tongue. There was a long deadly silence and he turned away from me. His voice when he finally spoke was full of pain.

"I mean to keep you safe. Do you know what finding you at death's door was like? How many times do I have to watch as you walk the line between living and dying, how many? You are the worst distraction a man in my line of work, in my position could ever have in his life! It seems I cannot walk away from you nor can I have you here and I cannot do my job with you underfoot, constantly getting in harm's way. You need to go with someone who can do a better job of keeping you out of trouble than I can."

"Underfoot?" I asked turning on him, shaking my head in disbelief. "I interfere with your job? You will send me away because I am in your way or is it really because you are afraid?" My voice was barely a whisper because I could not fathom the truth of it all.

"I thought you were dead," he said quietly. It cost him so much to utter these words, I saw the pain of it in his eyes but I ignored this and the anguish that flooded his voice. I was too riled up to care and lashed out accordingly.

"And that's the real issue isn't it, your fear," I said coldly. "You hide from your emotions and your pain by ducking into duty. That's what you did after your brother went missing and now you do it again with me only I am not dead!" my voice shook as my own fury gripped me. "No wonder your sister won't speak to you. You'll hide me away from the real world to save yourself from a broken heart and in the process you'll break mine! You drive everyone who cares about you away because you are afraid of the pain relationships cause! You are such a coward!" I hissed the words at him and took a grim satisfaction from watching him flinch. I had hit home and it was a low blow. I should have stopped but I didn't, I was too angry and beyond caring. "You are so full of

pretty words and grand gestures but when it comes to what really matters you hide behind that uniform! The real truth of things is that you can't deal with love or the pain of loss. You run away from emotions under the guise of work! So, go back to your duty then and see if I care!" I shouted, staring at him for a full second then uttered the words I would live to regret. "I hate you. You should have left me there to die we both would have been a lot better off." Tears spilled down my face. I could not stop them. I went to shove past him and smacked his hand away savagely as he tried to catch my arm.

He whispered my name and for a split second our eyes met. My heart wrenched with what I saw in his expression but my own anger, grief and misplaced pride had a far stronger grip on me than sense, proving him right about everything he had just said. I turned away, leaving him standing there. Without another word I went to find Navaari, stopping along the way to pick up my satchel which held the few belongings I had on the base and with some clothes. Navaari was waiting for me at the docking bay. He looked at my face and wisely kept quiet. I didn't say anything when I saw what ship he had come in, the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma*, but it was another addition to the fuel that fed my anger.

"Let's go," I said as I marched past him up the ramp.

Wordlessly he followed me in.

"I assume you are the one who flew *my* ship here?"

He nodded.

"Fine, then she's yours." I told him and left to find refuge in one of the small cabins.

I felt the ship's thrusters engage and closed my eyes as she swung lazily out of the docking bay. I had not known Navaari could pilot but nothing about the Dantassi who had rescued me in the middle of a raging blizzard surprised me anymore. I lay on the bunk, too furious to cry. When the shuddering stopped I knew the ship had broken free from the planet's atmosphere. I counted the minutes until we left the planet's gravity well and waited with baited breath to hear the hyperdrive kick in; when it did I knew a small sense of relief. Sometime after that Navaari knocked on the cabin door and then, although I told him to go away, came in anyway, holding a cup of tea. I glanced at him then went back to staring at the ceiling. He set the cup down on the small table then sat on the edge of the bunk and looked at me.

"That did not go as well as he wished, did it?" He asked. When I said nothing he continued, "I told him you would not be listening. He does not understand how you can be so emotional about something which makes so much sense to him. He only wishes to keep you from more harm." He chuckled a little at the face I made. "You are far too hard on that man." He added.

"Perhaps, but he is also hard on me," I retorted, "and now he can do what he wishes, which is to forget about me and bury himself in his duty! It is what he's good at."

"Give him time, Tjällh, give him time," Navaari said softly, placing his large hand gently on my shoulder.

"Time?" I could not keep the anger out of my voice. "Time, he has had months and months to get over it. I don't understand him at all."

"Yes, many long months of watching you find your way back from your journey through the underworld. Do you think it was hard for you to be in that dark place all that time? Imagine what it was for him having to be the observer of this journey. He is a

man of planning and of action, not a man to sit easily and wait." Navaari nodded. "You understand him better than you let on but you do not like the results of his choices and while he understands you as well, he loves you which blinds him. Pushing you away is the only way he knows how to deal with his own grief. He is not a stupid man. His crime is caring too much and that goes against all he has been taught. He does not mean to be cruel or cold. Allow him this time, this space, little one, he also needs to heal. Much has happened in these long months which he could not speak of; it has been difficult for him as well." His deep voice rumbled in his chest. His kindness was my undoing. I gulped down air trying to stop the damn within me from bursting. He stroked my hair watching me struggle to hold the well of sorrow and emotion back from exploding.

"Let go of your sadness, Tjällh, keeping it inside makes you do crazy things."

"Go away, Navaari."

"No. Not this time. You need to be listening to me now," he said, "You hurt through and through, you have lost loved ones and time. Your life has changed forever if you do not allow this grief to pass through you, you will surely suffer for it, perhaps even die because of it, so let it go little one." He spoke with a firmness I knew meant he would not go away, nor would he let me slide into the greyness that threatened to swallow me whole. He caressed the side of my face and he waited.

The gentleness of his touch and the truth in his words were a trigger, permission to let go of everything I had been holding inside. I felt the damn burst and could no longer stop it, curling up into a small ball on my side and burying my face in my pillow, I wept bitterly without holding back for the first time since I had come back to the land of the living. Grief poured out of me like a river and I thought I would die from the pain of it. Navaari simply sat at my side, his large hand warm on my back as he rubbed it comfortingly. A father's gift this was, the ability to somehow ease away pain without saying a word. It made me ache for my own father and I cried even harder. I thought it would never end but even the body has its limits and eventually there were no more tears to shed.

"I am thinking a rest on Hjal away from all this sorrow will be doing you some good," he said, "You need a place to heal, you need time to mourn. Nikätza'arth'pavjäska was right this is a deep wound and it has had plenty of time to fester."

I sniffled and turned around to look up at him. He read my disbelief in my eyes.

"He knows better than you think about such things, and he too, carries much sorrow in his heart. Just because he is not showing it as you do does not mean it is not there." When he handed me the cup of tea now no longer hot but still drinkable, I sat up, cross legged and took it gratefully. My throat ached from crying.

"This is my ship, you know," I said for lack of anything else to say.

He smiled. "Yes, I know. I have taken great care of her. Your things are aboard and some of your clothes, your Ta'kasta'cariad thought you would be wanting them. He thought you would feel safe in her."

"How long will I be staying on Hjal?"

Navaari shrugged slightly. "That is up to Nikätza'arth'pavjäska, it is he who must decide when it is safe for you to return."

"So I am to be a prisoner then."

"No, you could be leaving if you wished it but I would not be recommending doing such a thing. You will be safe with me, with the clan and if you are thinking to return to your family on Tatooine then I must ask would you wish to be putting them at risk as well? They are being watched, you cannot go home and where else would you be protected?" He paused to let the weight of his words sink in. "Would you rather be on the run? Always looking over your shoulder to see if you were in the sights of a bounty hunter? I do not think that imprisonment would sit well with you. Your family knows you are with someone safe, Nikätza'arth'pavjäska has kept them well informed. He simply did not give them details so that when they are questioned they do not need to tell lies."

"If I went home I would put them all in danger."

He nodded. "If I am understanding it correctly they could be executed for harbouring a known and wanted fugitive. Better that you vanish for a while and let Nikätza'arth'pavjäska sort things out on his end. It is what he is good at."

I could only nod. My last words to Thrawn echoed loudly in my head. My anger had receded leaving remorse in its wake.

"Time, you both need some time," Navaari said gently, reading the expression on my face correctly.

But I shook my head. There are some wounds time never seemed to heal, was not Lord Vader proof of that? As if he could read my thoughts Navaari wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me to him tightly. I just closed my eyes, my head ached fiercely and I was suddenly tired beyond belief.

"So now you are in my hands, Tjällh. Let us see if I cannot make of you Jhal'kai and teach you how to be Dantassi." He smiled.

I returned his smile but I don't think it reached my eyes and then rested my head on his shoulder. I could not argue against anything he had said and in the end, truth be told, I was a little relieved that the decision had been taken out of my hands. At least if something went wrong no one could say it was due to my rashness or stupidity.

"How long before we reach Hjal?" I asked.

"A few days by your reckoning."

I nodded. "Is there more tea?"

Navaari smiled. "I can be making more tea if you wish and perhaps something to eat? You are too thin, the cold will gnaw at your bones."

I didn't answer as I got up to follow him out to the galley. My mother used to say that nothing cured all ills like a good cup of tea. Now was as good a time as any to put her theory to the test because there didn't seem to be anything else I could do or say that would change the way things had turned out. What was done was done and there was no going back. The Empire that I had known and worked for was gone, what had taken its place was a stranger to me. Whatever my future held next was a mystery but at the very least I was alive to see it.



## **Chapter One**

I was born on Tatooine, a fairly unremarkable planet that orbits a binary star system. It was known for two things; its unforgiving heat and Luke Skywalker. It lies in the Arkanis Sector of the Outer Rim territories and at one time was mistakenly thought to be a third star because the reflection of Tatoo I and Tatoo II's light from the planet's surface was so bright. On the whole there was not a lot about Tatooine to recommend it as a home world to anyone. During the Old Republic it was left alone, forgotten and seen as unimportant by the Senate. The Hutts ruled along with the spice smugglers and many other underworld organizations. Its lack of law made it a prime place for 'undesirables' to hide out. It was a place most civilized peoples would not dream of setting foot on and whispers of slavery as well as other unsavoury occupations did nothing to improve my home world's reputation. It would also not have helped if more people knew that it was on Tatooine that Lord Vader, then Anakin Skywalker, grew up as a slave until he was freed and taken away to become a Jedi Knight at the age of ten by Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn which would alter his life and his destiny forever. Twenty two years later I was born on the same planet with my own strange story to tell. Raised in its blazing heat, until I got swept up into working for the Empire and sent to Coruscant, I had known no other way of life and was happy for it.

My time on Tatooine had made me hardy. I had learned at an early age to conserve all water and be wary of the twin suns that reigned in the sky. I never minded the heat which I had grown up with and I found my home planet to be beautiful in its starkness. As a child, I learned the whispering tell tale signs the wind gave when a sand storm was coming because the sky's face never changed. It never rained and water, plucked from the atmosphere by hardy moisture farmers too stubborn to give up and move someplace else, was more precious than all the spice and credits in the galaxy put together. I knew how long a person could survive in the desert without food or water. I knew what plants held precious juices and liquids which could save a thirsty man's life and where to find them. I knew the correct way to greet the Sand People should one ever have the misfortune to meet them in the desert and I could ride a bantha with ease but none of these things prepared me for life in the Empire's service or living on Hjal amongst the Dantassi with Navaari.

Hjal was a small planet far out on the shoulder of the Tingel Arm, one of three planets orbiting a small yellow star and the one with the longest orbit. It was a glacial planet. Almost seventy percent of its mass was covered in some sort of snow or ice. For much of its year the seas and lakes were fully frozen and even in the short summer the highest peaks of its sweeping mountains were covered in gleaming white snow. What Tatooine lacked in water, Hjal had in abundance, almost all of it frozen. Because of its strange elliptical orbit Hjal did have seasons, though none of them would be considered even remotely warm by my standards. The shorter end of Hjal's orbit around the small sun made up the two months of spring, two months of autumn and four months of summer. Spring and autumn brought violent storms which swept the planet for days on end with astonishing ferocity. The rest of the sixteen month year was the hell Navaari cheerfully called winter. The large enclave where Navaari lived was situated near the

midline of the planet, where the weather was most temperate. It was a stunningly beautiful place despite its harshness and cold.

The Dantassi, short for Mathäd'antass'Iyantha which meant the Ghosts of Flesh and Bone, had colonized the planet hundreds of years before the Clone Wars after leaving their home-world of Csilla. They were descendants of the Chiss people, a section of the population that had lived before their home-world had been plunged into an ice age and driven the majority of its people under ground. The Dantassi had chosen not to seek warmth deep under the planet's crust but instead found ways to survive the bitter cold on the surface.

They had been, for the most part, a nomadic folk wandering with the seasons, such as they were, but at some point they had taken root and begun to build their own small civilizations deep in the caverns of the Csillian Mountains using both traditional and some very advanced technological means to survive the surface cold. Most people, including the Chiss, knew next to nothing about them. The Dantassi had thrived quietly, secretly. Their reputation as terrible and fierce warriors and hunters was well deserved but also highly exaggerated by rumours and whispers passed along by any and all who met them. The Dantassi encouraged these tall tales on the premise that the more outlandish the mystery surrounding them was the less likely it was that people would come looking for them. If this meant that the rest of the galaxy saw them as a vicious feral society to be feared and avoided then so much the better. I knew differently.

My life had changed irreversibly the day Lord Vader had died. In the time I had been lost to a coma the galaxy had moved on, the rebels advanced towards Coruscant and Ysanne Isard was doing all she could to tighten her grip on the power she had inherited with the Emperor's death. It would have made sense to me that Thrawn be recalled to the Core to take charge of the military but instead he remained stationed on the base on Nirauan, carving out the Empire's niche in an area of space never before explored by Imperials. What he felt about this I didn't know, before we could speak of it and the other issues that lay between us he had unceremoniously shipped me off to Hjal with Navaari under the guise of keeping me safe. In spite of the fact that I was furious with him for this, it was probably, given the circumstances, the very best thing he could have done but this did not mean I forgave him for it, far from it.

The journey to Hjal had been a quiet one. I had withdrawn and Navaari let me be. We arrived on the planet in the middle of winter and it was every bit as cold and strange as I recalled it to be. Bundled up in the furs Navaari had brought with him, I did not feel the cold as we made the sled trip from the docking bay to the enclave, I just felt numb. The small apartment I had stayed in before was exactly as I remembered it. I chose the same bedroom I had slept in the last time, not wishing to stir up memories of happier moments. My return to the enclave was a quiet uneventful thing; the few people I saw kept themselves to themselves. When I asked why they turned their faces away from me Navaari's explanation surprised me a little.

"You are in mourning, they are respecting this," he had said.

And so I was. It was the Dantassi believed in many things and deaths were treated with the utmost of respect. It was said that the souls of the dead remained with the living until the living let them go, usually this period lasted for a year but in my case, Navaari had said that it would be longer.

"You were walking with the dead," he had said, as if that statement explained everything. I had just given him a look of confusion. "You were not letting go and saying farewell, you were following their path."

So I was officially said to be in what the Dantassi called sju'ru'arwy'kha, a period of mourning and meditation. The members of the enclave treated me with kindness but kept their distance. Firm in the belief that during this time the dead walked with the living and it was best to allow the person or people left behind to make their peace and move on. At first I had been furious about this, left feeling even more alone and shunned than ever before but over time I realised it made sense. So with a small solemn ceremony I was declared sju'ru-kha and treated accordingly. I found this idea of an official period of mourning to be silly at first, after all Lord Vader had been killed well over a year past but as Navaari had pointed out, I had not been awake for this time so for me it was a fresh wound which, in his words, was shattering my soul in many pieces. There were many such wounds in my soul, I had told him angrily. *All the more reason for you to part ways with your ghosts then*, had been his reply. I never could argue with Navaari.

Sju'ru'arwy'kha was observed in many ways, the person in mourning was given lots of space to 'find their way back'. They were left in peace to contemplate, to experience all the emotions one goes through with loss and above all to forgive. There was a sacred space, a room set aside for remembrance and contemplation. It was a beautiful space and much to my surprise, once I got used to the idea I used it often. Unlike my previous experiences with someone close to me dying, this time I could not escape thinking about it all. Time to contemplate was all I had and there was no place to run to, no place to find loud distractions so for the first time in my life I faced the death of the people I had cared about. It was the most terrifying journey I had ever had to make in my life and I felt as though I were facing it completely alone. Of course, this was not the case at all.

The enclave's healer and shaman were responsible for the well being of the sju'ru-kha and it was to the shaman, an elderly woman named Ma'kehla, I found myself drawn to when I needed to speak with someone about what it was I had gone through, was going through. She did not have to know Lord Vader to understand that in my case the mourning was complicated and compounded by a terrible, crushing guilt. We would sit in the sacred space for hours, sometimes saying nothing, sometimes I spoke until my voice was raw and sometimes all I could do was weep uncontrollably. I knew that I was not simply crying for him but for everyone and everything I had ever lost. It was a terrible yet at the same a cleansing experience. The rituals she performed were secret and sacred; never to be spoken of and indeed even if I had wanted to share them there were no words to describe this journey.

For the first three months of my time on Hjal I did next to nothing. When I was not wandering around like a ghost or speaking with Ma'kehla, I slept. It was surprising to me to sleep so much after nearly a year in a coma but this was not the same thing and for the first time in a very long time it was sleep without the terror of nightmares or pain. My ghosts, it seemed were giving me space and there were no unwelcome visits from long dead Jedi. When I did dream it was of day to day things and slowly I began to heal.



Six months after landing on the planet I woke up one day to realise that the great weight I felt I had been carrying upon my shoulders was gone. I had dreamed of Lord Vader for the first time in ages, seeing him standing on the bridge of a star destroyer, his hands clasped behind his back staring out into the stars. He did not turn to look at me but instead merely said *'You may go now.'*

When I told Ma'kehla this she simply smiled and told me that I was done. My ghosts had released me and I could now return to my life, such as it was. I suppose she passed the word along because within two days of me talking to her about this the enclave elder called a gathering and I was welcomed back from my period of sju'ru'arwy'kha. Suddenly it was as if someone had flooded the world with colour again and when Navaari pulled me into one of his huge bear hugs it was not tears of sorrow that leaked from my eyes but tears of joy.

Once I was considered to be whole and healed, no longer dragging around a bunch of disgruntled ghosts my life became suddenly very busy. The enclave had need of a teacher, someone who could unravel the secrets of learning basic to those who wished to learn it. I found myself with five willing and eager students to teach which was a completely new experience for me. It was one thing to learn a foreign language but it was quite another to try and teach one's mother tongue to another. When I was not teaching I was learning. At the hands of Navaari and his own students I began to learn the ways of the Jhal'kai, the art of tracking. Boba Fett would have been envious at what I learned and Navaari was an excellent teacher. While hours and hours of traipsing through the frozen tundra was not my most favourite thing to do it kept me in very good shape as well as on my toes. I was officially a part of Navaari's family but he by no means went easy on me, if anything he rode me harder than he perhaps might have had I not been who I was. There were days when I could have cheerfully murdered him.

During my time on Hjal, Thrawn wrote letters. They arrived as a packet once every five or six weeks, usually with messages from my family and friends on Tatooine and Coruscant included. My family understood the seclusion and wrote of cheerful day to day things, making them seem less far away, less remote. Shiv's letters spoke of much change on Coruscant and not for the better. Under Isard and Pestage's rule the Empire was suffering. If people had thought the Emperor cruel they now had reason to doubt this way of thinking. She was every bit as ruthless as she was rumoured to be and I felt guilty at my last words to Thrawn every time I read about Isard's exploits. Perhaps he did not know how to cope with strong emotions but in the end, in sending me to Hjal, he was only trying to protect me.

Navaari had tried many times to get me to open up with him on the subject of Thrawn but that was a place I would not go. Thrawn was a topic that was off limits. My guilt and my anger mingled in an unhappy cocktail leaving me to wonder if whatever it was that had been between he and I was now irreversibly shattered. I had told him I hated him, and in that tiny moment of time those words had been true but now, now I regretted them but I could no more go back in time and undo them than I could make Hjal a warm and sunny place. My regret and guilt made replying to Thrawn's letters impossible. I had no idea what to say to him, how to describe my experiences on Hjal and so his correspondence went unanswered. Still, he wrote. His letters were every bit as

elegant and wonderful as I remembered. His way with language never ceased to astonish me but often the subjects of his letters were less than encouraging.

The Empire was crumbling. The Alliance sniped away at small yet vital targets with everything they had. Thrawn wrote with some admiration of a group of elite pilots collectively known as Rogue Squadron and talked about the small battles lost and won. He also spoke of Isard and Pestage. He knew she was lying to him, keeping him at arm's length because she feared what he might do if given the opportunity to take over. He was frustrated by this because it was, as he had often told me, never his wish or goal to take over as leader of the Galactic Empire, he felt that his role was that of steward, keeping the law in order to maintain peace and cohesion. As he often had before, he hinted that there were worse things in the galaxy than the Emperor to worry about but he could see the slow decay and felt powerless to stop it. So he continued his original mission, to expand the Empire into the Unknown Regions. He populated the base at Nirauan with both humans and Chiss but in reading in between the lines I could tell that things were also not going according to plan, he simply did not have the man power he needed to continue the level of expansion he had been achieving before the decline of the Empire really began.

The two year anniversary of the battle of Endor came and went. I marked its passing quietly with Ma'kehla, half expecting it to be a difficult day, but the pain of loss had dulled considerably. I no longer felt that terribly gaping sorrow at Lord Vader's death instead, more often than not when I felt that pang of emptiness it came because I had thought of Thrawn. I missed him terribly but I could not bring myself to say it. To admit this would be to admit I had been wrong and that meant saying I was sorry which no matter how often I tried to write those words I simply could not seem to do. I ached for his presence, the touch of his hands the sound of his voice. With each and every letter he sent this pain was renewed because every time I touched the latest letter to come to me I was instantly given a myriad of images and sensations, thanks to my wretched gift of being able to read the memories from objects. He too felt regret, while he never spoke of it I sensed it, lingering under his words and, just like me, he did not know how to bridge that particular gap so he skirted around it filling his letters with news from the outside worlds, stories from his day to day life and updates of what was going on as far as the Empire was concerned. I read his letters so many times over I could probably have recited them word for word but not once did I ever answer them. If this hurt or worried Thrawn he never spoke of it. I suspected that Navaari kept him well informed on my life on Hjal, though he never said a word of that to me, nor did I ask although it had occurred to me to do so from time to time.

My days on Hjal were full and busy, time passed far swifter than I could ever have thought, Before I had realised it I had spent over a year and a half on the planet. I had grown and changed in ways I could not have ever imagined. If Navaari had felt I was ignorant to the ways of the Dantassi before, he could no longer make this claim. While I did not look like them, I felt as though I was welcome among them, even one of them sometimes. I had learned their language and customs though some had taken a lot longer to get used to than others. I had made friends and learned new skills I had not dreamed possible and even come to occasionally enjoy the austere cold the planet had to offer. In short I began to feel comfortable and at home. This should have served as a

warning of sorts because usually when things in my life settled down to some sort of normalcy was exactly when things tended to change. This was no exception.

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I struggled in the soft powdery snow, tripping over the snow shoes strapped to my boots and falling, for the billionth time, flat on my face. Trying not to laugh, Navaari backtracked and hauled me to my feet by the scruff of my neck. One would think that years of walking in the sand would have prepared me for this but that was not the case. I still sometimes struggled with the snow shoes despite the hours and hours of practice, tripping over the extra size they added to my feet. I used to think I was graceful but not now. Wearing the large flat additions to my boots just made me awkward and clumsy.

Navaari sighed and shook his head. "You look like a jax trying to swim," he said, his breath lacing the air with white puffs.

"I feel like it as well. How in the name of the almighty Sarlacc can anyone walk in these things?"

"Practice," he replied.

I glared at him. "I've been practicing this for ages now!"

He laughed. "Yes and your skills at falling flat on your face are improving with each try."

I grinned as I flung a handful of snow at him and sat down. "Ha very ha!"

He squatted down at my side and looked at me for a moment. "You are giving up?"

I nodded. "We've been at this for hours, we haven't found anything worth tracking and the weather is going to turn," I said.

He looked at the sky which had gone from a clear deep blue to a strange flat silver colour.

"Yes, there is a big blow coming in from the North East. It will be bad, I am thinking, three maybe four days."

I nodded. I knew the signs for storms.

Navaari gave me a smile, "Maybe you are not so good at walking with the snow shoes but you surpass my skill in sensing the weather. Come, time we head back."

We were close enough to home that we would probably get there before the storm really hit and I was glad for it. There had been a few times when we were not close enough and had to find shelter and camp out. I had learned a great deal about cold weather survival but that didn't mean I liked it any more than I had when I first stepped foot on Hjal. It was one thing to watch the wildness of a blizzard from the comfort of the enclave but quite another to be out in the middle of it, and I should know, I had done that on my own once. The enclave still talked about it, using my idiocy as an example to small children who thought playing in the wild wind and snow was a pretty good idea. If Navaari had not placed a tiny tracer chip in the bone mask he had made for me I would have died, curled up in a little ball in thinking I was warm when, really, I was freezing to death. It was not often that Navaari lost his temper but he had then, and rightly so. It had been a stupid thing to do and he never let me forget it.

By the time we made our way back to where the sled and hounds sat the first lazy flakes of snow had begun to fall. There was no wind yet but it would come. I could sense it the way I could sense lies. Navaari was right it was almost as if I had a gift to feel changes in the weather and I had never been wrong about it yet. I glanced up at the eerie sky and just knew this storm would be bad, Nagh'anni's brush, as the Dantassi called the storms that came during this time of year, were the worst. Violent and unpredictable they swept the planet for days on end with winds reaching past two hundred kilometres per hour and falling and blowing snow making the world impossibly white and visibility null. Better to be indoors safe and warm than out in it, that was for sure. During such weather the enclave battened everything down and concentrated on activities which could be done indoors. The spring and Autumn storms were often the times when the council sat in long sessions or weddings and other rites of passage were performed, because these storms pretty much guaranteed that most everyone from the enclave who was on planet would be present and would not be going anywhere for a while.

It was the first time in my life that I had ever really experienced any sort of community on such a large yet intimate scale. It was strange and wonderful thing. People lived together and got along together, for the most part. Disputes were settled either in house or when they got out of hand, by the council and the Elder. Almost everyone in this particular enclave knew each other and even though there were well over several hundred people living in the enclave at any one time it never felt crowded.

There five enclaves living on Hjal, widely spread apart across the planet. I had not known that when I had first arrived, the Dantassi kept their numbers a secret. No one really knew how many there were or exactly where they were all situated. Navaari told me it was to keep the *come from aways* from learning too much. Once a year, all five enclaves came together for a week long gathering at a neutral place. It was a spectacular thing to experience but I had found it overwhelming to see so many Dantassi in one place, especially as I was the only human among them. The gathering site was huge, built into one of the mountains that ringed the very southern edge of the central tundra. It was a place of power Navaari had told me, the first settlers had found the caverns not dug them and to this day it was only ever used for the gathering.

It was at this huge meeting that the five councils got together, discussed politics and policy, caught up on the news of the outside worlds brought in by the hunters who had traversed the galaxy and returned. It was also a great social gathering time, the intermingling of clans and families. The mixing of blood between enclaves was encouraged so there were always a few binding ceremonies at this time and it was the one time of the year when the rule about being masked before anyone but your own enclave and family was relaxed. Mostly, I had thought at the time, it was an excuse to party like crazy for a week. It was exhausting and I had been grateful when it was all over but also a little sad.

The Dantassi were a very close knit people and even when there were conflicts, the ties that bound them together were stronger. They looked out for one another, worked as a group for the better good and it was a far cry from the back stabbing, bitchy politics I had experienced while working at the Imperial palace. Here, there was no Emperor's favour to curry, no vying for positions of power. Power came from contribution the more you contributed the higher in esteem you were held, but in the

end it was simply about respect, there were no awards for hunting the most or doing the most. You were expected to pull your weight and do your part and in difference to humans, the Dantassi accepted this with grace. It was their way of life and their survival depended on it.

I came to understand why Thrawn admired them so much. While it was not the perfectly harmonious society that philosophers had dreamed about, it was organised and healthy. Once I had been able to see past my own grief, I came to realise just how lucky I was to be given the chance to experience this, to live with them and be considered one of them. Thrawn had not done me a disservice by sending me here to get better he had done me a huge favour. It was my own stupidity and stubbornness that kept me from telling him this.

I trudged back to the sled. The air had taken on that strange buzz that always came before a violent storm, as if the oncoming weather caused a certain vibration which only animals and beings far more advanced than me could actually hear. It set my teeth on edge though. I looked up at the sky as I stowed the hunting gear in the sled-box. This storm would be bad, the air pushed at me like a giant hand and what had started out as a few fat lazy snowflakes would become mean and vicious. I breathed the scent of the oncoming weather in deeply. The air had a damp smell to it, peppery and biting. It smelled of snow, lots and lots of snow. Navaari clapped a large hand on my back, reminding me that we had to get moving and there was not time for day-dreaming. We had at least a hundred kilometres to travel and we needed to do it as quickly as possible or we would have to make camp. I tied off the sled-box and then straddled it for the ride back. Navaari usually ran the sled hounds on the way home, he was still far more experienced with the hounds than I ever would be, but he had been insistent that I learn how to handle them and learn to drive a snow sled. Unlike walking with snow shoes I was actually pretty good at it but it helped that I had always been good with animals, something to do with my force gifts I suspected.

By the time we arrived back at the enclave, shortly before dark, the weather had turned fully. The wind had picked up from a gentle breeze which had played tag with the lazy snowflakes to a whining howl which sent snakes of powdery fine snow writhing across the ground. It was well on its way to being a violent beast which blew snow in all directions and the snowfall had gone from vertical to horizontal. The flakes of snow that had been fat and lazy were now mean and small, stinging as they smashed against us. I was grateful for all the protection my clothes and mask offered. The storm had not even begun to show her full fury and already the gusts shoved the sled from side to side as though our very presence was an affront to the weather gods. I had learned how to shift my weight to compensate for the gusting winds, keeping the sled from toppling. This was the reason for sitting on the box, not just to get driven home but to be a counter balance. It was achingly hard work which, because of the subtleness of the job, one did not notice at first, however the aching muscles a day later sure let one know that the ride was not just a pleasure trip. This storm had come down faster than even I had suspected it would and I was glad when we made the outer ring of the enclave, lights telling us we had come home, before things got really interesting. In spite of the fact that I loved the sheer ferociousness of this kind of weather it was exhausting to be out in and the lure of warmth and a hot meal was far more enticing.

Unpacking the sled and dealing with the sled-hounds was my job. While I took care of the animals, Navaari went inside to make supper. He had long since discovered that while I was pretty good at many things, cooking was definitely not one of them. It had only taken one of my very bad attempts at preparing a meal for him to make me swear I wouldn't do that again. That was a promise which was easy to keep; I hated cooking anything more than tea and toast. It became my job to deal with the sled and the dogs after a trip, and that was just fine with me. I liked the time I got to spend with the animals, they were simple and easy to be with. They made no demands on me; they yipped and yowled, tails wagging, tongues hanging out as they bounced about me when I readied their food. I loved their furry warmth, their trust which they did not give easily to many. Once they were fed and settled, I sat on the sled box and oiled the leather sled lines before stowing the gear away. It was a peaceful chore and it always relaxed me after a long trip.

The sled wolves were housed in a large kennel. Each wolf had its own place to sleep and its own food because while the wolves ran as a team and pulled the sled as one unit when left alone the pack instincts came out and if they were left in one area all together they started fighting with each other. I took my time with the animals because I liked being with them. It was uncomplicated, something I had come to appreciate living here. I loved the peace and quiet. It was something I had known on Tatooine as well but until I had gone to Coruscant and started to work for Lord Vader had never really treasured before. This time I savoured every moment of it. As I hung up the harnesses it occurred to me that I was truly happy here, which surprised me. When I had first arrived I was sullen and angry, hating everything now I wondered why.

When my chores were done I closed the kennel up and made my way through the underground passages to where Navaari and I lived. As I walked through the door to the cosy apartment, shrugging off the heavy warm clothes I noticed the lack of cooking smells in the air.

"Hey!" I yelled as I kicked off my boots and hung up the coat, "Are we eating out tonight?" I grinned at that thought; eating out meant that we had probably been invited to eat at An'jast'a's place which was just wonderful, she was an amazing cook. She had been showing a great deal of interest in Navaari as of late and he was not averse to accepting her frequent invitations for dinner. I got to eat with them but it was expected that I would suddenly become quite tired and leave shortly after the meal. It was fun to watch the two of them court each other even if it did make me a little sad concerning the status of my own peculiar relationship.

I made my way to the living room, still grinning, still holding my running commentary. "Oh, I bumped into Kai' on the way and I cancelled the lesson with him because he asked if I cou...." I froze dead in my tracks and so, it felt, did my heart.

Navaari looked at me but said nothing then he looked at the man seated across from him. Their conversation had stopped cold the second I had walked into the room. For a moment there was absolute and awful silence, only the faint sounds of the howling gale from outside could be heard. I didn't know what to do or say and like a terrified durni caught in the headlight of a speeder I stood stock still hoping the ground would swallow me whole. I wondering for a moment if the person in front of me was real or not, but when he spoke I knew it wasn't a dream it was all very real.

"Hullo A'myshk'a," said Thrawn getting up from the couch he had been sitting on. "It is good to see you."

Time stopped for a moment and everything, everyone seemed to hold their breath. It had been a long time since I had seen Thrawn and I didn't quite know how to react. I opened my mouth then closed it again as words fled from my brain. I stared at him and then looked at Navaari and then back to Thrawn. It felt as if the world had stopped moving. He was the very last person I had expected to see here and now and if he had hoped to surprise me it had worked. My heart thumped painfully in my chest but I had learned to hide that, learned to push that sensation away. Silence made the room seem small and oppressive. What was there to say that had not already been said before? My final words to Thrawn before I had been shipped off to Hjal still rang in my head, stirring up both guilt and anger, but mostly guilt. With another angry glance at Navaari, I ignored Thrawn and continued to my room to change out of my travelling clothes which were too warm for indoors. The storm that had begun on the way home was now in full fury so what ever it was Thrawn had come here to say to me could wait, he was not going anywhere for at least three or four days.

I wasn't surprised when Navaari followed me into my bedroom. The set of his mouth and the hardness in his eyes had not escaped my notice. I waited till he had closed the door before opening my mouth to speak but he beat me to the punch. He tolerated many things from me but where Thrawn was concerned that tolerance waned a lot.

"Your rudeness is not becoming of you, A'myshk'a," he chided.

"Did you know he was coming? Did you know he would be here?" I asked ignoring his statement completely.

He stared at me for a moment then said, "No. I would have spoken of it. I do not think it is wise to surprise you in this manner; it makes you difficult to deal with. He arrived early this morning and the first I knew of it was when I walked in an hour ago." He gave me a calculating look. "But it is not unexpected; you knew he would eventually come to see you."

I shook my head angrily as I stripped off my heavy clothes down to the warm under garments that I always worn when travelling, "Well, you can tell him to go back to his base. I don't want to see him or speak to him." I grabbed my robe and wrapped it around me angrily.

Navaari frowned, "Perhaps you can be telling him that yourself, he has come to be and speak with you, not me. You are the one who has shunned him by not answering his letters, not communicating with him. You have made this face to face meeting harder than it needed to be. I cannot help you here. It is you two who need to fix what is broken, not I."

"He was the one who broke it in the first place by shipping me off!" I hissed, trying to keep my voice down.

Navaari just raised his eyebrows at me. "It was the right thing to do and you know this, you are just angry because that is easier than to be admitting the truth. You hide from your feelings which serves no purpose at all. I will not play mediator for this, you must sort through your mess on your own. So, enough of this stubbornness! Go and get cleaned up. Your Ta'kasta'cariad has come a long way to speak to you, you will honour

him with the respect the he has earned." There was no mistaking the reproach in Navaari's words and I had learned enough about the Dantassi ways, enough about Navaari to know I would never win this argument no matter how hard I tried.

"Fine!" I stamped my foot, feeling every bit as immature as I sounded.

"Do not cross me on this! You live in my house, you will abide by the rules," he admonished.

I just sighed, giving in. I wondered, as I headed to the 'fresher to shower, if parents ever stopped being parents. While I was no child of Navaari's, he had taken me into his family, treated me as though I were his flesh and blood daughter. And because I probably deserved it, sometimes he treated me as though I were still a small kid as well. It was a real pain in the neck.

I took my time in the 'fresher. If I was going to face Thrawn I would at least do it smelling more like a girl and less like a bantha but I wasn't about to hurry. When I could no longer avoid it and had dragged my heels long enough, wrapped in my favourite robe I went back into the living room. The conversation stopped instantly so I knew they had been talking about me.

Navaari stood up. "Well, I shall be leaving you two alone. Try to sort yourselves out without bloodshed if you please," he said coolly, "If you are needing me I will be visiting with An'jast'a." His last words were directed at me but the tone of his voice said there would be hell to pay if I bothered him, and rightly so. I just gave him a little nod and watched as he left the apartment. The silence that remained after he had gone was heavy and unbearable but I couldn't break it, I didn't know how.

Thrawn poured two glasses of what looked a lot like Corellian Brandy and gestured for me to sit down across from him. I did so, took the offered glass and sipped from it slowly. I hadn't tasted Corellian brandy in a long time and just the scent of it brought many memories flooding back, most of them good and all of them had to do with Thrawn. The liquor's fire burned all the way to my stomach, thawing me out from this inside. I felt the heat spread through to my toes and finger tips. I savoured the first sip then promptly drained the glass. When I held it out he wordlessly poured me a refill. This time I just contemplated the contents, swirling the brandy around in the glass as though watching the amber liquid whirl around in circles would help me find the words, any words to say to the man sitting across from me. For a moment he watched me then he sat lazily back in the couch and sipped his own drink. He was very good at waiting me out; he had had many years of practice.

"Why are you here?" I finally asked when I could stand the silence no longer.

"To see you," he replied. He tilted his head to one side, as though it would help him to understand me if he viewed me from a slightly different angle.

"Well, you see me." I answered promptly. I wondered briefly why I was being so defensive and so cold. Then I understood it was because I was afraid. If he was here to tell me that what ever had lain between us was over I wanted to be able to give the appearance of not caring. I didn't want to be the first one to break down and I didn't want to give the impression I felt I had anything to apologise for even though I knew I did.

"Yes," he answered after a moment, "I do." He pondered his own drink for a moment then turned his gaze back to me. When our eyes met I felt as though my world



had tilted sideways. For a second it astonished me that with a single look he could still make my knees weak. "You look well," he said finally.

I could only nod.

"I see that life on Hjal agrees with you."

"I am guessing Navaari kept you informed about me," I said, ignoring his compliment.

He shifted to lean forward, elbows resting on his knees. "He let me know how you were doing in broad terms A'myshk'a, but if there are secrets between you two, rest assured he did not give them away. He simply felt it was his duty to let me know you were healing. It was a difficult road for you. I understand that."

"Do you?" I shot back without thinking.

"Believe it or not, yes, I do," he sighed. "Do you think that I needed you to come here simply to get rid of you? Nirauan was not the right place for you to be. I believed that Hjal was and I think I was right. I understand that you are angry but if I had to make the same decision all over again, I would."

I digested his words but they didn't make me feel any less cross. "Okay. Well you've seen me. I am happy here, it's peaceful. No one tries to kill me, or hunt me or anything else along those lines. I have a place here and it has become a home. You are not here just to see if I am okay so why don't you cut the crap and tell me why you really came."

He nodded, the gentle expression on his face hardening again. I had done that with my harsh words and cold shoulder but it didn't give me any satisfaction. "I'm here because I require your help," he said. There was truth in his words but it wasn't the whole truth.

"My help? You require my help? Let me guess, yet another mysterious planet you need to drag a force sensitive off to so you can discover another potential weapon? As I recall the last time you needed my help I almost got killed in the process but since you seem to take issue with me ending up in a med lab you'll have to forgive me when I question your motives."

He looked away from me and I watched the muscles on his jaw tighten as he bit back his own feelings. I threw Myrkr at him because I knew he felt a certain amount of guilt about it but it was always a low blow. When our eyes met again there was a coldness in his I didn't like at all but I was the one pushing him away, I was the one on the defensive. I didn't want to hear what was coming next because in the back of my mind I knew he was going to ask me to leave Hjal and I wasn't sure I wanted to go. For the first time in a very long time, I felt safe and at home and I was loath to let that go.

He took a deep breath, "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii has been keeping me informed about your progress here in teaching basic. He says that you not only have a talent for learning languages but that you seem to be extraordinarily good at teaching them to others. I have need of your skills in this area. As you know I have been populating the base at Nirauan with Chiss loyal to me and willing to serve under the Empire but the issue with the language difficulties has become somewhat of a divisive problem and I need to rectify that. I was hoping that you would be willing to return with me and teach Basic to my people and Cheunh to the Imperials. I need to have the lines of communication between the people under my command open up more, while there are

a couple who can and do serve as translators this is a waste of time and man power. I need the majority to be bilingual. I need your help to achieve this. The Empire needs your help." He spoke plainly and honestly.

I could not think of a job I wanted less. He had been right when he had said Nirauan was not a good place for me to be. My memories of it were unpleasant at best. I didn't have to think about my answer. "No," I said getting up. "I am happy here. The Empire made its point when Isard had a bounty put on my head, set a warrant for my arrest and threatened my family with execution if they were to help me at all. I worked hard for Lord Vader, I was as loyal as a person could be and this was how I was rewarded. My contract with the Empire ended the moment Lord Vader died. He released me from his service so I owe the Empire nothing."

He nodded. "I understand how you would feel that way but it is not Isard asking for your help, it is me. The bounty and the arrest warrant have been rescinded."

"Oh really, well isn't that nice. At least now I can finally go home and see my family without worrying about being hunted down like an animal or getting my family shot." I replied. "The answer is still no." I went to leave the living room, anywhere to get away from him but he wasn't going to give up that easily. He had come a very long way just to talk to me and he wasn't about to let me get away with my usual nonsense. Before I could make my escape he had gotten to his feet and grasped me by the arm, spinning me around to face him. He reached out and touched my face, as though he needed confirmation that I was real and not a ghost. The touch of his hand on my skin was electric and I gasped at the sensation of it. He pulled me close to his body, his eyes never leaving mine. I had forgotten how strong and how persuasive he could be when he really wanted to.

"Sarcasm does not become you," he said very softly.

"Let go," I growled trying to pull out of his grasp.

He did not let go because he wanted me to listen to what he had to say. "I understand you are furious with me. You and I have the remarkable ability to stay angry at each other for a very long time. You stir me up like one of these spring blizzards and I do not know how to contend with it. Under normal circumstances I would not ask you to leave because I know you are happy here but I need your help. You have the opportunity to be a part of something very big, to make a difference and believe me, if there were any other way I would not be here asking you now." I tasted lies beneath the words but I didn't understand what the lies were because mixed in with it all was the truth as well.

"So you didn't come here because you missed me? Because you want me to come back?" I asked, not having to pretend to be hurt.

"Oh for goodness sake Merlyn, what do you want to hear?" Finally the anger between us sparked, the physical closeness between us made that spark a flame. Of all the things I had truly missed since coming to Hjal it had been this passion, Thrawn's passion, our passion. Now it engulfed me and I felt as though I were drowning in it. I tried to throw up some mental defenses against it but it was too late for that so I wrenched out of his grasp and took a large step back.

"You sent me away because you said that having me near you was distracting! I am not a toy you can shove in a box every time you are unhappy with how it works!" I was shouting at him now. "What happens if I come back with you and you are not happy

with the job I do? Do I get sent to Kessel?" I shook my head. "You disappeared when I needed you the most and then you shipped me as far away as you possibly could because you could not deal with how you felt. You never asked me how I felt, you never once asked. So no! I will not be placed in that position again."

Those words hit home and he looked away, turning his back to me to draw a deep breath. In that moment I knew I loved him more than I had ever loved anyone in my life but I also resented him just as much and I didn't know how to put those two things together. I stood still waiting to see what would happen next.

"You are right," he said finally, turning back to look at me, making sure I knew he meant everything he was about to say. "And I have had a lot of time to think about everything that has happened. I regret how I dealt with the situation, I regret how things ended up between us but as I said before, if I had to do it all over again I would." He paused for a moment then said, "Shall I ask that you release me from your life? Is there another man in your heart now? Is that why you are so distant and cold?"

That last question took me utterly by surprise. During my time on Hjal there had been some interest shown from a couple of men. To say I wasn't flattered would have been a lie but when things began to get even a little interesting the only person really on my mind was Thrawn. All the encounters with brief flirtations and possible what ifs did make me miss and yearn for him more. It seemed that I could not live with him and I could not live without him and he had utterly spoiled me for anyone else. Or maybe it was just there was only meant to be one man in my life and unfortunately for me he was it. It had never occurred to me that he would worry about such things as well.

"No," I said softly. "Do you want to be released from me?" I asked holding my breath as he took his time to answer.

He gave me a tight smile then shook his head. "No. I did not enter into this relationship with you so lightly that I would walk away like this."

"So it is just pride that makes you stay with me?"

"Damn it! Must you twist everything around?" He snapped. Letting a little of his well controlled temper loose.

"Then stop talking to me as though I were one of your men! I'm not! I shared your bed, in theory also your heart! You are the one who chased and seduced me. You are the one who used Dantassi ritual to bind yourself to me without my knowledge so now you deal with it! Stop running away, stop pushing me away! If you spent even a little amount of time thinking about our relationship as you do your war games you'd be better far better prepared to deal with me. "

His lips twitched in a slight smile. "Nothing in my life has even remotely prepared me for you," he said quietly.

I just raised an eyebrow at him but he didn't say anything more and once again we just stood staring at one another while silence lay between us. Suddenly I was exhausted. The trek with Navaari had been a long and arduous one. I had come home hoping to eat and then sleep, not to spend time arguing with Thrawn. The brandy had gone straight to my head and now all I wanted to do was crawl into bed and stay there. In the few seconds of time that had passed between us he had read this. He knew me too well. The situation had escalated out of hand which wasn't what he had wanted at all and now he tried to diffuse it.

"I didn't come here to fight with you. It was the last thing I wanted although, admittedly, it was not unexpected. Up until now I have been unable to get away or else I would have been here months ago. I should have come anyway but you were right when you said I hide behind duty. I do. I am sorry for that. I had no idea how to help you, no idea how to even talk to you. I was so angry that I had almost lost you that I was blinded by it," he said plainly. "Your grief was an overwhelming flood of emotion to me and I am unused to coping with such intensity. I felt you would be far better off here with someone who could help you through it, someone better equipped than I. It was only when you never replied to my letters did I begin to see how much damage I had done. Even though I still believe it was the right thing, the best thing to do for you I was surprised that it hurt you so much." He stopped for a second and watched my face when I didn't say or do anything he continued.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii kept me informed about your well being but it is not his way, not the Dantassi way to interfere in the personal issues between couples, it never has been and I would not expect it of him. When he let me know that you had made it through your period of sju'ru'arwy'kha, and that he saw the life-fire in your eyes come back, I knew that I had made the right choice in sending you with him. Nirauan was not the place for you to be. You could never have healed there, in fact I am certain that staying there with me would have destroyed your soul altogether. I would rather lose you than see your beautiful spirit crushed by the weight of all the guilt and the sorrow you were carrying." He paused but gestured to let me know he wasn't finished. "It was only after you were gone, only after I had time to see past both your and my grief that I came to understand how much I also need you." He took another deep breath and let it out slowly. "The truth of the matter is that I miss you." It had cost him to say that. He was not a man to speak of his feelings with ease.

I stared at him not believing what I had just heard despite the fact that it was the truth, plain and simple.

The expression on his face softened. "I do not lie about the reason for wanting you to return with me, while I am perfectly capable of getting the task of language training accomplished; I have neither the time nor the inclination. As language instructor you would have an important role to play on the base, never minding the rest of your somewhat unique talents which I am certain will be more than useful. This would be a way for us to be closer and I would have a valid reason for having you there aside from simply being my bond-mate," he said, "Ultimately, the choice is yours but you should know that if you do decide to come back with me it will be difficult at first. There would have to be certain restrictions set in place on how you and I conduct our private relationship but I promise I would try to make it as easy for you as I could. However, if you really want to remain here I will not ask again."

I nodded slowly letting his words sink in. The air had that heavy feel to it as he waited for me to reply. It had been one of the longest speeches I had ever heard him make and somewhere in there he had apologised but I was too weary to sort through it all. "I can't decide this now," I said, "I'm exhausted. I will give you my answer in the morning."

"Of course," He replied coolly. He knew when to back off and give me space but I felt a ripple of uncertainty from him.

"You have a place to sleep?" I asked.

"Yes." He gestured to the room which was directly next to mine.

I nodded. I had not expected him to bed with me but part of me was a little disappointed he did not bring it up. I knew he was giving me the choice, giving me space but that didn't make me any less confused about how I felt about it all.

"Sleep well, A'myshk'a, we will speak more in the morning," he said quietly as I left. I just gave him little nod because I had no idea what else to say.

As I readied for bed I could hear Thrawn move about the apartment. It felt strange to know he was there, so close yet feel so unreachable. That had been my doing. He had come waving a peace flag of sorts and I had all but torn it to shreds because I wanted to stay angry at him. Navaari had been right about that. It was easier than admitting how much I had missed him and how scared I was to lose him. I would have thought that such a long and difficult time apart from each other would have lessened our feelings for one another but it seemed that was not the case. If anything time and distance had strengthened them, sharpening the passion as well as everything else that went into making up our seriously messed up relationship what it was. I was pretty certain that fate or destiny was laughing his or her ass off at us.

I lay in bed and essentially stared at the ceiling, despite being utterly overtired I could not fall asleep. I tossed and turned; going over in my mind everything that Thrawn had said to me and, worse, everything that I had said to him. It wasn't the words that knotted in my stomach though it was how much I ached for him physically. This, above all else, made me furious at myself. I had not wanted to feel this way, I had wanted to stay angry at him but anger is hard to maintain after many, many months and mostly I had just missed him. Why I couldn't just tell him this and be done with it though was another mystery all together. These were my last thoughts as eventually drifted into an uneasy sleep and for the first time in months sleeping well was something I did not do, instead I was plunged headlong into one of the kinds of dreams I dreaded having. Ever since I had been released from the period of mourning these nightmares had all but vanished and I had hoped they would never return but I was wrong, as usual.

*I knew it was a dream but still I could not move nor turn away as I watched from a dark shadowy corner while the Emperor taunted Luke Skywalker. We were on the second Battle Station, the Death Star II. I could see the fleet from the enormous view screen and the flashes of light as ships destroyed each other. I didn't understand how it was I could be here because I knew the battle station had been destroyed two years prior, I had watched it explode, but dreams had realities all of their own.*

*As the dream unfolded I watched as Lord Vader and Luke duelled with each other... They were so perfectly and evenly matched that it was as though I were watching mirror images fight. I thought for certain that Lord Vader would strike down his son but he pulled a blow at the last moment and it was Luke who slaughtered his father. I tried to scream from where I stood but someone standing behind me had clamped their hand across my mouth and whispered in my ear.*

*"Hush little one, it would not be wise to let him hear you."*

*I twisted my head to look up at the person who held me. Qui-Gon Jinn.*

*"Just watch," he said gently, removing his hand from my mouth.*

Luke retrieved his father's lightsaber and turned to face the Emperor who was standing and applauding. "Well done my young apprentice," he said, "Now kneel before me and I shall accept your pledge of allegiance."

But Luke had other ideas and before the emperor could move he had ignited the lightsaber he had taken from Lord Vader and force flung it at the Emperor. The Emperor easily blocked it but he had not seen this was a move of deceit and while he was watching the first blade he did not see the second blade ignite and pierce through his body.

"I am Emperor now," Luke said as he stood over Palpatine watching him die.

I had not expected this turn of events but there was nothing I could do. Qui-Gon held on to me. And it was all I could do not to scream as Luke face distorted and changed. Screaming with a rage that seemed impossible, the man who had worn Luke Skywalker's face twisted and began to shrivel as though it were being pulled in and out of shape by forces I could not see.

I was horrified by what I was watching and Qui-Gon sighed. "Using the dark side of the force corrupts the body. Palpatine knew this and was prepared for it. He had clones of himself ready and waiting, but this is unexpected."

"Is this real?"

"Perhaps," he replied, "The future is a fluid thing, always in flux and never certain."

When the morphing had stopped I saw that the Emperor was a wholly different man. Reborn and new. What was worse was that somehow this new Emperor, young and powerful knew he was not alone in this dark room and turned to look at the spot where I stood with Qui-Gon.

"There will be no hiding from me, child," he said, "I have cheated death before I will do so again." He reached out his arm towards us but before I could scream in terror the scene shifted and I suddenly found myself on the command deck of a Star Destroyer and I was alone. It was very dark; the only light came from the few system lights that were still on so it took me a few moments to get my bearings. I glanced around afraid to move because I didn't want to fall into one of the crew pits. The main viewing windows up front were completely covered and the bridge was utterly empty, but I knew this was a super star destroyer. The ship looked to be devoid of any living creature but all around me I heard the screams and cries of what sounded like people being tortured. It was a sound I had heard once before and it was not a good sound.

"I see you have finally returned back to the fold." A soft female voice said behind me. The floor lights on the bridge-way suddenly blinked on, making the world seem far too bright.

My heart suddenly pounded in my chest, I knew this voice it belonged to Ysanne Isard and it terrified me but I drew a deep breath and hoped my own voice didn't shake too much. "Madam Director," I said, "I thought you would be on Coruscant."

Her smile was slow and nasty. "Who is to say I am not?" She replied. "So have you come to work for me now? I heard many good things about you from Darth Vader and even the Emperor spoke kindly about your talents."

"Work for you? I was simply Lord Vader's office girl. What use could I be to you?"

*"I heard that you have certain talents for finding out the truth," she said. I stared at her eyes, one blue and one red. Both were cold and devoid of anything that resembled humanity. It surprised me that she kept her long hair down, not tied up as was regulation. I supposed that when one was the leader of the Empire one could do what ever one liked. She had beautiful hair, long and black with snow white streaks at each temple. It rippled like a curtain as she walked.*

*I made a face at her comment and she laughed.*

*"Come with me I wish to show you something," she said and she turned around abruptly so that I had no choice but to follow her, the two storm troopers that suddenly appeared behind me were added incentive. She walked abruptly, full of confidence and pride. She led me downwards through corridors and turbo lifts until we came to a small room with a window in the door. It did not escape my notice that the transparasteel was very thick.*

*"Please look inside and tell me what you think."*

*I did as she asked and was sorry I had. By the time I had finished throwing up it was only echoes of her laughter that remained. In the room were four aliens, I wasn't certain what species they had been, it was very hard to tell but I thought two of them were gamorreans, or at least what was left of them. The beings in the room were covered with open sores and pustules. The walls were covered in dark splatters I thought might be blood but I wasn't sure. The flesh seemed to have melted from their bodies but all of these things were not what had induced my sudden vomiting, it was the fact that they were still alive, flailing and screaming and writhing in pain.*

*"How do you like my method of finding out the truth?" Isard whispered in my ear.*

*I could only look at her in horror, wiping the remnants of vomit from my mouth with the back of my sleeve. "Truth?"*

*She smiled. "The rebellion will see they cannot win. This is my truth," she said, "Perhaps you would like to converse with these aliens and find out how they feel about their rebellion now?"*

*shook my head and began to back up. "What is wrong with them?"*

*"They are dying," she said with a slight shrug. "They will all die, every one of the aliens who clutter up this empire will be eradicated and the Empire will be cleansed."*

*"Aliens do not clutter this empire," I said without thinking.*

*"Ah yes, your lover." she hissed between her teeth. "He will also be dealt with appropriately." She smiled at me. "When the time is right." She gestured to the door with the small window.*

*I didn't want to know anymore and I backed up even more until I realised that suddenly we were back on the command deck but it was too late, I lost my footing and fell backwards into one of the crew pits. I yelped expecting to feel pain when I hit the bottom but instead my body twisted in a way that disoriented me, as though gravity also twisted and I found myself on another ship.*

*This was a ship I did not know. I didn't recognize the style of the bridge, similar but not the same as the ISDs I was used to, I also did not recognize any of the crew at all but they were all staring at a single point when I followed their gaze I knew a terror worse than I had just a few moments before. There, right in front of me, was*

*Thrawn slumped back in the command chair, dressed in his white uniform of Grand Admiral clutching his chest with his hands. The look on his face was one of utter surprise as blood pumped between his fingers and coursed down the front of the jacket. No one around him moved so without thinking I rushed forward to do something. I pressed my hands flat against his chest but the blood kept flowing freely. It ran between my fingers, over the backs of my hands making them warm and sticky. I looked up at Thrawn who looked back at me. I did not have to be a mind reader to see the hurt in his expression. I knew how betrayal felt and I knew the expression that came along with it.*

*"Why A'myshk'a?" Thrawn whispered.*

*I wanted to tell him I didn't know but I couldn't find the words. The flow of blood between my fingers slowed and the pallor of his skin told me he was dying. I yelled for someone to help me, to help him but no one moved. They all stood staring.*

*"Don't you dare leave me! I can't do this without you! I need you!" I cried, pressing at the wound in his chest even harder but I knew I was losing; I could feel his heartbeat slow and then stop. I began to shout at everyone around me but what came out of my mouth was incoherent then arms, powerful and unfriendly, pulled me away from Thrawn's body which slumped forward without my support.*

*I struggled to get free of whoever was holding me but it was impossible.*

*"Lady Merlyn, he is dead." A familiar voice hissed in my ear. I twisted around to look into Rukh's face.*

*"No!" I screamed. "No, let me go! You have to help him!"*

*"The betrayal is complete!" Rukh said twisting me around to look me in the eyes. His hands grasped my wrists and hauled my hands up to where I and everyone else could see them.*

*"His blood on your hands!" he said.*

*"The Admiral is dead!" Another voice chimed in, then another and another. Suddenly the mob of officers who had stood by and done nothing converged on me like a pack of scyks.*

*I began to struggle against Rukh, screaming that I was not the one who had killed the Admiral, not the one who had stabbed him, that I had tried to save him but no one listened to me instead the bridge crew which now surrounded me began morphing into more noghri. The words they spoke became babble and I could not get free from Rukh's grasp. I saw that they were going to kill me for the murder of Thrawn. I looked from one face to the next and then back to my blood drenched hands. I turned to look back at Thrawn not believing he was dead only to see his body start to break down and rot the way I had seen the aliens dying in the room Isard had shown me. Pustules formed on his skin and began to ooze dark liquid that covered his white uniform, mixing with the blood from the wound on his chest. I began to scream then and I couldn't stop.*

*"Wake up A'myshk'a, wake up, it is just a dream it isn't real." A voice kept saying to me over and over again.*

*Fingers bit into my flesh as Thrawn, seated on the edge of the bed gripping me by the shoulders, tried to wake me, tried to stop me screaming bringing me out of the*



nightmare and back into reality. Slowly his words sank in and the grisly scene I had witness receded. When I finally came back to my senses and realised he wasn't dead and that my hands were not covered in his blood I threw my arms around him and held on to him so tightly it hurt.

I kept whispering "Not dead, you are not dead." over and over. He simply held me against his chest, rocking me back and forth, not saying a word until a light flooded in from outside the room and I heard Navaari's deep bass voice ask if everything was okay. I must have been making a hell of a racket to wake him. Navaari slept like the dead.

"There is brandy on the table in the sitting room. I think it might be appropriate," Thrawn said to him by way of answer. He pushed back from my grip and lifted my face up with a finger tucked under my chin. I was shaking. The images of the dream still merged with the reality and I could still smell the awful tang of fresh blood and rotting flesh in the air.

"Merlyn look at me I am very much alive," he said as he brushed sweat soaked hair from my face. "You were having a terrible dream, that's all, just a dream."

"It was so real." I stared at my hands again to make certain there was no blood on them, turning them palm up and down over and over again. They still felt as though they were sticky and blood covered even though I saw only my skin, clean and pale and my fingers which were shaking. The lingering scent of blood made me nauseous. I placed the flat of my hand on Thrawn's chest just to feel his heart beat; just to be sure. I stared at the spot where I had seen blood, but here was no wound, just skin undamaged and warm. I heard Navaari come in and watched as Thrawn accepted the offered glass of brandy which he then gave to me. I took a grateful gulp. The fiery liquid burned enough that I knew I wasn't dreaming any more. How many times had we done this? I had lost count. But Thrawn's soothing presence after the grip of some terrible nightmare was something I knew, a pattern we had repeated often. He did not suffer from bad dreams but he understood how to react when I did.

"Better?" Thrawn asked, turning on the small bedside lamp.

I nodded clutching the glass with both hands because I was still shaking so much I was worried about spilling my drink.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Navaari asked.

I looked up at him framed in the doorway, back lit by the living room light and shook my head. I couldn't shut the images lingering from my dream out of my head but I didn't want to speak of them out loud. I had not had such a terrifying nightmare in a very long time. I had thought they were a thing of my past. Neither man spoke as I finished the brandy off in one gulp. The empty glass was removed from my trembling hand and placed on the night stand.

Navaari waited a few seconds then asked if there was anything else. I felt Thrawn shake his head but I didn't look up. I was afraid of my dream because my dreams had a nasty habit of turning into some sort of reality. In the time it had taken me to wake up and comprehend that it really had been nothing more than a terrible nightmare had also come the awful realization that I did not want to lose this man who sat next to me. That the frustration and anger we seemed to generate between us was a small price to pay for having him in my life, whole and alive.

"It was just a night terror, you are safe at home, little one," Navaari told me. "I am going back to bed, you know where everything is should you be needing it." His last statement was directed at Thrawn not me. I heard the door to my bedroom close but didn't look up.

I hugged my knees to my chest making myself small and tried to remember to breathe, just breathe. I felt Thrawn's fingers run through my hair and the action brought tears to my eyes. How was it that things between us had gotten so out of hand. I could not remember anymore why I had been so angry at him. Shame and sorrow engulfed me.

"What did you see?" Thrawn asked breaking the silence that settled in the room after Navaari had left. "Tell me."

I shook my head. I hadn't wanted to tell Navaari about my dream and I especially did not want to tell Thrawn that I had seen him die in such a horrible way.

"If I say please? You know, speaking about it will not make it real," he said gently.

I shook my head again.

Thrawn sighed and tucked two fingertips under my chin lifting my face up to meet his. "Merlyn," he said more firmly, "No more secrets, no more shoving these fears, these feelings down as far as they can go into your soul. You are not helping anyone especially yourself. This reticence to tell me what troubles you is what has us in the situation we now find ourselves in." He chided. "So tell me what has you screaming as though you are being murdered in a most brutal manner and clinging to me as though I were...."

"I saw you die," I said flatly, interrupting him.

"It was a dream, Tekari," he repeated. "Tell me exactly what you saw, no more hiding, out with it."

The words came tumbling out one after the other. He said nothing until I was done and the silence in the room afterwards was even more oppressive that I could have imagined. He reached over and caressed the side of my face. I trembled and blinked the sudden tears out of my eyes.

"It was awful."

"Yes," he said gently. "And probably my fault."

"How do you figure that?" I asked with a frown.

"You saw no killer, you did not see yourself kill instead you tried to save me which was why you had blood on your hands. These things are just symbols your mind uses to sort out past events not portents of things yet to come. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii told me that you have been well these last few months, no nightmares to speak of so I can only assume that it was my coming which triggered this one," he said, "You experienced a terrible, terrible trauma, everything you knew is gone, taken away from you in a brutal manner. That is not something that simply vanishes from one's memory no matter how hard you try to make it so. This dream was your subconscious trying to cope with the trauma you try to hide away. I know how difficult Vader's death was for you..."

I put my fingers on his lips, interrupting him and looked at him so that he would get the full meaning of my next words. "Not as difficult as yours would be."

His expression softened. "I am not going to die any time soon. It was just a dream and nothing more." He spoke quietly and with absolute conviction. "You and I have

many unresolved issues which we have still to deal with and your tendency to shove everything as deeply down inside of you as it will go only serves to make your nightmares more intense, more vivid, but I will be vigilant never the less. Besides, how could anyone get past Rukh?"

That made me smile a little. His noghri bodyguard was a force to be reckoned with even in my dreams. I scrubbed my face with my hands, weariness slowly creeping into my body.

"You should try to go back to sleep. We have a lot of things we need to discuss in the morning." Thrawn started to get up but I grasped his hand making him raise an eyebrow at me in surprise.

I said, "Every time I close my eyes I see..."

"It was a dream," he insisted, cutting me off, easing his hand from mine.

"It didn't feel like just a dream, Za'ar, it felt like a vision of the future, it felt real."

He sighed, getting up off the bed to pace the room. "You told me yourself once that it isn't the dreams that matter, it is the interpretation."

I nodded.

"Do you not think that this could be your mind's way of forcing you to look at what you really fear?" he asked as he leaned against the door frame.

I got up out of the bed and went over to where he stood, to face him. "If that is the case, then what I really fear more than anything else is losing you," I said plainly.

He reached out and caressed the side of my face. "And now do you understand?"

"Understand?"

"How I felt when I found you on your disabled shuttle."

I swallowed and looked away from him, nodding. "Yes," I said, "I am so sorry." I understood that and now I also understood that the mess I had made of things was big. I wasn't sure it could be fixed, I wasn't sure I knew how to but Thrawn did. When he cupped my face with both hands I clasped his wrists and looked up at him. When our eyes met I felt as though the bottom had dropped out of my belly. After all this time, after everything that had happened he could still stir me up from the inside out with a single look.

"Being with you is like drowning in fire, being without you is like starving to death," he said quietly. "And I cannot decide which is worse."

I didn't know how to respond to that either. Thankfully I didn't have to. Before I could even say anything he pulled me forward and kissed me in a way that reminded me I was very, very much alive. His hands slid from my face to my shoulders, over my shoulders, down my back, around my ribs to rest at my hips. He was right it was like drowning in fire but I didn't care. After what seemed both an eternity and a split second he pushed back from me.

"You've put on some weight since I last saw you," he said after a moment.

"Are you saying I'm fat?" I asked automatically. Navaari often teased me about my appetite.

The right side of his lip twitched in a smile. "I did not say that, nor did I imply that," he said, "But the last time I held you in my arms you were nothing but skin and bones. You looked like the walking dead. Now you feel more like a woman and less like a skeleton. You are soft and have curves where you ought to have curves, whereas before..."

you were boney and stick like." He ran his hands back up and down my body to confirm what he had just told me. "I don't feel each and every one of your ribs poking out of you now." His hands rested once again on the swell of my hips. Their warmth through the thin fabric of my nightshirt almost seemed to burn my skin. He tugged me closer to his body and suddenly my heart forgot how to work. I reached up and caressed his cheek, then I drew his face to meet mine and kissed him gently. When we separated again the look he gave me was unfathomable.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, uncertain.

"No, not any longer," He replied but something in his expression made me look carefully at him. I could see he wanted to say more but didn't know how to begin. His hesitation made him vulnerable which was new to me.

Two years was a long time and so much had happened, so much had changed between us that suddenly it was clear to me, he had been worried about his place in my life. I had not known him to be so uncertain but I understood that where I was concerned it was probably a normal state of affairs. For too long things that should have been said were not, words were held back because of fear and stubbornness and it wasn't what we said to each other that hurt but rather what we didn't say. I stroked his face with the tips of my fingers, as if I could memorize the contours of it just by touch. He made my heart ache.

"I thought you were dead," he said quietly after a long pause. "I did not know how to deal with that very well. I did not deal with any of what happened very well. You are not the only one who has apologies to make."

"That sounds like you missed me a little?"

He gave me a look which sent a flash of heat that seared me from my gut to my groin. The twitch of his lips became a slow, hungry smile and suddenly my decent sized bedroom felt very small.

"Perhaps, a little," he said, one hand cupping my face his thumb caressing my cheek. The moment between us stretched and slowed down until he held my chin with his thumb and forefinger so that he could kiss me again. This time there was nothing gentle about his kiss. His lips and his tongue explored my mouth as though he were eating the rich sweet ice treat the Dantassi made from cream and sugar. I shivered violently.

"Are you cold?" he asked with a slight smile.

I shook my head, rendered speechless. After all this time he could still do that to me.

"Perhaps I should go and let you get some rest." He murmured in my ear with a smile that reminded me of how the sled hounds looked at me at meal time.

I shook my head. "No, no I don't think I can sleep and if I can't sleep neither can you," I said and because he had begun to unbutton the night shirt I was wearing, I slipped my fingers under the waist band of the soft silk pants he had worn to bed and slipped them over his hips and buttocks so they fell to the ground. I grinned a little at his naked body, aroused and beautiful. He smiled as he slid the shirt off my shoulders. He suddenly smelled of sex, of need and want.

"Well then..." he said.

His voice was suddenly husky and his eyes had taken on that weird look of liquid fire. It had been a very, very long time since we had done this and the teasing had taken its toll. There was no more room for words or foreplay. He scooped me up in his arms and brought me to the bed. He put me down gently then lay over me, covering me. He didn't waste time and his mouth crashed down on mine while his body melded to me, his skin hot on mine sending goose bumps rippling up and down my spine. His knee nudged my legs apart and I opened to him willingly. The sensation of him and every move he made was almost too much to bear so when our desire blossomed into insanity there wasn't much to really think about. I wanted him every bit as much as he wanted me and I no longer cared about nightmares, being angry or anything else. I just needed him and I let him know it. Our dance climaxed in a crescendo I hoped would not bring Navaari running back to the bedroom thinking that both of us were being murdered.

It was over too fast and I lay in Thrawn's arms sweat soaked and breathless wondering how we could have forgotten how good it felt to be together this way and how awful it felt when we fought. He rolled over onto his back and pulled me to snuggle into his body.

"I think we just set a speed record...What was that anyway?" I asked when I caught my breath. My fingers traced up and down his chest then followed the line of dark hair that went from his navel to his groin.

"That was me marking my territory, and reclaiming that which is mine," he said running his fingers through my hair. Every word he spoke was the absolute truth.

"Do you care to explain that?" I asked propping my head up on my elbow to look at him.

"Well, from what I have been told perhaps it is you who should explain it to me. I heard you are being courted."

"Navaari told you about that?"

"He mentioned that you have been chased by several eligible young men since you were released from of sju'ru'arwy'kha." There was a hint of something other than concern behind his words.

"Yes," I said plainly. "And did he also tell you that I turned them down."

That earned me another raised eyebrow and a smirk.

I sighed, "At first it was flattering. I mean I am not Chiss or Dantassi but a complete alien and yet there are men here who found me attractive. It was a bit of a shock but in some way it was good too. It made me realise I was still alive, really alive but it was confusing. I didn't tell Navaari at first because I didn't want him to be disappointed in me. He makes such a big deal out of you and I being together but finally I had to because one of the men in question was starting to pressure me for more than just conversation. At first it wasn't serious but then it got that way. He found ways to be alone with me and he got too close physically. You know that my talents work both ways so you will understand when I tell you that while I did not initiate anything, I felt his need, his desire and... well... it was just hard to deal with." I sighed at that memory. I had been astonished that while my heart said one thing my body had reacted in a completely other direction. That moment had shaken me but thankfully common sense prevailed.

Thrawn stroked my face possessively. "So what happened?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Well, the man in question sort of backed me into a corner by point blank asking me to partner with him and was not all that impressed by my refusal. He said I was free to do as I wished. Free to be with whomever I chose, that you ...well he was not complimentary towards you or what you had done to me. I told Navaari what had been happening. All of it. He said he wasn't that surprised which I suppose surprised me. He asked me what I wanted because you had left me with the choice. While you had bound yourself to me for reasons I still don't understand, the ceremony we had undergone was only binding one way. I was still free to choose my own mate should I wish to and you would have to live with that." I drew a deep breath. "He said I needed to follow my heart. Do you know the first thing that popped into my head and out of my mouth?"

"No, but then again I never know what you are thinking, my dear."

I made a face at his barb and continued, "I told him, 'My heart is a billion light years away sulking. I don't want some fresh faced boy as a substitute even if he can give me sand jiggers in my belly with a smile.'"

Thrawn raised both eyebrows. "Sulking? Is that what you thought I was doing?"

"Yes and you were, don't change the subject."

He smirked, "And this boy gave you sand jiggers in your belly with just a smile?"

That earned him one of my looks. "It had been a very long time since you and I..." I began but stopped as he brushed his fingertips suggestively across my lips and smiled as I swallowed. I knew he could see the effect he had on me.

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You are the most stubborn, wilful creature I have ever known. You are also the best, the most beautiful and the most surprising thing that has ever happened to me. When I heard that you were being courted I admit, I was worried especially since you did not answer any of my letters. I don't enjoy the sensation of insecurity; it is not something I am used to at all. It was Kirja'navaar'inkjerii who told me that if I was concerned then I should return and stop, as he put it, all this ridiculous back and forth nonsense. He said, *'She misses you and hides it well but she cries when she thinks no one will see or hear. You sent her here to heal but if you don't come to her soon you will end up breaking the one part of her that hasn't been truly broken yet'.*"

"Navaari said that?" I asked.

Thrawn nodded, "Yes and he was right." He shook his head as though even he could not quite believe it himself.

I didn't know how to answer that. I had not thought Navaari had noticed the few times when I had curled up in a dark corner in my room, thinking the apartment was empty, and wept. He had left me alone and not interfered. These bouts of sorrow usually coincided with one of Thrawn's letters. I suppose I was stupid for thinking Navaari would not notice. He was Jhal'kai, a master tracker. Nothing escaped his notice. No matter how much I had lied to myself about it, I had missed Thrawn more than I could say or bear. It made me melancholy just to think about and some of this must have shown on my face because Thrawn wrapped his arms around me and pulled me tightly to his body. We lay like that for what seemed a very long time and I relished the sensation of being held. His scent on my skin was a perfume I had missed. I sighed contentedly. The sex between us had been sudden and explosive, at least two years

worth of pent up passion pouring between us in what felt like mere seconds. Our coupling had been hurried, raw and needy but the aftermath was like being bathed in sunlight. I looked at him and smirked a little.

"What?" his eyebrow arched.

"Well, that was fun but it was also a little short and not up to your usual standards so do you think we could do it again?" I asked.

He let his fingers trace up and down the length of my body, from my shoulder to my hip. "I expect we shall be doing *that* again several times if I have my way." He whispered in my ear, his warm breath making me shiver.

"Several times? I thought you were tired."

"Oh Tekari, how many times do I have to tell you, the Chiss have amazing stamina."

"Does this mean you are not angry anymore?" I asked.

He shook his head slightly, "Don't get me wrong, you and I have much to talk about and we will talk but it occurred to me that the conversation we need to have will go a lot better if you are satisfied and relaxed, not on edge and strung out from bad dreams. Besides I need to prove to you that I am very much alive."

I smiled as I caressed him and watched the results of my actions. Yes, we needed to talk, we had an awful lot of things we needed to talk about but tonight was about relearning who we were to each other not about opening up the box of hidden and forbidden secrets we both kept. "Well," I said carefully, "You seem very alive to me right now."

That remark earned me a kiss on the forehead but he didn't say anything else. He just wrapped his arms around me and pulled me tightly to his body. This was home, no matter where I lived, what planet I was on, in his arms was truly home. It had just taken watching him die in a dreadful nightmare to make me understand this.

"Don't ever send me away from you again." I told him after what seemed an eternity.

"I won't," he replied.

"Promise." I looked up into his eyes.

He drew a slow, deep breath. "I promise."

It had cost him to say that because he was a man who kept his promises and he didn't make them lightly. I nodded but said nothing else. I suspected that we would spend more than enough time talking tomorrow. As he had said, we had much to discuss not all of it pleasant but there were some wounds that could only truly heal after they were dragged out into the light of day and had their filthy bandages ripped off them brutally. I was guessing that the time for hiding things from each other had come and gone. I understood now that I did not want to live without him; the big question was after everything that had happened, if circumstances allowed it, would we be able to actually live with each other again.

"Stop thinking so hard, you'll break something," he chided with a smile.

I just sighed and continued to stroke him concentrating on his fingers as they untangled the knots on my hair. He leaned over to kiss me on the forehead. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"For what?"

"For this," he said and he began to reacquaint his lips with my body. He made me smile then he made me shiver and that was even better.

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When I woke up the next morning Thrawn was still there beside me. He wasn't sleeping instead he had his head propped up on his arm and was simply watching me. He smiled and brushed hair from my face looking more at ease, more relaxed than I could remember seeing him in a very long time. I guessed I was not the only one who benefited from being on Hjal.

"What?" I asked, stifling a yawn and stretching like a jax.

"I was just thinking about the very first time I ever saw you," he said.

I looked at him with a smile. Memories of that first meeting flooded back to me. "I thought you were an arrogant pri..." He placed a finger on my lips to stop the rest of the words from escaping.

"I know exactly what you were thinking and you were probably right. My first impression was *what was Vader doing hiring this little girl from the back end of space?* But you surprised me with your pluck and your bluntness," he said, "I found it impossible to believe that the red-headed bundle of spit and fury telling me she would kill me if I touched her again actually had Vader's favour. You were the most intriguing person to step into my life in a very long time and I probably should have listened to the whispering voice in the back of my head that told me to stay away from you, that you would be nothing but trouble."

I poked him in the chest and wondered if I should tell him that my little voice had said exactly the same thing about him only it wasn't whispering it was yelling, loudly.

"Can you deny I was right?" he asked arching his eyebrow at me, catching my hand in his so I wouldn't poke his chest again.

"You are not exactly the easiest man in the galaxy to be with either, you know." I replied tartly.

He smiled, "Which is a good thing, my dear, as you do not seem to enjoy the company of men who are easy to be with."

I wasn't certain how to take that so I just shook my head and got out of bed, slipped on my nightshirt and headed to the 'fresher before the conversation turned combative. By the time I returned Thrawn had poured two cups of stim 'caf and was sitting up, leaning back against the head board sipping his. Instead of crawling back under the covers beside him I sat facing him, accepting the cup he handed me happily.

I took one sip and knew that Navaari had made it. "Ugh, he always makes it far too strong."

"He said he thought you might need something strong to get started today. He won't be back until late, he has to attend a council meeting and they tend to last a while. I suspect he was just happy to see us both still alive and in one piece, he rather feared the worse."

I just nodded. It was not unusual for enclave meetings to be longer than usual when the weather was bad and I was also sure that Navaari welcomed the excuse to give Thrawn and me time alone together. If it hadn't been a meeting he would have found



another reason to stay away for the day. For a long while neither of us said anything at all. I suspected that neither of us wanted to break the sweetness of the morning after.

"Another cup?" Thrawn asked after seeing me contemplate my empty one for a few moments.

I nodded and watched as he vanished for a moment and then returned, handing me my cup refilled. I sipped and made another face, the second cup was equally as strong as the first.

"Did you know that would happen between us last night? I mean was that your intent when you came here?" I asked a little shyly after a long moment of quiet.

Thrawn shook his head. "No, I came here with no intent," he sighed, "only hope."  
"Hope?"

He nodded slightly. "Yes, hope that we could bypass our stubborn natures so that we could at least talk and perhaps resolve some of our issues."

That made me smile. "It didn't work," I said, which earned me *the* eyebrow. "Well, we didn't exactly talk." I clarified.

He reached over and touched my face. "No, that is true enough but we did resolve at least one issue and the communication was positive never the less, don't you think?"

I just bobbed my head in agreement and silence settled between us again. I sipped at my stim 'caf not really knowing what else to say or where to even start. I found it strange that we could bridge the gap between us physically but the words needed to really fix the other damage that we had done failed. It made me a little sad.

He drew a deep breath and looked at me. "I put off coming here for too long. I should have come when I learned that you had passed through the period of mourning but I didn't. There was always a good reason for staying away, always work to be done. It was one crisis after another, so it was easy to put off the one thing I really needed to do, come and talk to you."

"Navaari said it has been difficult for you, that things in the Empire are not going so well."

He nodded. "The Emperor's death left a gaping maw that no one has been able to fill. Isard tries but she is not Palpatine. She has neither his charisma nor his power of will and her cruelty only serves to strengthen the resolve of the Rebels."

"I thought that Pestage was the Imperial leader now."

Thrawn shook his head. "No. Sate Pestage is dead. Executed by Admiral Delak Krennel, if the report I received was to be believed."

"Dead?" I frowned. I had never liked Sate Pestage, the Emperor's long time advisor and friend but I could not imagine him being dead.

"If I understand the news I get correctly, Isard did not like it that Pestage planned to turn Coruscant over to the rebels in exchange for immunity. She arranged for his elimination."

"So if Pestage is dead then who....?"

"Ysanne Isard runs the Galactic Empire by herself now. Although she maintains she is merely its steward I have the feeling she enjoys the power too much to simply give it up when a better leader comes along."

"I'll say she wants power. That crazy bitch had her own father framed and executed so she could take his place as the Director of Imperial Intelligence. She's

insane. I hated it when she was at palace functions because she would always try to get me to talk about what it was I was really doing for Lord Vader, she seemed convinced I was some sort of super spy not an office girl and once she learned I was seeing you, well then she tried to get all the information she could out of me about the mysterious alien who had the Emperor's favour." I shivered as fragments of my dream resurfaced.

Thrawn nodded slowly as he let out a slow deep breath. "She has been lying to me but there is not much I can do about it at the moment, so I continue to build up the forces we have in the Unknown Regions and hope that she sees past her own nose sooner rather than later."

"Why don't you just take over?" I asked. "I mean you could, you have enough force and you have enough loyal men to back you up."

He ran his free hand through his hair, "And then what, Tekari? Set myself up as the next Emperor or dictator and begin the whole cycle again? No, I have no interest in ruling the empire only seeing it return to a state of law and order, not this cluttered chaos we currently have. I dislike being lied to intently but she feels secure thinking that I know nothing about the truth at the moment and that allows me a certain amount of freedom. When the time is right I will make my move but the time is not right. There are too many power hungry factions out there vying for a piece of the Imperial pie, the Rebellion is just one of many. The only thing they have on their side is that they are seen as heroes and liberators but that will change when they realise just how hard it is to run a galaxy wide democracy. Democracy fails because power corrupts and no matter what people will tell you, greed will always win out in the end. Everyone has their price, Tekari, especially politicians."

"Is Coruscant still under Imperial rule?"

"For the time being but it is the end goal of the rebellion because Coruscant is seen as the keystone to owning the galaxy. Obtain that governmental seat and you appear to have the power, eventually the other systems will fall in line with the ruling body from the core world. It is like ripples from a stone thrown in a pond. Most beings, no matter what the species are a lot like nerfs, they long for independence but they tend to follow the herd."

I frowned, "Why is that?"

"For the simplest reason of all my dear, survival. In the herd there is protection from predators, the best chance for food, and the greater choice of mates. Being independent is a lot harder in reality than it is in theory."

"But creating and keeping a government up and running isn't easy either, I can't imagine why anyone would want to even try doing that."

"No and they will discover this soon enough. The balance between trying to please everyone and trying to maintain law and order is very, very fine. It does not take much to topple a fledgling government or a well established one for that matter. One only has to look at how well Palpatine arranged his rise to power to see that and he was a man of extraordinary strength of will and character. He was powerful with your mysterious force and, most surprisingly of all. He was fairly well liked by the majority of beings." Thrawn said, "Now, in retrospect, people understood that despite his somewhat strict and often eccentric ways, for the most part life under Imperial rule was not so bad. Ask a world whose trade and shipping lines have been interrupted, whose population is

starving and whose infrastructure is failing due to the sniper style war going on how they feel about the Empire and they will paint a very rosy picture of how things used to be. It all comes down to a point of view and popular point of view will depend heavily on how well fed and comfortable people are."

"Was life under the Emperor really so bad?" I asked him after a moment's silence.

He gave a slight shrug with his left shoulder. "I guess you would have to ask someone who thought so."

I sighed and thought about the nightmare I had had. "What if what I saw in my dream was true?"

He frowned. "Which part are you referring to?"

"The first part, about the Emperor being reborn."

"Do you think this is a likely scenario?" He asked.

"Yes," I nodded. "But I can only think of one way. He clones himself, it's the only answer. The power he had and used took an awful toll on him physically. It was the reason he looked so old. I had heard rumours while I was still living on Coruscant that he had actually done this clone thing more than once but it seems so unreal and I just put them down as silly gossip. People had all sorts of weird speculative stories about the Emperor because no one really understood much about the force or its nature and the darker side of it," I said thoughtfully. "But what if it is real? What if he can somehow clone himself and transfer his consciousness, his memories? If he really can do this why didn't he come back sooner? Surely he must know what chaos the Empire is in now?"

Thrawn just shook his head. "I can't give you an answer for that. Perhaps there are problems with the cloning procedure. It used to be the best cloners in the galaxy were on Kamino but that facility and the knowledge base are rumoured to have been destroyed. The Empire developed its own method of cloning and due to issues with the Kaminoans stopped all production with them on that planet. Most of the Stormtroopers in the last decade have been conscripts and not clones. There were too many issues with cloning sickness among other difficulties, at least from what I know."

"Cloning sickness?"

"It is a form of madness, from what I have read. It happens if the cloning process is too fast. I believe the fastest that a clone can be grown is a year, anything faster than that and what is produced is rubbish."

"Rubbish...." I repeated softly. "Clones, they are humans. They think, have feelings, know love and pain ... how can you say they are rubbish?"

"Cloned madness of mind and sickness of flesh is not a human being, Tekari, it is a created mess manufactured by science and technology. There is no soul, no life force as you or I know it."

I looked at him for a moment. "The man who gave me life was a clone, Za'ar. Does this mean I have no soul?"

He sighed and chose his words very carefully. "The clones of the past, the ARC commandos were different, bred differently. They were granted independence and free will, which caused no end of headaches, in the hopes that they would make better soldiers, better leaders. I suppose they were human in every sense of the word, not born but grown but I argue against them having an actual soul. They were programmed by DNA. The execution of Order 66 showed that in the end they were more like droids than

independent free born men. Clones from later generations, with production pushed up go mad. They are not human in the way you think of humans. They are created and designed from human DNA. They look human sound human and do all the things that human beings do except that they are manufactured and programmed to be obedient, to follow orders and above all to fight. Mad clones are rubbish in this context and that is what I mean." He gave me a look so that I had to nod that I understood where he was coming from even if I didn't agree with it, then he continued. "On the theoretical side of things, it is believed, at least in my culture, that there is one soul per being so if there are many clones of one individual how can there be multiple souls for his or her clones? It is a difficult topic at best and one with no answers. But for your question, of course you have a soul, you are not a clone. You are unique in this galaxy, thank goodness because I don't know how to deal with just one of you."

I smiled at his small attempt at humour but I didn't like this line of thinking much and the morals of clones and cloning had often bothered me, especially since finding out that I was born of one. The truth was I didn't know what to think so I just nodded and let the matter go. We had enough issues of our own to deal with without me creating new ones.

"If the Emperor did have clones of himself made, they were not on Coruscant, or at least not in the Palace I am sure of that," I said after a while. "I am positive I would have felt it and I am certain that Lord Vader would have mentioned it at some point."

"You think Palpatine kept this a secret from his second in command?"

I shrugged. I didn't know. "I think it would have been seen by Lord Vader as a weakness and the Emperor knew how much Lord Vader hated him. Knowledge of the Emperor's need for clones would have given Lord Vader an opportunity to do what he always longed to do, which was destroy the Emperor and take over as ruler of the Empire."

Thrawn's chest heaved as he took a deep breath. "Well, in the overall scope of things I am grateful this never happened."

"Me too," I said quietly. "I don't think that Lord Vader would have been a good Emperor."

That earned me a questioning look but instead of commenting Thrawn merely nodded. We had long ago come to the conclusion that our respective feelings for my now dead boss were vastly different and that we would never see eye to eye about him.

"You know, I would be more concerned about the part of your dream with Isard in it if I were you," Thrawn said after a moment.

"What do you think it meant?" I asked.

He pursed his lips and shrugged. "I wish I knew. My communication with her is limited at best. She occasionally sends people to me, usually under the guise of me being able to use them but I think it is more a case of her weeding out the Imperials who disagree with her or that she feels could benefit from being made to work under an alien. Anyone being sent to me is seen as being punished. It would be amusing if it were not so time consuming and annoying. I get the impression that she is planning something and has been for some time now. She is aware that the rebellion is heading slowly but surely towards Coruscant and that she does not have the man power to head off a direct, large scale strike, or an attack that would come from many fronts."

I raised my eyebrows in question. It had been such a long time since I had had anything to do with the Empire or heard any real news from the outside world. I felt as though I were missing huge gaps of a very complicated story.

"When the Emperor died, his hold on the entire galaxy fractured. There are many factions now who would love to obtain a piece of the galaxy for their very own. In killing the one person who truly held it all together, the rebellion has opened this galaxy up to be picked apart by all the warring factions. There are many petty war lords now vying for power in the political and military arena. The rebels know this so their journey towards capturing Coruscant has been a slow and careful one helped by the fact they also lack the man power and the ships to launch a full on attack. I am quite certain that should they decide the time is right to take back the Imperial center it will be done in a covert operation and with as little bloodshed as possible. The rebellion does not wish to be seen as blood thirsty, they wish to be seen as the good side. It is hard to be the saviours of the galaxy if you slaughter innocents along the way."

"In my dream Isard was eliminating all the aliens, but surely she would not allow that to happen? I mean everyone would hate her even more than they do now."

"Well one might think so but Isard does not think the way most people in power do and she has a very cruel streak in her."

"Do you think she would actually attack the alien population to get back at the rebellion? Surely that would just generate more sympathy for them and not her?"

"Perhaps," he said vaguely. "I am not privy to her inner circle nor do I know her plans. I only know I do not trust her and that it would not be the first time she has done the unexpected to get what she desires."

I sighed and cradled my now empty cup in my hands. I had nothing to add to what he had said and although there were a billion questions boiling in my head I didn't know where to begin asking them so silence settled between us once again. We were so good at avoiding the real issues at hand, so good at not talking about the things we really needed to talk to each other about. I wasn't the only one who felt the weight of these avoidances and I wasn't the only one who did not know how to bridge the gap.

"I hear you have become quite skilful in the art of Jhal'kai," Thrawn said eventually, making conversation.

"Navaari is kind." I smiled slightly. "I still fall flat on my face while walking with snow shoes."

"But you can track." Thrawn said, "He tells me you have a talent for that."

"I can track." I agreed. It was true, while walking with snow shoes gave me some issues, I was good at following a trail. I could somehow find even the tiniest traces to go by. Navaari had been pretty amazed the first few times I had done this but I thought I owed it more to my force talents than anything else. It was as if I could hone in on what I was seeking and the signs of where whatever I was looking for had been just stood out for me. Thrawn nodded and again we lapsed back into silence until he took the lead and eventually broke the silence.

"If this storm hadn't closed us in I would have returned to the *Grey Wolf* which is orbit, but as it looks it could continue for another three or so days so you have some time to decide what you want to do, if you want to stay here or not." There was concern in his voice and while he did his best to hide it I could read the touch of uncertainty in

his expression. A lot rode on what ever I said next. It was a good job, I thought, it was not a difficult decision to make.

"I don't need more time." I told him, glancing at his face over the rim of my cup. "I can't stay here forever and be happy. It just doesn't work that way. Part of me would always yearn to be with you and I think even Navaari would agree this would not be very healthy. If my nightmare was nothing more than a subconscious creation then it tells me I'm afraid to lose you. If it was some sort of vision of the future then maybe if I'm aware of it I can prevent it from happening at all. Either way I don't want to be without you in my life anymore." I spoke plainly. "And you promised never to send me away, ever again." I added, making sure that particular promise did not get forgotten.

After what felt like forever he drew a slow deep breath and nodded slowly, more to himself than to me. I could not tell if he was pleased or displeased and I was a little afraid to ask if he had suddenly changed his mind. "It will not be easy, you know," he said eventually.

"You told me that but really, nothing has been easy in my life so why should this be any different?"

His eyebrow hitched up a notch, "Why indeed." He murmured.

The silence that crept back in between us was not uncomfortable but I felt the weight of the past sitting on my shoulders. I sighed which made him look at me in question. "I'm sorry," I said plainly.

"About?"

"For what I said to you on Nirauan." I answered. "I didn't really mean it. I don't hate you at all."

"Ah." He nodded. "Well, I know that."

"I was so angry and I wasn't thinking straight. I hated everything and everyone. I hated what you were doing to me, even though I knew you were right. Mostly I think I hated myself. I was so ashamed." I sighed, "I should never have said what I did and I'm sorry."

He reached over and caressed my face. "Is that why you never replied to my letters?"

I nodded staring in to the dregs on my stim 'caf wondering if there was anything he did not seem to be able to unravel about me.

"Sometimes you are an utter mystery to me, do you know that?" He sighed. "Not even Kirja'navaar'inkjerii could riddle that one out, although he speculated on it. He said you would never speak of what happened between us the day you left. He said you don't speak about that time much at all, at least not to him."

"What is there to say? I poured my heart out to Ma'kehla. Surprisingly enough once I told her all these terrible things I didn't need to speak of them with anyone else." That was a half truth and we both knew it but Thrawn let it go.

"She has a power to heal that astonishes me to this day." He murmured to himself, making me wonder how he would know this and more importantly why.

I looked at him for a moment but when he said nothing more I continued, "And writing an apology just seemed so inadequate. I didn't know how to get past that and every time I tried to word a reply I ended up hating myself even more. It was easy to

channel it into anger and be mad at you because you weren't there when I needed you on Nirauan and you weren't here either."

The sudden quiet that filled the space between us again made me nervous. I thought that I had angered him but when he finally spoke I understood he also felt ashamed of his own actions and just like me, he didn't know how to move past them.

"I am sorry for that, truly I am," he said. The power of truth behind his words made my stomach knot with sadness.

I studied his face for a moment then got up. "I know we have a lot more to discuss but I'm hungry and I want to have a bath so can this wait until afterwards?"

"Shall I make breakfast?"

"Might be better if you did, the last time I tried to cook something Navaari banned me from the kitchen."

"Oh?" His lips twitched in amusement.

"I nearly burnt it down," I said sheepishly. That had not been one of my more memorable moments.

He laughed then. "Very well, go bathe and I will make food and then we will talk. It would appear that I am not going anywhere for a few days so hopefully that will be enough time to pull out all your secrets." He teased.

I caught the glitter of mischief in his eyes but I swatted his thigh anyway. "I am not the only one who has lots of explaining to do, you know! You have at least twice as many deep dark secrets as I do! This is a two way conversation! Making it sound as though it is all my fault is a bad move on your part!" I said with my hands on my hips. "As I recall..."

He caught my arm pulling me to him so that I was unbalanced and fell back to sit on his lap with a squeak. I went to protest but he stopped any words from escaping by kissing me. By the time he was done I was too breathless to finish the tirade I had been about to start.

"As I recall," he said, "you were on your way to have a bath rather than lecture me on the art of conversation." His voice was more like a purr.

"I think it depends on the definition of conversation and of art." I replied tartly.

He caressed the back of my neck and then began to unbutton the nightshirt I had slipped back on earlier. "I believe that when it comes to art often the hands on approach is far more useful than wordy explanations. Allow me to demonstrate."

I shivered as he managed to slip the shirt off me without me actually noticing. It should not have surprised me though, there were parts of him that were becoming very distracting and my clothing or lack of it was the least of my concerns.

"This won't help towards you making me breakfast or our discussion." I swallowed and wondered if I was just confusing the sand jiggers in my belly for hunger and that really I wasn't hungry at all, at least not for food cooked in the kitchen.

His hand trailed down the front of my neck, traced the outline of my collar bone and then went on to explore another parts of my body which made me forget anything else I had planned to say. "I like this style of conversation," he said with a grin, "it allows me to get a word in edgewise." And to prove his point his fingertips danced over the sensitive skin of my breasts making me bite my lower lip to try and not make a sound.

"That I can occasionally render you speechless is a very, very good thing." He added mischievously.

"Only because you use dirty tactics." I managed to say.

That made him smile. "It is your race who says that all is fair in love and in war. It seems to me that this relationship is a little of both."

I squirmed under his touch which was making me ache from the inside out. Then needing to find some equal footing I tugged off his pants. His smile broadened as he moved his hips to make this task easier for me. I blushed at his arousal. It still amazed me that I could do that to him. Of course I managed to regain some ground when I stroked him gently with the tips of my fingers then decided it was time to turn the tables completely. I smirked at the look of surprise which danced across his face when I began to execute some rather unorthodox manoeuvres of my own.

He arched an eyebrow. "Where did you learn to do *that*?" he breathed, "I don't recall ever teaching you ...."

I grinned as I placed the tips of my fingers on his lips. "That's because you didn't."

The expression on his face turned dark. "I thought you said you were never with another man in this way...?"

This time I clamped my whole hand over his mouth. "I wasn't, you are still the only man I have ever shared a bed with but I have girlfriends here and we share things, compare notes and talk about ... stuff," I said with a little nonchalant shrug.

This time both his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You *share* and *compare* things?" he asked sounding a little alarmed.

"That's the great things about having girl friends." I answered airily then before he could think to speak I just gave him a look and occupied his attention with another interesting trick, grinning broadly when I heard his own moan of pleasure.

My friends Tanika, Sh'jenni and I had spent many a lengthy discussion on relationships, men, sex and everything in between. Sh'jenni had a rather interesting holovid drama that her mate had smuggled on-planet for her... it was explicit, amusing and remarkably educational all at the same time. We had watched it together one evening when Navaari was away. We had all drunk a little too much ice-wine so we ended up laughing through most of it, finding the whole thing uproariously funny. Aside from the holovid, its how-to tips and our own discussion on the men we shared our beds with, what I remember most about that evening was giggling so hard it hurt and the sensation of warm friendship. I had discovered that it was good to have girlfriends and I would miss them sorely when I left Hjal.

"Just what *exactly* do you tell them?" He asked when he found his voice again.

I just gave him a wicked grin and said, "*Everything*." Which wasn't actually true but he didn't need to know that.

He opened his mouth to say something else then changed his mind. It was amusing to watch various emotions flicker across his face. After a second or two he simply shook his head and asked. "So what else did you pick up that I should know about, my dear? Now you have quite piqued my curiosity."

"You know what they say about that don't you!" I replied as I began to execute another of the more intriguing things I had learned from the silly holovid.



It was his turn to smile. "Ah yes, curiosity killed the jax, but as I recall you keep telling me satisfaction brought the unfortunate creature back to life and I have the distinct feeling you will satisfy me greatly."

I just shrugged but he was probably right and I set about seeing if that was actually the case. The look on his face told me there would be a rather hefty question and answer session after this was all over and I looked forward to his interrogation but right now I had rendered him mostly speechless which was good enough for me.

Need shot through us both, I felt it sharply and it sucked my breath away. Suddenly I wasn't in the least bit hungry for food anymore and even though I knew he wasn't about to go to the kitchen anytime soon but that wasn't going to stop him from cooking up a storm. He had decided that both my having a bath and his making breakfast could wait. I wasn't about to complain about this diversionary tactic. There were all sorts of hungers in the galaxy but this was the only one I knew he alone could satiate; the only down side was that he would take his time and drive me crazy. However, I had long since learned that it was a game two could play. With a smile I shifted to straddle his lap, pushed him back so that I could show him that he was not the only one capable of fulfilling these physical culinary delights.

Despite our rising need and aching passion, Thrawn took great pleasure in drawing out our love making with agonizing slowness. He let me play but never let me take it over the edge, always pulling us both back before it went too far and was all over. It was as though he wanted these moments between us to last forever and I didn't complain because there was such a sweetness in our coupling that I didn't want it to end either. It never ceased to astonish me how our two bodies could meld into one and that the power that we produced between us felt as though it could light up an entire city.

We moved together, rippling like falling water, his scent and mine mingled into a new perfume which only served to arouse us further. I breathed him in deeply, musk, spice and something unique only to him. I tasted the salt on his skin as my mouth explored his body. Making breakfast was taking on an entirely new meaning, yet there was something bitter-sweet about this. As though we were both trying to make up for something irretrievably lost. I felt the flicker of sorrow slip through him and pulled back from him to frown. When our eyes met, he shook his head in answer to the question I didn't voice but something in the way he looked at me told me that, no matter what else, I had his heart. It was an overwhelming moment and tears sprang to my eyes. If last night had been about the physical reunion then this morning was more about reuniting our souls and it was an agonizingly slow and painfully honest affair.

"What is it?" I asked him as he brushed away the tears that escaped down my cheeks. His shifting emotions puzzled me. It was unusual and incredibly alarming.

"I truly, truly missed you, sj'iu Tekari," he said gently. It was the truth and he had said it in such a way that I felt the rush of emotion which accompanied his words and understood that it was what had not actually been said that really mattered. It was like standing in front of a damn that had broken. All I could do was hold on to him with my arms and my legs, so tightly that I could feel his heart beat against mine. I dug my nails into the skin of his shoulders so hard that he hissed in pain.

If I could have captured this moment in time and held it forever I would have but time has rules and it moved forward in accordance with them. "*Peyla'mer a mal'yn.*" I

told him fiercely, nipping the delicate skin of his neck just under his ear with my teeth to make sure he got the point. *You belong to me.*

"Sad but true." He teased with a grin, pulling my hands off his shoulders, easing me back a little. "Though it would be less painful if I were to simply tattoo this on my flesh rather than have you try to mark me with your nails and teeth every time we do this."

"Pain is good for the soul," I said, checking the skin on his shoulders to make sure I hadn't actually drawn blood.

He only smiled in response and then, with his mouth and his hands, he shut me up.

He had been right, as usual, when he had once said that the Chiss had astonishing stamina but he had failed to mention anything about the voracious appetite they also appeared to possess. I was grateful for all the hard work that Navaari had put me through in the last year because it meant I was in good enough shape to keep up with him. Nothing, it seemed, not even falling empires, assassination attempts or near death experiences could keep us apart. I hoped, as we climaxed together, that we had finally learned our lessons. We were meant to be with one another and that was all there was to it. Why we both seemed to fight against this was beyond me.

Long after the waves of pleasure had rippled through us both, did he finally concede that he, too, was hungry and in desperate need of a shower and that it might be perhaps a good thing if we left the bed. I was in too languid a state to argue with him or point out that he had started this particular go-around so his hunger was entirely his fault and that, yes, he really did need a shower. After he had finished in the 'fresher, I ran a bath and luxuriated in the abundant geo thermally heated water until he came in to tell me that breakfast was almost ready. Dressed in clean clothes, I joined him at the kitchen table and for the first time since before the battle of Endor we shared a meal that was not fraught with tension or anger. He had not forgotten how to cook and I was grateful for his culinary talents both in the kitchen as well as out of it.

It was only after we had eaten and the dishes were cleared away did the tension begin to creep back into our world. He made a fresh pot of tea and then sat down across from me. I knew by the look in his face that now there would be no more distractions and when he began to talk, I listened just I knew when I spoke he would listen to me. I also knew that it would not be easy for either of us, despite the passion we stirred up between us, we had a lot of things we needed to sort out and if we didn't get a handle on the issues here and now then our lives as a couple with all the pressures that were to come with being together on Nirauan would collide badly. If I had learned anything from my time on Hjal under Navaari's tutelage it was when to shut up and listen. Luckily for me Thrawn had learned the very same thing from the very same man.

## **Chapter Two**

Living on Hjal had changed me. I hadn't felt it happen or really noticed the subtle differences as they had occurred but as my time on the planet with the Dantassi drew to a close I realised that I had grown up in more ways than I could count. This did not escape Thrawn's notice either and although he didn't come right out and say it I knew he welcomed the change. We had spent nearly all of the day talking to each other about pretty damned near everything. Some of the conversation had been pleasant, some of it had not but through it all there was no yelling or temper tantrums, no hurling of half full tea cups and no storming off in tears. We had simply talked. What had started off in the kitchen had ended in the underground gardens which supplied the Dantassi with all of their fresh produce because while we could talk a lot, sitting for hours was another matter. I had always found it easier to think and talk while walking rather than sitting still and Thrawn did not complain.

The garden cavern was beautiful and I had often spent time here alone when I needed to think. It was the only warm, humid place on the entire planet and it reminded me of Naboo a lot. Created in one of the largest caverns deep underground, the Dantassi had managed to simulate sunlight and harness the geo-thermal properties of the planet to create an enormous botanical style gardens, much like the Emperor had owned on Coruscant. The difference between the two was that the Emperor's gardens had been a selfish indulgence only for him and invited guests to enjoy, filled with rare and beautiful plants, many of which the cost for one alone could have fed entire families for years, the Dantassi gardens were designed to feed the enclave as well as be a place of peace and harmony, filled with fruit bearing trees and plants as well as greens and vegetables. Everything that was grown in this cavern could be harvested and eaten or used for other purposes, not a single thing went to waste. Dantassi technology never ceased to amaze me, it was as clever as it was invisible and the fact that when one walked into the massive cavern it was as if one had walked out into another world only heightened this sense of wonder.

Our day long discussion had come to a quiet close by a small waterfall which was part of the complex irrigation system. The roaring sound it made echoed about us, reminding me a little of the winds in the desert or thunder rumbling about the hills on Naboo. I found it hard to believe that meters above us was a planet mostly covered in ice and snow, where a raging blizzard scoured the surface making it impossible for traffic to land or take off and where every living thing cowered in its shelter for fear of being devoured by the storm. I sat on the grass and breathed in the sweetness of it deeply, while Thrawn lay down and rested his head on my lap, allowing me to run my fingers through his hair. I wondered what the rest of the galaxy would think if they knew that such a place as this existed on this sarlacc forsaken planet. This huge cavern was a miracle of sorts and I felt blessed to have been able to see it, to walk in it whenever I wished to. The silence between us was comfortable. I could not remember the last time I had felt so carefree, so at ease with everything. When Thrawn glanced up at me I just smiled.

"So, you'll come back to Nirauan with me?" He asked after a long period of quiet.

I nodded. "I already said I would," I said, "That's the second time you have asked now, did you think I would change my mind?"

"Well, one never knows with you," he teased and caught my hand before I could swat him lightly on the head.

"Where else do I have to go and what, in Sarlacc's name, would I do?" I asked, freeing my hand from his to pluck at the grass idly.

He drew a deep breath, "You could return to Tatooine and work for your father again. Mechanics, especially good ones, are always in high demand."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I would drive everyone crazy there just as I would drive Navaari crazy if I stayed here. You're stuck with me, so deal with it." The truth of the matter was I didn't know how to go back after everything I had experienced. Going home to work at the docking bay would be like Thrawn asking me to go back to just being his friend. I had changed too much. I had not realised it until this moment but I had outgrown my home. The thought made me a little sad but it also made me smile.

"Good," He replied watching my expression, "We should arrange a trip to Coruscant so you can pick up some of your things. I also know that Siavaan would love to see you again. Every transmission I receive from him, he asks how you are. I understood that you did not want to write to me, but why did you not reply to your friends or family, Tekari?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It was as if I needed to just shut out everything from my past. It was just all so painful. I knew that papa would understand because we went through all this when my mother was killed. I just needed time, a lot of time. It was selfish; I guess I will have a lot of explaining to do when I see him again." I had no idea how to put this all into words but I knew that it had been the right thing to do. In order to get past the terrible things that had happened I needed to cut myself off from everything I associated with that life. It was only now, after passing through the ritual of Sju'ru'arwy'kha did I understand how appropriate such a mourning period really was. It was difficult enough to part with the ghosts of the dead as it was, but to have constant reminders around me of how everything used to be would have made the transition that much harder.

"I doubt that Siavaan will think it selfish. He seemed to me to have a remarkably clear idea of what was going on in that pretty little head of yours after I let him know you were still alive. He knows you very well and much to my surprise he wasn't past giving me an earful either," he paused to smile. "Still, you should go back to the core sooner rather than later and when you do you need to give him my heartfelt thanks."

"Why is that?"

Thrawn sat up and looked at me. "Because he gave me some advice which helped me through a difficult moment."

"It had to do with me?" I asked, digging a little.

He gave me a look, "Not everything in the galaxy is about you, my dear."

"So what was the advice?" I pushed.

He just smiled. "I will let you ask him that when you see him. If he wishes to tell you then you will know," he replied.

"Hey, no fair you having secrets from me with my friends."

Thrawn smirked a little. "I do believe we now share friends, Tekari and I am certain that you have secrets with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii that you would not wish him to divulge."

I sighed letting him know he had won this round. "Is Shiv okay? I mean in the data discs he sent he babbles about life as usual but I wondered if he was just being all happy because he didn't want to worry me."

"Things have changed a great deal on Coruscant and I think that he made the best of a bad situation. He still works in the same position he did before the Emperor's death but the job itself has changed a great deal," Thrawn said quietly. "I think that Siavaan does what he can to survive under the circumstances."

"Isard is making things hard for him then isn't she?"

"Isard makes life hard for everyone, my dear. She is as ruthless as she is beautiful."

"You think she's beautiful?" I asked, failing to keep the twinge of envy and surprise out of my voice.

He answered with a smile. "She is a very striking woman, even you could not deny that but she is, of course not nearly as beautiful as you are."

I pinched him on the arm. "I wasn't fishing you know."

"I know, I just enjoy the pain you tend to inflict on me when I tease you," he said, "You do know that she was rumoured to Palpatine's lover...."

"Eww, just stop right there! These are pictures I don't want in my head!" I said. I could not imagine anyone wanting to bed with the Emperor and the very thought made me shudder with repulsion.

He laughed and then sighed. "I have not been on Coruscant in such a long time. My information that comes from there is not as complete as I would like. Siavaan helps, of course but he needs to be careful with what he says. I do have other sources but again it is all bits and pieces."

"Sounds like you need a spy in the palace."

"Are you volunteering?"

"No, I make a lousy spy," I said thoughtfully. "But you know, there might be other ways."

"I'm listening."

"Lord Vader had a vast spy and information network set up. He and Price Xizor spied on each other all the time, hell even lord Vader's spies had spies. I wonder if there would be something of that network worth salvaging that you could use."

"I would imagine that Isard and the Intel division would have dismantled most of that."

I shook my head. "I would not be so quick to assume that. Lord Vader circumnavigated Isard many times. He felt she had too many fingers in too many pallies. He didn't trust her, hell he didn't trust anyone."

"He trusted you, my dear."

"I wasn't any sort of a threat to him." I replied. "I am sure that there would be a way to tap into his surveillance network in the palace, I am certain Isard and her sweepers didn't catch all of it. I would have to go back and look for this stuff though, probably at his house or his office."

"I doubt there would be much left of his office and I don't know how comfortable I would be with you wandering around the palace trying to look for ways to secure me a covert Intel network."

I gave him a slight smile. "Lord Vader was super paranoid just as the Emperor was. They had so much covert security systems in place that I don't think either of them could have told you were all of it was and what all of it did. I'm betting I'd find something to use in Lord Vader's office and I am sure it hasn't been touched. Isard may be brilliant but she doesn't know all the secrets of the palace. I am also sure I can move around the palace without alerting security or causing trouble. I should also check his home on Coruscant as well, maybe there is something there of use as well."

"How would you get into Vader's Coruscant fortress?"

"I have a key?" I replied giving him a '*what did you think?*' look.

"He gave you a key to his private sanctuary?"

"It saved him from hearing me bitch about the length of time it took for someone to let me in every time he hauled me out of bed to work from his home. I still had to pass through his security but at least I could open the damned doors for myself. I didn't poke my nose where I wasn't supposed to. I respected his privacy and that earned me his trust on this matter." It had never occurred to me to consider this unusual but looking back in retrospect it was.

He sighed for a moment and was very quiet, lost in thought. "I am not happy about you even considering this and if you were to get caught you could and probably would be tried for treason."

"Well, then probably it would be best if I didn't get caught." I joked. "Seriously though, you need information and I could probably get something to work for you. I would just have to plan it out very well."

"You mean no rushing in head-long?"

"No." I confirmed. "It's either that or we could take a secret holiday to the Core posing as newlywed Dantassi and initiate a spy network of reprogrammed mouse-bots."

He shook his head in dismay. "Still under the influence of Jeb Holloway I see."

"Entirely your fault," I said poking him in the arm. For a moment we just grinned at each other.

He nodded then went back to the topic at hand. "Would you want to return to the Core as soon as we leave Hjal?" He asked.

I thought about this for a moment. "No, let me get settled on the base first. I would need to study the plans of the palace before I went back in and find some of the more quiet ways to get around."

"You still have the blue-prints?"

"There is a copy on the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma's* main on-board computer." I confirmed. "Plus I don't think that the little library the Emperor allowed me access to would have been discovered or disturbed, so there are also copies of the plans there."

He nodded. "As soon as you wish it, I can arrange to trip back. Isard will not trouble you if she thinks you are harmless and I will make certain that you still have high enough security clearance so that no one will question your return to the planet or hinder you from at least entering the Palace. After all, you are still working for the

Empire. There is no reason why that should change," he said thoughtfully. "You would have to be very careful though. This is a dangerous game you are planning."

"I know," I said, "But you need eyes and ears in the Palace. I can't believe Isard lies to you and keeps you out of the loop. She should be taking advantage of your brilliance not shoving it away in the farthest corner of the galaxy."

He smiled slightly. "Your faith in me is heart warming, Tekari but she sees me as a threat nothing more and nothing less."

"Then she's an even bigger egotist and even more stupid than I ever imagined." I spat, sounding very petulant.

He made a *tsk* sound and shook his head. "An egotist perhaps but she is not stupid and you should never make the mistake of thinking this. Do not underestimate her. She is very dangerous and very unforgiving. I do not want you ending up being held prisoner in the Lusankya facility."

I shivered. The Lusankya Correctional and penal facility was the most feared Imperial prison next to the Spice mines of Kessel. People who were sent to Lusankya almost never came out and those few that did were never the same. No one knew where it was not even the people who worked there. If people had thought Lord Vader's interrogation methods were cruel, they had obviously never heard stories about Isard's methods.

Thrawn watched my face carefully and drew a deep breath. "If I tell you that this is too risky and I won't allow such a thing will you go all stubborn on me?"

"No, I would not go all stubborn on you. It is risky, but I think it could be done," I said sounding a lot more sure than I actually felt. It was one thing to have worked day in and day out with Lord Vader and his constant mercurial temper, it would be quite another to try and circumnavigate the Director of Imperial Intelligence.

"Let me think about it for a while, Tekari. We have time to consider this option which makes planning easier."

I nodded, it wasn't a *yes* to my idea but it wasn't a *no* either. "Is the shuttle I flew from Endor in still at Nirauan?" I asked changing the subject.

The *Sigiri*?"

I nodded.

"Yes, and no one has touched her by my express orders."

"Not even to repair her?" I was surprised by this. A damaged shuttle taking up hanger space was a waste.

"No," he said carefully. "I thought that you would want that job when you felt up to it, when you came back. She is, after all, your ship now."

"Technically she belongs to the Empire," I said.

"Actually she was part of Vader's personal fleet of shuttles which he paid for out of his own money, so she is now yours, unless you don't want her?"

I shook my head. "Of course I want her," I said and swallowed the sudden sadness that had rushed up from my gut to greet me. That ship had managed to get me to Nirauan safely and I was kind of attached to her though until this moment I had not realised how much. "There are a lot of files on her on-board computer as well which might be useful," I said by way of explanation.

He just nodded and I could see the worry in his eyes. I knew he was not happy about the suggestions I had made but he was considering them, which was a start.

"Look, I won't be rushing off to go track you down a spy network any time soon and I have no intention of tangling with Ysanne Isard and getting on her bad side. First I need to get my life sorted out with you on Nirauan. I need to settle down and make a home for myself. Once I know what I need there, I can see about getting my things from the Coruscant flat and then decide if it would be worth while looking into a way to get you more intel. So if I do go back and try to dig about, it would be considerable planning involved, planning which would definitely include you."

"I see your time on Hjal has curbed some of your impetuosity," he said softly.

"I don't think it was being on Hjal that did that, Za'ar, I think it was nearly dying and nearly destroying everything I held dear and loved."

The look he gave me was tinged with a sorrow that seemed fathomless. He understood something about loss and regret. "A hard lesson to learn in the hardest possible way," he said stroking my hair possessively.

It was my turn to sigh, but he was right. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and hugged me close. "We'll head back to Nirauan in a day or so, as soon as this storm is over. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii has made it clear there will be no sneaking off, so there will be a big gathering to say farewell. He tells me you have managed to win over the enclave's heart and that you will be greatly missed."

I smiled but didn't say anything more, what was there to say to that anyway? I would miss everything here but I had learned this was the universal truth about living in more than one place. No matter where one was currently something else was always missing. *'Everything changes,'* Lord Vader had once told me, *'Even the galaxy will eventually change as the stars die out.'* Lord Vader had been in a particularly melancholy mood when he had told me this but for all intensive purposes, it was the truth. I just wasn't sure it was such a bad thing because there had to be change, without change everything stagnated, just as without goodbyes, there would be no hellos, and hellos could be very sweet indeed. Still, the prospect of saying good-bye to Navaari weighed heavily on my heart and I thought I had no more than a day or so to prepare for this but Hjal's weather had other ideas about that.

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The storm which had begun the day Thrawn had arrived was far worse than either Navaari or I had predicted. It lasted nearly eight whole days. Thrawn enjoyed his enforced holiday for nearly four days but after that he became restless, itching to get back to work, to get back into space. He didn't actually say anything and if I hadn't known him so well I might not have noticed but I had long ago learned the tell tale signs of planet locked spacers. I had seen it in my father when he had been on-world too long, he needed space-room he would say and my mother would shoo him off, sending him out on some convoluted shopping trip to another planet so he would get out of her hair. As I got older and spent more time working at the docking bay I learned the tell tale signs in others, pilots, smugglers and drifters. It was as if the air around them



shimmered with the anxiousness, the edginess of being planet bound which they felt after a certain amount of time.

In Thrawn, because it was tiny little things that gave him away, most people would never have noticed. He hid his restlessness well but I knew him better and it made me edgy, rubbing already worn emotions in entirely the wrong way. It did not help that I knew my time on Hjal with Navaari and all the friends I had made was coming to an end and it made me sad. I was torn by this, I didn't want to go but on the other hand I couldn't stay. At times such as these the apartment I shared with Navaari and now Thrawn seemed too small and claustrophobic even the enclave, which was by normal standards huge, felt oppressive and boxy.

I didn't like the feeling of being caged indoors at the best of times but ever since Jyrki's kidnapping it had been worse rather than better. I had a deep seated aversion to being in windowless places. So four nights into the bad weather, when I finally could no longer stand being cooped up and I could sense that the brewing tension would lead to a boiling fight, I threw on warm clothes and went to the South gates to be alone and get outside for a while. Growing up on Tatooine had taught me to appreciate solitude. The planet which was mostly desert was a very lonely place, unforgiving in its vastness. There was small solace in the cities and towns that clung tenaciously to its surface, where the difference between those that lived here and those that were just passing through was a look about the eyes. I could still recall the very first time I had spotted that look, the one which said I have what it takes to live here and you don't. Being from Tatooine, living on Tatooine was like wearing a badge which said *I survived the wrath of Darth Vader*.

Some of my earliest memories were of the desert which we could see easily from our house outside of Bestine. My mother, a native of Alderaan had fallen in love with the place the first time she had laid eyes on it and my father, who was still a transport pilot and not a docking bay owner had bought it for her as a wedding gift. Long after her death, when he was able to bring up memories of her without bitterness or anger and sorrow, my father would talk about her love for Tatooine and how unusual it was.

"She came from a world as lush and as beautiful as this one isn't. Most folks who visit this place take one look and high tail it out of here again. This place scares people but it didn't scare your mother," he had said one day. When I had asked him why he had replied, "Because Tatooine makes a person look deep inside to see if they have what it takes to survive here. Most don't, it's that simple."

The things I had missed most about my home world were the wide open skies, never ending vistas offered by the vast deserts and the exotic, dry spice scented air which swept off the Dune Sea. I had travelled to many planets in my life, enjoying each one for what it offered but noticing also that there was always something missing. It had taken coming to Hjal for me to figure out just what the missing thing was the scent of the world itself. Where Tatooine smelled like warm pasha spice, Hjal smelled like cold, ground pepper, the scent of snow, Navaari had said when I had commented on it.

This had led to a lengthy discussion about the differences and the similarities between our two home-worlds, both were places of great extremes which tested the body and soul of all those who visited them for any length of time. This conversation had to

led to Navaari giving me a very large piece of his mind about just running off without first letting him know that I was heading outside, saying that if he ever caught me even thinking about just leaving the enclave like I had the last time I was on his home world, well, the consequences would be *interesting*.

I had only nodded sullenly at the time, not happy about being reminded of my own stupidity, but once we had landed on Hjal and after being shut in for a few days, defiant and angry at everything in sight, I had ignored his warning completely. I suppose he knew I would, given the mood and the frame of mind I was in at the time.

I had no intent to run away or go for another death defying walk through a blizzard, in fact just the opposite but my need for wide open spaces outweighed any fear I might have had of Navaari's anger and the consequent punishment for not being obedient. He was, after all, I had pointed out in the several arguments that ensued, not my father and could therefore not tell me what to do. This argument was illogical and the barb was meant to hurt him, this was me lashing out in anger because my own pain was too big, too bewildering for me to acknowledge. With a calmness that was infuriating, he allowed me to rail against the wind all the while persisting in laying down some rules which I took great delight in ignoring. From the moment I had begun my strange exile with him on Hjal all I seemed to do with Navaari was fight. I was angry at everything and he caught the brunt of it and while he was good about it most of the times sometimes I pushed him too far.

The first time I had left the warmth and safety of the enclave, shortly after my arrival on Hjal, Navaari had been beside himself with anger, thinking I had run off on another crazy death walk. I had not bothered to let anyone know what I was doing; I had just dressed in my warmest clothes without wearing the mask and buggered off. His relief at finding me huddled by the South entrance had been almost as palpable as his anger. It had taken me nearly an hour to try and convince to him that I had not been planning on venturing from the doorway and that I had definitely learned that particular lesson and that I just really, really needed to get outside for a little while. It was a rare thing for Navaari to lose his patience but I had managed to make this happen when I had not told him I was heading out for some fresh air. It was a good job the discussion had been held outside where the winds could sweep most of the loudness away.

The story of my first and last little hike into the heart of a raging storm had become a bit of a legend in the enclave and not a particularly good one at that, so he had been anxious to make sure history did not repeat itself. In the end, it had been his friend, Kerrjan, who had solved the *stop A'myshk'a from going stir crazy and Navaari from killing her* by offering to build an addition onto the south door of the enclave.

Kerrjan was considered the master builder in the enclave. His skills at designing and creating structures from the materials at hand were almost magical. He was as old as Navaari was and he was also Navaari's closest and oldest friend. When Navaari needed to talk with someone he sought out Kerrjan and vice versa. They had grown up next door to one another and, as Navaari had once told me, were like brothers.

For the longest time Kerrjan had intimidated me. He was a tall, slender man almost wiry in stature but there was this thread of icy durasteel that ran through him which said no messing around here. Whenever he came to visit Navaari I usually found reason to be elsewhere. I always had the impression that he disliked me and

disapproved of Navaari having me live here so it was a huge surprise when he came by the apartment one day and instead of asking to speak with Navaari, he had simply told me to follow him. I was too dumbstruck to argue or think twice about it and I had done as I was told.

He had invited me into his studio where he drew up and designed architecture for the enclave. There he had shown me the plans he had created, with Navaari's help, for an addition on to the South side entrance. I had fallen instantly in love with what Kerrjan had designed. It was elegant and beautiful, like a room with one wall missing so that I could see the outside world but was sheltered from the worst of the weather. I had simply stood and stared at it without saying a word, unable to take in what I was seeing.

"We'll start tomorrow, if that's alright with you," he had eventually said breaking the silence.

"You want me to help?" I had asked in total disbelief. I had never helped build anything like this in my life. The only thing I knew how to build was an engine.

"Wasn't my plan to be building this all on my own," he had replied tartly. "You need to be doing something purposeful not sitting around staring at the walls."

"I thought that was the idea behind the period of mourning." I had muttered sullenly under my breath. Instead of annoying him this had made him laugh.

"Seems to me, little pup, that you could use something to take your mind off everything that has happened to you. Sju'ru'arwy'kha is about letting go of the past, setting your ghosts free, but sitting alone day in day isn't healthy for you." He had given me a little shrug, "I never did hold with the idea of leaving the person in mourning to sort it all out on their own, but then again I was never much one for holding with most traditions either, just ask your Pa'tjad'cu-sjä," he told me, using the word that meant honoured grandfather for Navaari. "Besides, after what you did the last time you were here, he felt it wise to give you a place to be going that would indulge your need to be outside."

"This was his idea?"

Kerrjan had smiled. "Sometimes it is easier to walk with the wind than against it," he had said somewhat cryptically. "We'll start tomorrow morning, dress warmly."

The next day, a lot earlier than I was used to, Navaari had hauled me out of bed, fed me breakfast and sent me to Kerrjan who put me to work. While I had grumbled about the cold, the early hours and anything else I could think of I was deeply grateful to have something constructive to do with my time. It had taken us nearly a month to build the addition and in all that time he had rarely spoken except to give me instructions, ask for tools or correct me when I made a mistake. It had been a welcome change to be with someone who didn't expect me to be conversational especially when I didn't know what there was to say.

Once we had finished the work on the porch he began to work on a place for me to sit. "You don't need to be huddled out here like a pup on the snow." He had told me. He worked on the bench in his workshop and I was allowed to sit and watch him as he cut, shaped and joined the wood.

There had been something peaceful and cathartic about sitting there watching him work with the hand tools and create something ornate and beautiful out of the deep dark wood pieces he had found for this project. Where we had been silent and almost

taciturn with each other outside, in this small sanctuary we talked to each other. He drew me out of myself imposed shell little by little and I had not even realised it was happening. He always seemed to know when I had had a bad night or when I had fought with Navaari. I had been almost sad the day he had finished the bench and I hadn't known what to say or how to thank him but I guess he had understood. Together we had carried it through the quiet halls to the South door and I had watched with mixed emotions as he put the finishing touches on it. He had smiled with a certain satisfaction at the expression on my face as I trailed my fingers across the smooth wood he had shaped.

"This is not an easy time for you, I understand that and it may surprise you to hear this but so does Navaari, more than you realise," he had said after what seemed like an eternal silence.

"It doesn't feel that way." I had replied. "It feels as though we are at odds with each other all the time. I don't know how to get past it. I don't know how to get past anything anymore."

He had nodded. "Well Ma'kehla will help you with that when you go to talk to her."

My response had been to nibble nervously on my little finger and sigh, wondering if the weight I felt on my shoulders could get any heavier. I had been avoiding the enclave's healer even though I knew I was expected to go and see her.

Kerrjan had studied my face carefully for a long moment then as if he had decided on something he began to tell me a story. "You remind me of a snow wolf I once raised. I found him on the south ridge half dead cuddled by his mother who had been killed by some other creature. He wasn't more than eight or nine weeks old, and I should have killed him rather than save him, born wild and too old to socialize usually snow wolves like that are feral, wild and hating everything but right from the very start that pup and I bonded. I could no more kill him than I could have left him there to die so I bundled him up, brought him back and hand fed him. For a very long time I was the only person he'd let get near him, I suppose he knew I had saved his life but he wasn't terribly sure about anyone else. It took him a long time to stop hating the rest of the world and calm down. I began to train him up to run on my sled. I had lost my lead runner several months before and had not found a suitable replacement. He would do almost anything I asked but he hated being caged, hated being locked up in anything that had four walls, he'd bite and fight and make a terrible racket to get out of where ever it was he had been put in. Most people thought he was too savage, unusable as a sled-hound but he just hated being locked up no matter what size the room was."

"So what happened?" I'd asked.

"I built him a kennel with a swinging door to the outside. Oh, he ran away a few times and people were convinced he was gone for good, I suppose he was testing to see if his freedom was real or not but after a day or so, when I didn't chase him down, he always came back to the warmth of the shelter and promise of steady food."

"Weren't you afraid he'd never come back?"

"Yes, but sometimes to let a thing go is to hold onto it forever. You cannot cage a living thing against its will." Kerrjan had said. "Once he knew he had the freedom to make the choice of inside or out, well he settled right down and was the best lead on a

sled I ever had. All it took was figuring out what he really needed which was a door to the outside world. He didn't like being boxed in, he was never what one would call tamed anyway but he was as loyal as they came and a good friend. Still that didn't stop him from being stubborn and disobedient from time to time just to point out that he was still his own wolf and not mine. Navaari just hasn't quite figured out yet that you're a lot like that snow-wolf. He is afraid that if he lets you go he'll lose you. He worries too much you'll just up and vanish like you did the first time you were here, not because you are being foolish or thoughtless but because you feel that you have nothing left to live for."

"I don't feel now the same as I did back then. I keep telling him I won't do that again but he doesn't listen."

"Aye, but the threat is always there when you just up and vanish from the enclave and he still blames himself for not seeing the signs of that coming the last time. He felt he should have known, felt he should have been able to read what you had on your mind."

I had answered hotly, "How can he blame himself for something I did? That wasn't his fault. He can't read my mind and know what I am going to do before even I know?"

"Of course not, you are quiet old enough to be responsible for your own idiocy." He had replied with a shrug. "I've known him since we were children and he was always the one to take the responsibility for everything on his shoulders. He was always the one who noticed things first; it's what makes him such a good Jhal'kai. He knows more about loss than many of us will ever dream about. He has passed through more than his fair share of grief. He knows something about letting the ghosts of the dead go, first it was his twin sisters, then it was his wife and then he said goodbye to his daughter when she fell in love with a Chiss who didn't want to live here, knowing that he would rarely, if ever, see her again. He knows about letting go, but you... well you he is afraid to lose."

"Why is that? I mean it isn't as if I am really family. I am not even really Dantassi or Chiss." I had frowned as I had asked this question, a question that had long been on my mind.

"Well that's the true mystery isn't it?" Kerrjan had replied carefully. "You and he, you bonded, just like I did with that wolf-pup. No one here is quite sure how that happened, not even Navaari but you are his family now and better you start thinking that way, behaving that way."

"He doesn't speak to me about these things." I had said with a sigh.

"No, I don't expect he does. Navaari was never a particularly open man nor does he let many people get that close to him, even less so after his daughter left home."

"So what happened to change that?" I asked because the Navaari I knew wasn't withdrawn or closed, but always seemed to me to be loving and wide open.

"You happened, little wolf pup." Kerrjan had said, looking at me as though this should have been as obvious as night and day. "You gave him something to care for, to look after and love. He was talking about you long before the first time you ever showed up here damaged and broken. He was mystified by what Nikätza'ar had done but at the same time he was also completely baffled by how protective he had felt over you on Rothana."

I nodded, remembering how Navaari had helped me, how powerful the sense of connection with him had been. That feeling had not lessened any when Thrawn had brought me to Hjal after what had happened with Jyrki. If anything it had made it stronger, more intense. "Did he tell you what happened there?"

"He did eventually." Kerrjan had nodded. "And that tale was almost unbelievable to hear."

"Meeting him felt like a dejarik game with all the pieces moving in the right places at the right time," I said, "Though at the time I was way more annoyed at Za'ar about it all because I figured that he had set the whole thing up, but he hadn't. It really was chance. I remember Navaari telling me that things always happen for a reason and that his people did not question destiny."

Kerrjan had made a short bark of a laugh, "Most of the time we do not, although Navaari has been known to fight against it from time to time, much good it does him."

He had stopped what he was doing to look at me. I had held his steady gaze for a moment then looked away. It had felt as though Kerrjan could see into the deepest part of my soul which was unnerving. For a very long time there was a silence between us, then he said, "You were a gift. You arrived at a point in his life where he felt empty, like you do now."

I had looked at him for an explanation and Kerrjan had sighed. I could see by the expression on his face that he was debating what he should say next and exactly how to say it, as if he were about to unveil a great dark secret.

"There is a lot you do not know about your Pa'tjad'cu-sjä," He had started. "He went through a very bad time in his life, shortly before he found you. While he will never admit to this, he had gone to Kerest with the intent of maybe not coming back. He did not think it would be noticed but I knew. Before he had left he had said goodbye in a manner that had sounded final and he had put all of his affairs in order. He had not expected to survive that hunt which is always a sure way to ensure one doesn't."

I had given him a startled look then. "I don't believe Navaari would do that. He would never give up, he would never ...," I bit off the words that had started in my brain before I could speak them out loud.

Kerrjan gave me a long speculative look. "I am quite certain that many people would have said the very same thing about you, but you gave up everything when you decided to head out in a blizzard. Loneliness and sorrow do strange things to people and Navaari had carried his sorrow around with him for a long time. While he may preach about letting go of ghosts, he was not always one to be practicing the same thing. He went to Kerest to lead the most difficult and the most deadly hunt we know of, knowing that the chances were very good he would not survive it. Dying while on a hunt would have been an honourable death. Navaari saw that as preferable to dying alone in his sleep like an old wolf long past its usefulness," he said plainly, stating out loud what I could not.

I had shaken my head in utter disbelief. "But he wasn't alone, the entire enclave loves him, he had you, why didn't he talk to you?" My voice had sounded so plaintive, so small, echoing the terrible ache in my heart. The rawness of the loss I still felt seemed to double with the knowledge that Navaari had felt the same way. It had taken all my

concentration not to cry. I could not believe that Navaari, who was like a mountain of strength for me would ever have felt he had nothing to live for.

Kerrjan had sighed, "That's not something most men will ever talk about. We tend to be taciturn at best about our feelings and stupid at worst. Navaari was over seventy eight years old, he had outlived his family with the exception of his daughter whom he almost never saw or spoke with, he had lost that vital link which seemed to make him whole and he did not know how to get it back. Sometimes that sort of loss and disconnection does funny things to a person and you of all people should understand this."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe he would ever give up like that." My words had been fierce and angry. I had not wanted to know this, not wanted to believe it but Kerrjan was not lying, I would have known if he was.

"Well, little pup, belief on your part is not required. Your Pa'tjad'cu-sjä went through very dark times of his own. He understands about wanting to be walking into a storm alone. That's what makes him fear for you so deeply."

When tears had welled up in my eyes I had not fought against them. It had never occurred to me that Navaari would understand me so well and I had been more than cruel with my words to him during many of the bitter arguments we had had since my arrival. Suddenly, I had felt a deep sense of shame at my own selfishness and it hit me like an avalanche. Kerrjan had watched me as I had brushed away my tears angrily and had nodded with a grim air of satisfaction before continuing to tell me his story.

"There comes a point when a man needs to face himself and that was what he was doing when he went to Kerest. He went without a reason to return but then, on the way, he met you."

My memory of my first meeting with Navaari was so sharp, so clear but not once did I recall getting the sense from him that he was getting ready to face his last hunt. What I really remembered the most was his quiet calm strength, the way he had guided me through the fight which had occurred and helped me to come out of it alive. I also remembered his frustration and slow building anger, a fearsome thing, at my own ignorance of all things Dantassi. Yet underneath that anger had been something else, a kindness, a tenderness one sometimes feels towards strays and children but I had not seen this until now. Then I remembered the way he had looked at me and the way he had said '*you have given me much.*' when I had told him that I had nothing to give in return for the amulet he had placed around my neck. I had thought he was simply being polite but now I understood. Kerrjan must have noted my revelation on my face because he had smiled then.

"When he returned from Kerest he had changed. It was as if he had found a purpose but for a very long time he would not speak of it except to say that something remarkable had happened, that he had met someone who had given him hope. It was only after Nikätza'ar had come to pay him a visit just after you had been kidnapped did he finally open up and tell me the whole story."

"Za'ar came here?" I had asked. "I knew he had asked Navaari to 'keep an eye out for me' but I had not known he had actually come to Hjal."

Kerrjan had nodded. "He came to ask the Jhal'kai Order to look for you. It was only then, after it became public knowledge that something truly extraordinary had

happened did Navaari tell me the whole story. I know that he had confronted Nikätza'ar about you before but that had been in private. When your Ta'kasta'cariad came here to ask for help what he had done was out on the open, no more secrets to hide. Navaari had known about you since Rothana but he had said nothing. I suppose the situation was so unusual he was unsure how to proceed so he kept it to himself trying to find a solution or an answer but once your existence was common knowledge, well then he came to me."

I had sighed. That I had been the cause of so much turmoil seemed unreal.

"We were most impressed to learn that you had managed to free yourself and find your way home." Kerrjan had continued. "It was then that Navaari made known to the council that he wanted you to come to the enclave and be taught the Dantassi ways. He felt you had earned that right by surviving what must have been a difficult trial."

I had shivered. "It was an awful time. I don't like thinking about it."

"Of that I have no doubt." Kerrjan had nodded. "It was not a surprise when word came that Nikätza'ar was bringing you here. We all knew that you would be brought to stand before the elders so that there would be no need for masks, but no one had expected Nikätza'ar to ask for a soul-binding ceremony and the look on your face told everyone he hadn't even spoken of it with you either. I suppose we all put down your quietness that night to being shy and maybe even surprise at Nikätza'ar's actions. No one expected you to simply vanish off into a blizzard but in hindsight it was not such a surprise that you did."

"It was a stupid thing to do." I had said crossly. "I was an idiot."

"On those two points I do not disagree but you were also in so much pain, too much pain with no way to let it all go. That sort of anguish makes people do foolish things. Navaari, to this day, regrets that he did not see it coming because he knew the signs. The first time you left the hall he followed you, fearing you might get lost but the second time he figured that you were just exhausted and needed sleep."

I had shaken my head angrily. "How could he have seen that coming? I didn't even know I was going to do what I did before I did it."

"You asked the right questions." Kerrjan had said carefully. "You asked Navaari how to survive the cold because somewhere in that head of yours you had already decided on what you were doing later. He thinks he should have known. He was trained to see the smallest signs for tracking, so he thinks he should have been able to foresee your actions. Though, after getting to know you it doesn't surprise me that he didn't. You are a bit chaotic and unpredictable."

I had just made a face but didn't interrupt him.

"Now, after what happened here the first time, he doesn't want to lose you to a repeat of that so he tries to hold you close. You fight this because you don't want to be feeling trapped, backed into a corner you cannot get out of. But I have to tell you, neither Da'hajn's hand nor unconditional love is a trap. He'll figure it out eventually and so will you but until then, consider this place we've made here to be a room with a door to the outside and use it to compromise before the two of you wake up the whole enclave with your shouting."

My cheeks had flushed red with sudden embarrassment. "You can hear us fight?"



"I live only a short ways from you and yes, I can hear you fight. You, little pup, have a very loud bark."

I could only mumble an apology which had made Kerrjan laugh. He had me help him hook the seat he had finished to the chains that hung from the roof of the addition and that had been the end of that conversation.

I loved the bench he had made because I could sit with my feet barely touching the ground and swing back and forth. I liked it even better because it was broad and large enough for three of me, which meant that when Navaari came out to join me we could both sit on it comfortably.

What I had learned about Navaari I kept to myself but from that time onward I always left him a note, letting him know where I had gone. Often he would join me outside somehow understanding that while I needed to be out in the open I didn't necessarily want to be alone. He never asked what had prompted my change in behaviour but he had let me know in his subtle way that he was relieved not to have to fight with me about it. I had not ever really thought about my own actions or their broader implications before, but the conversation I had had with Kerrjan had shown me that what I did had consequences and I touched other people's lives in ways I could not even begin to imagine. Thrawn had been trying to tell me this for years but I had just been too wrapped up in my own little world to listen.

"Sometimes, little pup," Kerrjan had said to me when I had spoken to him about this shortly after our earlier conversation, "you need to learn to pull with the team instead of against it."

I had only nodded, acknowledging his words, hoping that this was a lesson I had finally, finally learned.

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I sat bundled up in furs and warm clothes and watched the swirling snow from my sheltered place as the storm continued to howl. After five days of being cooped up inside the enclave I had decided enough was enough and done my usual disappearing trick. Thrawn's restlessness was infectious and he had begun to grate on my nerves. After a year or more of sleeping alone, I wasn't used to sharing my bed or my space and I was finding the adjustment a little difficult, though I suspected it had more to do with his edginess than his presence. He had accomplished what he had come here to do and now he wanted to return to work in the Unknown Regions but the weather, which was some of the worst I had ever seen on Hjal, was making it impossible for ships to land or take off.

It was twilight and the sky had turned an eerie purple colour as the last of the day's light filtered its way through the storm. I was grateful for the clever design of Kerrjan's addition which sheltered me from the worst of the frigid wind and blowing snow. This was not weather I wanted to go walking in but my need to be outside and breathe the fresh, icy air was far stronger than my love of warmth and being indoors. I sensed rather than heard the door behind me open and smiled at Navaari's presence, shifting on the bench to make room for him.

"Impressive weather this, I expected it would be dying down this morning but I see that isn't the case," he said as he sat next to me and began to clean out his pipe. "Thought I'd better come and make sure you weren't planning on spending the night out here again."

I grinned. The bench that Kerrjan had made was just wide enough for me to lie down on and wrapped up in the warm furs of my long coat and my other outdoor clothes I had actually fallen asleep on a couple of occasions. Something about the warmth of the clothing and cold bite of the air relaxed me, I knew I was safe and so when the drowsiness had crept over me I had not fought against it. It amused Navaari to no end that I could do this in the middle of a howling gale, even though I had pointed out I wasn't actually in the middle of it at all.

"Wasn't my plan," I answered.

"Your Ta'kasta'cariad was asking where you were."

"I left a note," I said defensively.

"Yes," Navaari chuckled, "but '*Gone hunting*' is not very informative and while I know what that really means but he does not. He was thinking that perhaps you might be doing something ... foolish."

"As if I'd dare!" I retorted.

Navaari nodded. "I was telling him not to be worrying. You were not going anywhere," he said, "I explained to him that you would not be making such an error in judgement again but he was not so convinced."

That made me grin. Navaari allowed you the grace to make a mistake once and learn from it but repeating the same error often provoked his ire.

"Huh, then I'm sort of surprised that he didn't come looking himself." I replied.

"He was asked to join a meeting that will be taking place shortly and I told him I would take care of finding you. I was thinking you were needed some breathing space, yes?"

"Something like that." I nodded.

I felt his smile and watched as he lit his pipe, the warm red glow of the burning tobacco was a strange contrast to the white of the snow in the dark of the night. I inhaled deeply the scent which I would forever associate with the man sitting next to me. Although Navaari never smoked the pipe in the apartment, the scent of it clung to his clothes anyway, sweet and almost apple like.

"This need you have for the wide open always makes me wonder how you can love being in space in a tiny ship so much, Kycsi'i."

"Well, it's awfully hard to be in space without one." I grinned at the nick name.

He had long ago stopped calling me Tjällh. He said I was no longer a small, silly child so the name no longer applied but it hadn't taken him long to find a replacement for it though. Kycsi'i was the shortcut for a word that when roughly translated into basic meant wolf-pup. It was a soft word, pronounced through closed teeth so that it sounded like ka-yey-shh-eh. I had Kerrjan to thank for it. He had taken to calling me 'little wolf pup' all the time and the name had somehow spread and stuck. It never ceased to astonish me how quickly some nicknames managed to stick to a person but I took it as a sign of affection and it was way better than the last one Navaari had given me.

A comfortable silence settled between us again and I closed my eyes, listening to the sounds the wind made as it moved around us. It was slowing down and the mournful howling was giving way to a grating whine. I wondered if the storm was finally starting to die off but it didn't have the usual feel of a storm's end. I smiled at the hissing sound the snow made as it snaked across the frozen ground because it reminded me sharply of sand in the desert. That my two homes which were so vastly different had so many similarities never ceased to amaze me.

"What is on your mind?" Navaari said after a long silence. "I noticed that the two of you were quiet at breakfast this morning. Is something wrong?"

"Nothing in particular, just restless," I said, then after a moment I added, hoping it would be enough of the truth to placate his curiosity. "Za'ar was driving me nuts."

"He is missing space," he said carefully, turning to give me a speculative look.

Up until a few days ago Thrawn, as a topic for conversation, had been absolutely off limits so Navaari was testing the waters. I couldn't blame him for being cautious, Bringing up Thrawn in any kind of discussion before now had usually resulted in shouting matches, angry silences or me walking out of the room. Just hearing his name had hurt and had stirred up my anger at everything I had felt he was responsible for. Now that had changed and for the most part my reasons for being so angry no longer existed, still my reply to Navaari's answer was cross. "I am well aware of that but does he *have* to make us all suffer for it?"

That made Navaari chuckle. "It will be over soon enough and then you will leave here to be with him where he is at his best," he said with sorrow lacing his voice. It made me ache with a loss that had not even happened but would come as sure as the day followed the night. My departure lingered over everything now, only the storm's violence had delayed the inevitable from happening. I knew I had to leave, and that staying would be the wrong move to make but knowing this did not make it any easier to deal with.

I heaved a large sigh. "I don't want to go!" It came out sounding petulant but I didn't care.

Navaari wrapped his arm across my shoulders and pulled me into a hug. I rested my head on his shoulder. "I know that," he said, "But you cannot be staying here forever, you would eventually go stir crazy. Hjal has served its purpose."

"My father said almost exactly the same thing about me leaving Tatooine when I got the job working for Lord Vader."

"Then your father is a wise man and he was right. All pups must be leaving the den sooner or later. You have a destiny that is not here. I will be missing you sorely but I am certain you will be visiting me on occasion, yes?"

"Of course!" I said, hoping it was true. I loved Navaari with a ferociousness that seemed almost unreal at times and the very prospect of leaving him brought a lump to my throat. For over a year this had been home. He had become family to me, strong, solid and kind and in some ways I felt closer to him than I did with my own father. I often thought about this while living on Hjal because the blood ties between the families here meant so much that I wondered how I could feel so strongly for all the people I considered family in my life when I was not tied by genetics to any of them. I had asked Navaari about this one day after we had made up from a particularly loud and

spectacular argument. His reply had been short and simple but its implications had weighed heavily on my shoulders for days after wards. "Love does not have blood ties, Kycsi'i," he had said. "Love only knows love." I had not understood this then but over time it dawned on me that I chose my family not the other way around and in some ways I was blessed to be able to do so without the obligations that being bound by the same blood line often seemed to create.

"Why can't I be two people?" I asked him.

"Two of you?" he shook his head, "I don't know what to be doing with just one of you...."

I made a face which he couldn't see. "Oh you sound just like Za'ar."

His warm, booming laughter was carried away by a sudden gust of wind. Despite my warm clothes I shivered.

"He was speaking with one of your students this morning and was most impressed with the progress you have been making. He had no idea that you would be such a good instructor," Navaari said after a lengthy silence. "He was telling me he hopes that you will make the same progress on Nirauan."

I sighed. "I can't think of a job I want less, you know," I said, "I don't have fond memories of that place and the people on the base were not the friendliest in the galaxy. The Chiss seemed to resent the humans and the humans don't really like the Chiss. I don't want to be stuck in the middle."

"You will be doing just fine and those who you teach will warm up to you." Navaari said.

"Maybe," I said, "I feel as though I am going back there because there is nowhere else for me to really go and that's not really a good reason is it?"

Navaari's answer was surprisingly blunt. "You are going because he needs you and you need him. Without you, your Ta'kasta'cariad is half a man though he would be hard pressed into actually admitting this to anyone. You make him whole, Kycsi'i, you complete him." It had taken Navaari all of a second to see that things between Thrawn and I had worked themselves out, more or less. He had come back from his meetings to find us in the living room playing the Dantassi version of dejarik. The atmosphere between us was decidedly less tense than it had been twenty or so hours previously.

I snorted a little. "Za'ar was never half a man with or without me."

Navaari's chuckle made the swinging bench jiggle. "Do not be underestimating your importance to him or your place in his life."

"And just what makes me so important?"

Navaari turned his head to look at me, both the soft glow of his eyes rivalled by the warm red embers of his pipe burned brightly against the dark of the oncoming night. "Love, unconditional love," Navaari said quietly. "As I said, he came back because he needs you. You bring light into the darkness. Kerrjan was very apt in likening you to a wolf-pup, you know, you are just like one. You give your love and your loyalty so freely, and I have never seen you ask for anything in return except to be loved back. It is a very rare thing and it's precious beyond belief. Both Nikätza'arth'pavjäska and I are blessed by your presence in our lives."

*Love.* I thought about this for a moment because it was a word that held so many meanings and so much promise but at the same time it also caused so many problems and it did so much damage. I sighed, retreating back in to an almost sullen silence.

After a while Navaari asked, "What's really on your mind, Kycsi'i? Are you unhappy? Do you not wish to return to Nirauan with Nikätza'arth'pavjäska? Did you and he have a fight over something?"

I shook my head, thinking about the strange turn the discussion Thrawn and I had had as we had lain in bed the night before. "No, we didn't fight exactly." I answered his last question. "It's more about things which haven't been said."

"What do you mean?"

I drew a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly. "He never told you he was going to use the unmasking ceremony to bind himself to me before it actually happened, did he?"

"No." Navaari replied.

"Did he ever tell you why?" I pressed because I was certain that Navaari would have asked Thrawn this.

"I did not ask him because I knew the answer," Navaari said after a lengthy silence which let me know I would probably not like the reply to my next question.

"And that is?"

"He knew I would try to stop him."

A myriad of emotions flashed through me all at once not the least of which was surprise. The was the very last answer I had expected to hear Navaari give and it brought back a flood of insecurities which surfaced in my mind every now and then about belonging to and being part of the Dantassi culture. I was so alien among them and sometimes, despite assurances to the contrary, I truly felt as though I had no right to be there. For a long moment I did not know how to respond to this and then when I found my voice I asked the only question I could.

"Why?"

The wind which had howled about the enclave like an enraged bantha had stilled to almost nothing and it felt as though all of Hjal including myself was holding its breath waiting for Navaari to answer my question.

"You have to understand, what he did..."

"I know what he did!" I cut him off. "At least I know what he has told me, which isn't very much. I asked a few times what that all meant but he was vague about his answers, evading the question. Everyone evades this question and now you tell me you would have stopped it?"

This was what Thrawn and I had discussed the night previously while lying in bed, talking long into the early hours of the morning. The discussion had never turned ugly nor had it become an argument, both of us were still being too careful with the other for that to happen, but I had questioned him about what he really meant by being bound to me and what the strange little ceremony which had taken place at my unmasking rite had truly been about. His answers had been evasive at best and at worse he had lied. When I had called him on it he, in much the same manner as my uncle did, had asked me to back off and let the matter be. "What is done is done, Tekari," he had said, "I am bound to you, is that not enough?" I had backed off because to take it further

would have meant a fight and neither of us was ready for that yet. But this secret thing he had done to me in public without anyone else's knowledge before hand was biting at my curiosity. There were whispers about it within the enclave but no one would speak to me of it and when I had tried to learn of it more I got told off. I looked at Navaari knowing that if I was ever going to find out, this was the time and the place for it and I asked my question again. "What I want to know is why? Why would you have tried to stop him?"

"Because, such a thing should be discussed and both parties should know about it not just one but he seemed to feel this was the best way. I never agreed with that but, like you, he is wilful. I let it go because your acceptance was only to allow him to bind to you, not the other way around. Never- the-less, you should have been told of his intent, especially as you did not understand anything that had been said, or the agreement he had made and the implications that went with it, which in itself was unusual and remarkable."

I frowned, "Just about everything he does seems remarkable or unusual, how was this any different?"

Navaari's reply held an undercurrent of anger in it that I did not often hear from him. "He has bent every rule we have about outsiders when it comes to you and no one quite knows how to deal with that." It wasn't an answer.

"I don't know how to deal with it." I told him tartly. "I don't know why he does anything he does most of the time, especially when it comes to me!"

"Ahhhh Kycsi'i, that is because when it comes to you, he is ...well... cautious." Navaari replied sounding tired.

"Cautious? Why?" This was the eternal question I never seemed to be able to find satisfactory answers for. I kept asking it over and over.

"Well, I suppose in order to know the answer to that you need to learn a little about his past. There are some things you don't know, things I am sure he won't tell you because maybe he is ashamed, maybe he is afraid you will think less of him." Navaari shrugged a little.

"How could I think less of him? I love him." I murmured in a whisper.

"That is what I told him but he doesn't always listen," he said with a snort. "When I first met him, he was brash, idealistic and full of himself. His work with the CEDF had made him well known amongst his people and not always entirely for the right reasons. He was arrogant even then, thinking his way better, and so defiant, always arguing his reasons for being right using his logic and tactical genius. When he came here to help in the defence of this planet it was against his people's wishes, but he came anyway and it was a blessing for us that he did. His brilliance saved us and our home."

"I know this Navaari." I interrupted.

"Mmmm," Navaari nodded as he took a slow thoughtful draw on his pipe. "What you don't know is that during this time, he was courted by several women here who saw in him the potential for a perfect mate. Yirnika, Mechele, and Torvai to name just three of the girls who nearly clawed each other's eyes out to be with him but he would have none of it, he would not even bed with them simply for pleasure even though they made it abundantly clear they were his for the taking should he wish. He always politely declined their offers and invitations, each and every one, until the rumours began to fly

that he was already married or that perhaps he was more interested in men than in women."

"Yirnika? Tanika's mother?" I asked.

"The very same."

"Oh! Well, that explains a good few things then," I said ruefully.

"Been giving you a difficult time has she? I was wondering why you were liking to avoid her whenever possible, it is a good thing that daughter of hers doesn't take after her mother." Navaari nodded. "She took Nikätza'arth'pavjäska's refusal of her affections very hard. To this day I think she is bitter and angry at him because of it. He swept into this enclave like a storm stirring things up, though that was never his intention. It would be no surprise that she would be passing these feelings on to you. After all you have managed to obtain that which she could not."

I glanced up at him, meeting his eyes which glowed softly in the darkness and waited for him to continue. I know he read my 'why?' on my face but I bit my lip to keep from uttering it out loud.

"He bound himself to you in an ancient ritual, made it plain and public that he would never give this promise to another. It must have galled her, after all those years, to see that he chose you, an outsider to this enclave, and an alien, and a slip of a girl who was half his age over her. She has never forgiven him for rejecting her offers, despite the fact that he really did make it plain he was not interested. I thought she had mostly forgotten him until the two of you showed up here the last time. The fuss that stirred up was most amusing to watch, of course everyone waited until you were both gone from here before they were saying anything about it."

"He's never mentioned if there were women in his past to me," I said with a small shrug, not doing a very good job of hiding the strange and sudden flare of jealousy I felt, "but then again he hardly ever mentions much of his life before he came to work for the Empire and I don't like to press him."

Navaari nodded. "He was a young, handsome, eligible man and when I had asked why he refused to even consider the attentions of these young women, he'd told me that it did not feel right to encourage them, he knew he could not be what they wanted. He spoke of his career and said that he could not be with anyone who did not understand that duty came first, that his love of space and ships would never allow him to be tied down and he was quite right in these things when he spoke of the women here. While we are being a somewhat nomadic peoples in the past, we have settled here and even though we travel off world to hunt, to track, when we are done, we come home. The women who chased him wanted a mate who would not only provide a comfortable living but also be around to warm the bed and father offspring. He told me it would have been wrong to give them false ideas and false hopes, that there were reasons for his decisions that would become clear in time. "

"Well he was right about that. I think that Za'ar and I have been together a lot less than we have actually been apart, but I never expected anything else," I said as I sat back against back of the bench and looked out into the night. "He is a man with...."

"...stars in his blood." Navaari finished for me. "I am certain that, because you understood this, is part of what drew him to you in the first place," he said thoughtfully, "You did not chase him but you did not reject him either. I think that intrigued him into

wanting to learn more about you and the rest came later. What began as a desire to satisfy his curiosity grew into something he could neither back away from nor totally control. This was and is a precariously interesting situation for a man like Nikätza'arth'pavjäska to find himself in."

"How so?"

"He, as with most Chiss, has been trained from birth to acknowledge the feelings he has but to tuck them away allowing reason and logical thinking to lead and direct his path. He was never a man to allow his emotions to get in the way of his, ambition, duty or his analytical skills. However, where you are concerned this is not the case." He paused for a moment. "He can be ruthless if the moment demands it and not hesitate to kill if that was called for. Yet, this is a side of him I suspect he has not allowed you to see, he cares too much for what you think of him and I have never known him to be this way with any other being. He recounted to me a story once about having to destroy an enemy ship despite the fact that he knew it was full of prisoners, captured beings bound for slavery. He said the humans who were with him at the time this occurred were horrified. But, he told me, if he had to make the same choice again, he would have and I believed him. When he spoke of this incident he did so without emotional attachment at all but when he speaks of some of the things that you have endured he cannot hide how he feels. For a Chiss to be so emotionally attached is difficult to say the least."

I shivered. Navaari was wrong about Thrawn not showing me his ruthless side. I could still hear the sharp crack of bone as he broke the neck of the man who had tried to rape me on Myrkr. He was just careful not to show it all that often, but I knew it was there. I didn't say anything so Navaari continued.

"This was all a long time ago, when he was a young man in the CEDF and he first had contact with beings from your part of the galaxy, humans, a woman and two men. Smugglers, he said. They were on the run and had somehow managed to hyper into Chiss space. Instead of destroying them he brought them on board of his ship as his guests, though I expect they did not see it in this way. It is how he learned to speak basic but it is also around the time he lost his brother."

"Thrass." I whispered.

"You know about this." It wasn't a question.

"I only know a little, that his brother vanished along with a Jedi woman trying to prevent the ship from getting into the wrong hands. It had to do with maintaining balance of power within in the Chiss Ascendancy, but I don't know much more than that." I shook my head.

Navaari nodded. "It is a wound that runs deep. He feels responsible for the loss of his brother. There were dire consequences for him because of his actions. He does not speak of it because guilt makes it painful and difficult. He knows a thing or two about hiding from the truth, about shoving things that hurt deep down inside and about loss." He spoke gently but there was also anger in his words. Anger directed both at me and at Thrawn. In Navaari's opinion we both kept far too many emotions and secrets locked up inside our hearts. It wasn't something I could disagree with either. "I am not one to be believing strongly in fate but I will tell you this, your life, his life and mine are wound together in more ways that we could ever be imagining. I had thought that once he left us after the defeat on the Ninlial and returned to his own world that I would not be



seeing him again but that was not the case and over the course of many years our paths crossed time and time again. Not too often, mind you, but enough that I knew our threads were woven into the same story. And then there was you."

He paused for a moment and looked at me, I returned his stare and didn't look away until he nodded slightly, "When I met you on Rothana I was angered that one who was not us would dare to take on the mask of the Dantassi so boldly, so brazenly but when I saw the amulet around your neck I knew that this was not an accident and that something bigger than simple chance was at work. When you openly told me your story without guile or lie I understood that I had been sent to that planet for the single purpose of meeting you there. The connection I felt to you as we sat and spoke that day was not something I ever thought possible with one who was not of my kind. It puzzled me how Da'hajn could tangle her threads so badly and I was convinced this was a mistake. However, I was wrong. Meeting you was something I needed. I just did not understand that then. It had not been my plan to go to Rothana although it was often used as a stopover for my kind, you understand, I was on my way to Kerest and had booked a passage on a ship that was heading straight there. It was a broken hyperdrive and a very odd twist of circumstances that brought me to Rothana and kept me there for two days. I did not understand why until you told me who it was that had named you in Dantassi fashion. Then, as you like to say, the last piece of the puzzle felt as if it had fallen into place." The scent of sweet smoke mingled with the icy cold air as Navaari stopped to suck on his pipe and consider his words.

"When I saw him next I challenged him about you, but we only had a little time to speak and there was so much that needed to be said. What he had done, well there was no precedent for that. You are one of a kind among our enclave, perhaps even amongst all the Dantassi. There have been one or two other 'Traeth who have wished to join us, become one with the clan but it was forbidden. Nikätza'arth'pavjäska could get away with it because while he was under my protection, taken into my family he is not of the blood and bears the name of another clan. He was in a very unique position to circumnavigate our rules without actually breaking them, which, incidentally, is why neither he nor you bear my name," he sighed. "I was so angry with him over you. You, a slip of a 'Traeth who knew nothing of our ways, ignorant and innocent should not have been given the key to our world, yet there you were and no one, not even the elders could deny his right to do what he had done with you. When I asked him why, he simply said, *'Because my thread is bound with hers.'*"

"What did he mean by that?" I asked, leaning into Navaari's warmth. The wind was definitely dying down and still chill had begun to creep over everything.

Navaari looked at his pipe and tapped the dregs of the ashes out. "I am sure that you have heard some of the stories about Da'hajn, yes?"

"A few." I nodded thinking of the bedtime stories Tanika told her two small children.

"It has been a long time since the Dantassi or the Chiss have been worshiping any gods but their stories remain in our world, touching our culture in more ways than even we know. One of the surviving tales likens life to a giant, endless tapestry forever in motion. Threads, which represent lives, weave in and out to create the pattern of the galaxy, some threads are short while others are long. Some are single and separate and

others are wound together making one colour out of two, blending, becoming stronger. Long before the Chiss hid underground to cuddle against their planet's inner warmth they believed that this giant tapestry was woven by a goddess who plucked these threads from the trails of stars and the tails of comets, colouring the bright white light with the red of giant stars, the blue of planets' skies and the fiery green of the dancing lights and so on. Each thread is a life force and she weaves their singular and separate tales into the never ending tapestry we call life. It is a simple tale from a simple time when no one understood where we all came from."

He glanced at me and continued, "While in this enlightened age this myth is now relegated to the status of a bedtime tale parents tell their small children, we still talk about fate in terms of the Great Weaver, Da'hajn. By telling me what he did in the manner that he did, Nikätza'arth'pavjäska was letting me know how important you were to him. The idea that Da'hajn weaves two beings' threads together, joining their lives is a powerful one, even today. We symbolize this union by exchanging tokens that remember her and her weaving skills." He lifted his arm and pushed back his sleeve showing me the slender torque bracelet that encircled his wrist. It was made with three different kinds of metal wire twisted together to make one single cord. It was an incomplete circle the two ends finished in stylized snow wolves' heads facing each other. It was beautiful and while I had seen it many times before I had never thought about it having any meaning.

"Why are there three different strands and not just two?" I asked as I studied the beautiful piece of jewellery.

"The silver strand is for moonlight, representing the female, the gold represents the sunlight and the man, twisted together they represent the couple being given to each other and the third strand, the blue one which is made from metal only found on a few planets, Csilla and Hjal among them, represents Da'hajn who binds all lives together on the great tapestry. It is to her magic that we pay homage with this token. You have seen this ceremony; you were at Belljani and Karhek's bonding."

I nodded remember that joining and how beautiful it was. I had been to weddings before on Tatooine but somehow the fairly dull civil ceremony that passed for a wedding on my home world seemed lacking in beauty and meaning that the Nai'da Rite of the Dantassi had. I knew that what Thrawn had done with me and the Rite of Nai'da had been two different things. The wording had been different and the meaning behind it also was not the same but I had not been able to unravel just how this was because I could not remember everything that had been said and no one would tell me now. I had the feeling that if I let him, Navaari would ramble on about everything except the one thing I really wanted to know so I decided to push.

I let out a slow, angry breath, "Get to the point, Navaari. Tell me what he did to me and the reasons behind it." Navaari withdrew his hand from mine and studied the bracelet on his wrist for a long moment. Then he pulled his coat sleeve back down and began to refill his pipe, slowly thoughtfully. I wasn't sure he would answer me but I stayed silent and waited. He regarded me for a very long time, searching my face as if that would give him answers to the questions I had asked. When he took a deep breath and lit his pipe I knew we would be outside for a while longer. When he began to speak I felt a great sense of relief.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska was never one to show much emotion about any one person in particular although, on occasion, he has shown a small amount of affection but this was the exception rather than the norm. In all the time I have known him, I had never heard him speak about anyone in the way he spoke about you when I confronted him after meeting you on Rothana. I see the two of you together and I know I have never seen him look at anyone else the way he looks at you. Nor," He added thoughtfully, "have I never seen him look the way he did when he told me that you had been abducted by the man who was your childhood sweetheart."

I shivered at that memory. Jyrki's madness had almost killed me and it had been Thrawn who had saved me by bring me to Hjal. "That was a very bad time."

Navaari nodded, "Yes and you did not help it by trying to walk to your death in a blizzard."

I sighed. Navaari was never, ever going to let me forget about that. "Za'ar was so angry and I do seem to excel at making him angry," I said quietly.

"Anger covers up fear," he said knowingly then turned to glance at me. "Fear causes us all to do stupid things." There was so much more behind his words than what was actually spoken and it reminded me of the Jedi creed which talked about fear and anger and hate. No wonder the idea of attachments and love scared them to death; the fear of losing these things was enough to drive anyone mad.

"Do you think he did not tell you or me what he planned at the unmasking ceremony because he feared someone else in the enclave would protest it or stop him?" I asked wondering who might have done that. While Navaari was right and I had made a place for myself in the enclave not everyone was happy with my being there, some were more vocal than others but I knew that I had not been and was still not universally welcome.

"That would also have been a possibility, as I have said his actions with you were unpopular and unheard of." He conceded, "Although it does not excuse his silence to you. Still, I said my piece on it and let him know what I thought," he said, "I would have been more vocal but what he did was one way, only tying him to you formally and not the other way around."

"Maybe I need to remedy that, Navaari," I said quietly.

His gaze was intense. "Such a thing is not to be done lightly." His tone of voice was suddenly hard.

"I am well aware of that." My reply sounded crosser than I had intended.

Navaari only shook his head speaking to me as though I were still an unbedded girl whose infatuation had caught the better of her. "Nai'da cannot be performed without both people's consent and I do not think he would give his."

"Why not?" I asked.

Navaari sighed. "That answer is complicated."

"*Complicated* is another way of saying I can't be bothered to explain it to you!" I retorted hotly. I knew this because I used it the same way all the time when I didn't want to speak about something or explain an action.

Navaari bit back the annoyance I know he felt. "I do not think you would want to push him about it. He has chosen you, he beds you, he loves you is that not enough?"

"What if it isn't? What if I am tired of all this keeping of secrets from me for my own good? Why, for once, can't you all just be straight with me about why you do the things you do? I am not an idiot!"

Navaari snorted. "No but sometimes you act like one!"

I punched him, without malice, on the arm and he smiled then said thoughtfully. "Nai'da is a life bond, A'myshk'a, permanent and binding with serious consequences if you were to decide to back out or seek another to lie with on a whim. Requesting to be bound under this rite in this enclave would be restricting for both of you so please do not push for that because you would not be happy with his answer and you are smarter than that."

"I know what a life bond means in Dantassi terms, Navaari. I also know that what Za'ar did was different. It was not Nai'da, not even close. Did you think I wouldn't ask? Did you think I would not discover some of the truth behind what he did? Did you think I would never find out what neither you nor Za'ar nor anyone else would tell me?" I didn't bother to try and hide some of the frustration I felt.

Navaari's shoulders slumped a little as he sat back against the back of the bench. It was as if the terrible secret he had been holding onto now suddenly weighed too much and I knew that finally we would get to the real truth. "It was not my place to tell you, little one."

"Yes it was!" I said hotly. "You were the one who found me in the snow and saved me from freezing to death, you were the one who gave me a home here, helped me heal when no one else could. You took on responsibility for me when no one else wanted to, not even Za'ar so if not you, then who else would have, should have, told me the truth of this thing, who?"

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska," He replied with the only answer he could.

"Gah!" I let out an exasperated breath, tipping my head backwards rest on the bench's backrest. I stared at the ceiling of the porch shelter for what seemed an age before speaking. "Last night Za'ar and I discussed this thing he did, or better say talked around it. All he would ever say is that he is bound to me, he never really explains what it truly means and I don't understand why. So, I went to see Ma'kehla this morning. I pleaded with her to tell exactly what had happened at the unmasking ceremony to me."

Navaari was very still as he asked. "And did she?"

"She told me that what Za'ar had done wasn't ordinary, she called it Pen'nai Da'ataith. But the way she acted when I asked, it was as if the entire thing was some sort of dirty secret."

"I wondered if she would be the one to eventually break the silence. She hates keeping secrets like this even more than I do," he said with a heavy sigh.

"So...?"

"Pen'nai Da'ataith is a very old version of the Nai'da binding ceremony...." Navaari replied.

"Well, I've witnessed the Nai'da and I know that what he did with me was different." I interrupted, pushing because while Ma'kehla had told me the name of what Thrawn had done she had not gone into any details about the consequences. That, she had told me tartly, was either Navaari or Za'ar's job but not hers.

Navaari looked at me steadily and bit on the stem of his pipe then, making a decision, he tapped it against the side of the bench letting the last of the tobacco embers fall out, and black ashes swirled briefly upon the white of the snow then, scooped up by a slight gust of wind, vanished. He took his time as he began to refill his pipe, mulling over his words as he did so. "Listen to me Kycsi'i, if you want to hear this then stop interrupting or else you will never learn what I know and think about this thing he did." He raised his eyebrows in question and I nodded in agreement.

He began again, "Pen'nai Da'ataith is an ancient Chiss custom that dates back many, many, many centuries. It was drawn up as a way of putting a stop to the practice of arranged pairings in order to solidify power and wealth, giving all people the right to choose their mates, to choose love over lineage obligations. It protected the lovers involved by disallowing their families from disowning and banishing them and was a way of preventing blood feuds and unions of convenience. Once the right of Pen'nai had been called the person who claimed it was, to put it crudely, off the market and not even family could alter this or punish them in any way for what they had done. In centuries, as customs changed, it has been mostly forgotten, considered an antiquated law that no one needs to use any longer as arranged marriages have long gone out of fashion, at least officially any way. However, the Rite of Pen'nai Da'ataith still exists and it has deep meanings as well as great power, it was never removed from the list of laws so technically it can still be used and must be upheld. In my life, until he invoked it I had never seen the Rite Pen'nai Da'ataith performed. The enclave still whispers of it."

"Why does he always make things so complicated? He could have just asked if I would marry him."

"Perhaps," Navaari shrugged, "but to be honest I don't think that is what he had in mind when he called for the Rite of Pen'nai. He was still courting you and he had not yet taken you to his bed and you, well you were still unsure of your place in his world. I think, in his eyes, he felt you were too young, too untried to be asked to make such a choice...."

"Well then he gave me no credit at all!" I interrupted angrily.

"Perhaps, perhaps not but there were also other reasons as well, Kycsi'i," he chided gently, "More pressing reasons."

"Such as?"

"To look after you in part, I suspect. Because he claimed the rite of Pen'nai, he is duty bound to protect you in all things. His duty is also the enclave's duty. This means he has the right to call upon the enclave's clans people to aid him in matters which concern you if needs be. All his belongings and holdings pass to you should he die before you do and no Chiss or Dantassi law can deny you this. It grants you many rights and a certain status within his people's culture as well as with the Dantassi as it was one of the few laws that survived the splitting of our peoples. He would have known all of this. He took great care to see that you were protected not just by your own family but by all that is his as well. Being joined under Nai'da does not grant the same rights as under Pen'nai."

"But why would he do that?" I asked, my brow wrinkling in utter puzzlement.

"Can you think of no reason?" Navaari nudged.

I closed my eyes and remembered back to the conversation Thrawn and I had had after Jyrki had broken in and destroyed my old flat in the Imperial palace. *'After your kidnapping I thought about it carefully then I had your name added to the papers on this flat. Should anything ever happen to me, ownership will be transferred to you.'* He had said.

I sighed and as if it answered everything I whispered Jyrki's name.

Navaari nodded slightly, "In part it was a reaction to what happened to you the night you were taken from Coruscant by your mechanic friend. I believe that having you snatched away from under his nose like that frightened Nikätza'arth'pavjäska more than he was willing to say. As soon as he was able to, he came to us asking for the help of the Jhal'kai to find you. He was refused outright. I often wonder if what he did was also a direct reaction to this simple act of refusal on our parts. If we had said yes, perhaps he would not have felt forced to invoke the Pen'nai Da'ataith."

"What?" I could not keep the surprise out of my voice.

"He did not tell you that did he?" Navaari said sounding unimpressed and not the least bit surprised.

I shook my head. "No, he said that he had asked you to keep an eye out for me."

"He came here asking for the Jhal'kai Order to actively search for you because your Emperor would not allow him to do so but the council turned him down."

The sudden hurt I felt at hearing this surprised me more than I could have ever imagined. "Did you say no as well?"

"I did not vote, I was forbidden to because I had known about you long before Nikätza'arth'pavjäska came to ask our aid and I had said nothing about it. That alone was grounds enough for me to be removed from the council although it never came to that because I stepped back from my place in it myself. I told you, what he did with you has no precedence in our enclave. He damned near caused a riot at that meeting and I had never seen him or the enclave's council members and elders so angry. The Jhal'kai were well within their rights to refuse him and as angry as he was, he understood. All the same, it was not an easy parting. He did not lie to you when he said he had asked for my help, he did and I gave it to him as much as I was able to but council law forbade me from actively searching for you and even I have lines I will not cross, to do so would have meant being shunned and this is my home."

I nodded that I understood this but because I needed to know I asked. "If you could have voted how would you have done so?"

"I would have said yes." His answer came easily and there was no lie in it. "But for reasons that I would have been hard pressed to explain to the council. Sometimes there are ties that go beyond blood lines and race. I knew that from the first moment I saw you something larger was at work even though I was unwilling to admit it at the time. They would not have understood this then."

"Do you think they understand now?"

Navaari snorted. "Yes I do but getting certain members to admit this would be an impossible task. Do not underestimate the power you have for getting inside people's hearts Kycsi'i. You worked hard to earn your place in this enclave and you have given a great deal to this community, teaching basic, learning our ways, and becoming a part of who we are, adding to our stories. We have Nikätza'arth'pavjäska to thank for this,

without him invoking Pen'nai you would never have been allowed sanctuary here and that would have been a great loss for us in so many ways, especially for me but not everyone is happy with a "Traeth in the enclave. That is their problem and not yours. You have a home here no matter what." I looked up at him and his eyes met mine. The sense of love and honour and so much more that I felt from coming him was overwhelming and I had to blink away my sudden tears. I suppose he knew and understood that I felt the same way as he drew me close with his arm about my shoulders. "Do you understand better why he did this now?" he asked.

"You still should have told me what he had done, I don't get why you didn't, you know."

To my surprise he just laughed. "Oh Kycsi'i, you want it all, you know that? You are sometimes impossible to please. What was I supposed to do or say? Every time I tried to talk with you about Nikätza'arth'pavjäska you shut me down faster than a Toydarian trader does a beggar. For the last year you would not speak of him with me, nor about your family on Tatooine or much about your life on Coruscant. It was as if you wanted to erase all pre existing memories of your life before you came here away and start all over again. I did not talk to you about these things because I did not know how to broach the subject without you getting hugely upset. I figured that when you were ready you would come to me and we would discuss it but you never did, not until tonight. Even if I had tried, would you have been willing to really listen?"

I made a face because he was right. "Probably not." I conceded. "It's weird you know that he did this to me in this way. It is almost as if he knew I would need some place to vanish that was safe and out of the way. It's downright spooky how he plans things sometimes."

Navaari just made a noise. "His strategic thinking, tactical skills and his ability to plan ahead are the reasons I stopped playing dejarik with him. Sometimes I used to wonder if he could simply see the future but the truth of it is, this is his gift. He plays this game like no other I have ever seen and he is brilliant at it. It is how he thinks all the time, what moves can be made, when and how and then how to counter each and every one of them. But honestly, I don't think he saw what happened to you coming at all, I just think he wanted to be prepared for anything. He has told me several times that you are one of the few people who truly frustrates him with your unpredictability so I suppose he was making sure all angles were covered. It was a very clever move in the end."

"So how do I balance out what he did without backing him into a corner?"

Navaari was quiet for a few moments and then he said, "You learn to play his game, Kycsi'i."

This made me laugh, my breath coming out in white puffs of air. "If only it were that simple." I snorted.

"Well, it might be," Navaari said giving me a look which said he had something in mind.

"How?"

"Patience, little pup, patience." Navaari just smiled. I had nothing to add to this and the silence between us seemed all the more still because the wind had finally died completely down.

"Strange storm this was, it looks all clear now but it feels wrong," I said casually getting up to look up at the night sky. It was surprisingly clear; at least the area above us, but when I looked to the south all I saw was a thick darkness.

"Not seen a storm like this in over six or so years," Navaari said with a grin, coming to stand beside me. "Seems to me that Hjal is not wanting to be losing you just yet. Look out towards the South Ridge." He pointed to where he wanted me to look.

"Can't see anything." Which I realised was unusual. Normally on a clear night the mountains stood out white against the sky.

"This is a koj'l'wynt," he said as if that explained everything. The word meant demon's wrath. He made a circling motion with his fingers to show me what he was talking about. "A storm that turns back on itself. The wind's changed, she'll come back now from the south now and be twice as bad as before. Feel the breeze on your face?"

I lifted my face and closed my eyes. He was right it was coming from the south, south west and that was not all, its scent had changed. There was a needle cold sharpness, an almost cruel hint in the way the wind smelled. Storms from the North East always brought a touch of salt and brine because they swept over the sea flats. This new wind was coming straight down off the mountains and in order to do that, to maintain the cold and be as strong as they were this storm had to be very bad.

"Well," I said, "This won't make Za'ar very happy."

"No, but it does give us a little more time together." Navaari just laughed.

I winced as a sudden gust of bitterly cold air swept snow into my face. It felt like a thousand tiny cold needles prickling my skin. I made a face, winds from the southern direction made sitting outside impossible. Glancing back over my shoulder I saw a wall of snow heading towards us. It reminded me greatly of the massive sandstorms that sometimes swept in from the desert. When the first real blast of wind found its way into the small shelter, I shivered and huddled closer in my heavy clothes. Now I was starting to feel the cold keenly which didn't escape Navaari's notice. He cleaned the ashes from his pipe and tucked it carefully away in his pocket. He activated the force field that had been installed for Southern storms, preventing the build up of snow drifts against the South doorway and slung his arm around my shoulders.

"Come inside before you freeze to death. Enough of this fresh air nonsense! Your Ta'kasta'cariad will be embroiled in conversations with the council now so we will have peace and quiet to continue talking if it is what you are wishing to do."

I nodded, grateful to be back in the warmth of the enclave. As much as I loved the outside and the wildness of the terrible storms, I love being inside where it was warm even more.

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If there had been one thing I had learned from my time in the enclave it was that the Dantassi did not need much prodding to have a celebration. What I had hoped would be a quiet going away dinner turned into an enclave wide affair, much to my chagrin.

"You have a lot of friends here Kycsi'i." Navaari had chided when I had grumbled about it. "They all wish to say goodbye properly."



Saying goodbye properly was really an excuse for a night of revelling, although I didn't mind as much as I seemed to. It was the prospect of leaving that made me sad not the party to say farewell. After all the Dantassi enjoyed life to the fullest. 'We feast, we dance and then we couple to celebrate living!' Navaari had once said. This was no exception but the reason for it made me a little melancholy.

Thrawn had been in contact with the *Grey Wolf* and because the storm which had grounded him was finally starting to taper off. Satisfied that there would be no safety issues, he had arranged for us to meet with his ship as soon as the weather cleared enough. I was fairly certain that after the farewell celebration I would not be in the mood to pack so I decided to do it before rather than after, I was in the middle of trying to decide what to take and what to leave when Navaari knocked on my door.

"If you are looking for Za'ar he's speaking with Ma'kehla," I said without turning around.

"Actually it was you I was hoping to find," he said closing the door behind him.

I sighed as I stopped what I was doing to look at him. "Have I ever mentioned how much I hate packing?" I asked.

He just chuckled. "Often," he said. Then he looked around at the room and I saw a flash of sadness cross his face. "Whatever you want from this room is yours to take, Kycsi'i."

I nodded feeling the lump in my throat grow. "I don't think I will be wearing much Dantassi fashion on Nirauan though." I told him trying to lighten the mood a little.

"Well now, you never know what you'll be needing and when it might be of use." He commented, his fingers casually caressing one of the dresses I had laid out on the bed.

I nodded. "What did you want to see me about, Navaari?"

He smiled. "Ah, I thought we might talk about what will happen tonight," he said with a smile.

"You found something?"

He nodded. "I believe I did, so do you want to hear it?"

I heaved a huge sigh feeling some of the tension I had been holding inside dissipated. "Will he go along with it?"

"I think so, but it needs to be done right," Navaari said with a nod then he sat on the bed and motioned for me to sit beside him. "So, listen carefully."

And I did.

After our conversation outside Navaari had told me he would look through the laws, the ceremonies and rites to see if there was anything that I could use to essentially get back at Thrawn for what he had done in invoking the Rite of Pen'nai Da'ataith that would not have any negative repercussions for either of us. The Dantassi marriage ceremony of Nai'da had too many restrictions on it because it had been designed with growth of the Enclave in mind. Marrying under this ceremony would mean that both Thrawn and I would have to give up our other lives and come to Hjal and settle down for good. That was never going to happen in a billion years and since I had no reason to invoke the Rite of Pen'nai we needed to find another way for me to effectively and publicly bind myself to him.

I had never given marriage much thought before and as far as Thrawn was concerned it had actually never really entered my mind. It had always been enough to know he was there, but now I wanted to let him know that I had meant what I had said when I had told him I was his and only his. If this meant getting married well I was happy with that but both Navaari and I agreed that if Thrawn had wanted marriage he would have asked for just that. So it had to be something symbolic and meaningful but not legally binding which was the tricky part. Just about everything ceremonial or official which happened in the Dantassi world had some sort of deep significant meaning and usually came attached with a bunch of obligations. As Navaari explained to me what he had found out and how I was to go about it I grinned. It was perfect and I hoped Thrawn would not see it coming.

"It is not often I get to surprise him, so this will be worth it," he said with a smile. "Now let's get this mess sorted out, we have a celebration to attend in a few hours.

With Navaari's help I managed to finish my packing in time to have a bath and decide what to wear. By the time Thrawn returned to the apartment I was ready and waiting for him, curled up on the sofa with a book.

"We'll be late if you don't hurry," I told him.

He just arched an eyebrow at me and vanished to change. I envied the fact that it took him less than ten minutes to get ready. It had taken me nearly two hours. When he appeared from the bedroom, changed into fresh clothes he looked so handsome that it took my breath away. Dantassi clothing suited him and he had chosen to wear black which set off the colour of his skin perfectly. I tried to picture him with hair as long as Navaari's was because that would complete the outfit and the image but I had difficulty doing that. For as long as I had known Thrawn his hair had always been short, military short but he had told me that at one point in his life his hair had been very long and that if I did not believe him then I should ask Voss Parck.

I stood up, smoothing the long skirt of the dress I had chosen down, brushing away nonexistent dust and wrinkles. I was nervous and he could see that but I hoped he would put it down to the size of the gathering rather than anything devious.

"I have never you seen you wear that dress before. It is most becoming," he said as he circled my waist with his hands, pulling me to him.

"Thank you." I replied, making a half hearted attempt to move out of his hold. He simply tightened his grip so I didn't resist when he leaned in to kiss me either.

"Do not be too sad, Tekari. We will come back here again, you know." He murmured, nibbling on my ear, making my stomach drop.

"We'll be late if you start that." I replied as his mouth moved from my ear to my neck.

"It is acceptable for the guest of honour to be a few moments late. It allows everyone time to be seated first," he said. I knew that tone of voice well, that honey laced *I think I could forget about attending any celebration and just whisk you off to the bedroom* sort of voice.

"Plenty of time for this later," I said.

"Only if you stay in the enclave this time," he teased.

I rolled my eyes. "Then we should go before Navaari sends out a search party," I said pushing back from him. He just grinned and let me go, by the time we arrived in the great hall everyone was waiting.

As Navaari had suggested I waited until after the feast but before the revelling really got underway. It was during this time that the enclave Elder would call me forward to give me the traditional farewell blessing. When the moment came I felt as though all the eyes of the galaxy were staring directly at me. I made my way to the dais and stood in front of the High Elder. For a long moment he stared into my face and then he smiled. I knew that he had been one of the few of the enclave's high council members that had not disapproved of me being here and I was grateful for his support. He was a powerful member of the enclave and everyone respected him greatly whether they liked or agreed with him or not. It had been he who had presided over my unmasking and as I stood in front of him now I could not help but recall that moment in my life. Somehow it seemed pivotal now looking backwards but at the time I had been too overwhelmed to even think about it.

When he spoke the entire hall stood silent. It was almost unnerving; you could have heard a grain of sand drop. I listened while he recounted my history with the enclave and wondered at the person he was describing. The things he said had done did not seem real to my ears yet they were true, he spoke of my contributions and he spoke of Navaari and Za'ar. When he was done he laid placed the tips of the first three fingers of his right hand against my forehead and he spoke the traditional blessing for those departing on a long journey. When he was done I had to fight the tears that threatened to escape as he placed around my neck a bone amulet carved in the shape of a seated wolf pup. He smiled at me when he saw my expression. I did not have to ask who had made it. I knew Navaari's work too well for that.

When he asked if there was anything I wished to do I nodded and told him. It was not a surprise to the rest of the enclave when he called both Navaari and Za'ar to come forward. As my appointed guardian and my Ta'kasta'cariad it was expected that I should thank them both publicly for all that they had done for me. I did this gladly. I had so very much to be thankful for and much of it I owed to these two men. They both accepted the small token that I had for each. Thrawn smiled as he took the small bone carving from my hand. I turned to face Navaari who nodded when I gave him his, passing to me the small bracelet he had made for this occasion.

"Now, Kycsi'i," he whispered.

I turned to face the elder who looked at me with a smile. He knew because Navaari had cleared this with him first, it was never a good idea to surprise the enclave Elder with ancient rituals in the manner that Thrawn had once done. I stood up on tip toe to whisper in his ear and handed him the bracelet in such a way that no one else could see it. The Elder regarded it for a moment and smiled. I could feel all eyes bore into my back and I knew that Thrawn was staring at me with curiosity.

"Are you certain?" The Elder asked softly.

I nodded, "Absolutely." He smiled at my answer.

The Elder nodded and motioned for me to step back and then he looked at the sea of faces watching us puzzled, waiting, expectant. The air crackled and everyone knew

that something different was going on. There was a very long, pregnant pause and then the Elder spoke.

"Akiana'myshk'apavjäska, in accordance with the rite of Pen'nai Da'ataith, has chosen to give her Ta'kasta'cariad a token as an answer to his request," he said.

Thrawn glanced sharply at me then to the bracelet that the Elder now held up in his hand for all to see. The expression on his face was unreadable.

"It has long been said that Da'hajn weaves lives together without us knowing why and so it is with the lives of Akiana'myshk'apavjäska and Nikätza'arth'pavjäska. The Rite of Pen'nai Da'ataith has tied him to her but with this token she now affirms that there is no other in her life but him." He continued, "Do you Nikätza'arth'pavjäska accept this token? Do you accept this woman, past, present and future and the bond-gift that she now offers, to publicly acknowledge your request of Pen'nai Da'ataith?"

I turned to look at Thrawn. For as long as I had known him I don't think I had ever seen him rendered utterly speechless before. A myriad of emotions rippled across his features and for a second I thought he might refuse. He stared at me for what seemed like forever and then he turned to address the Elder.

"I accept her gift, past, present, future, and all that it entails," he said clearly. My knees nearly gave way with the relief that flooded through me. Navaari had said that there was a chance he would refuse even though this little rite was purely ceremonial and had no other significance or repercussions. In essence it was a formal reply to what he had done the very first time we had been here and nothing more than that but I knew better and this had deep meaning for both of us, more so than either of us could ever put into words, still...he could have refused it but he did not.

The Elder gave me the bracelet and I looked at Thrawn. His face was expressionless as he held out his right arm to me. With trembling fingers I slipped it on his wrist. It was a beautiful piece of work, similar to the Nai'da wrist torque that Navaari wore except instead of three strands of wire twisted together there were only two and silver one and a gold one, closed at either end with caps of pale blue metal.

As I clasped the slender metal band and tightened the gap so that it would not slip off I whispered "My heart to your heart is, by Da'hajn, forever bound." It was an ancient line from an even older myth and although I had spoken it softly because of the acoustics in the great hall just about everyone had heard it. Everyone knew the story and murmurs of approval rippled through the watching crowd. Everyone loved a happy ending to a complicated love tale; it seemed it was even better when it happened in front of one's eyes.

Time stopped for a second and then Thrawn reached out and pulled me to him. He cupped my face with both his hands and shook his head but before I could ask what that he had meant by that, very slowly and deliberately, he kissed me with such reckless abandon that had he not been holding on to me I would have crumpled to the floor felled by the muddle of emotions I felt coming from him in waves. His kiss lasted forever, languid and explicit in a way I had never known him to show in public. If anyone had any doubts about how he felt for me this was his way of shutting them up. It shut me up as well and once I got over my initial shock I did my very best to kiss him back. I knew then, in that moment I was whole again. When he finally, almost reluctantly drew back from me and held me at arm's length his expression was so open it

brought tears to my eyes. It was as though everything I had ever felt for this man was crashing around me and I opened my mouth to tell him that I loved him but he placed a finger across my lips and shook his head ever so slightly in a 'don't' motion.

"Deeds speak louder than words, Tekari." He whispered as he looked at me intently and I nodded that I understood. It would have been too much all at once. I didn't need to say the words, not here and not now because he knew anyway exactly how I felt and saying it out loud would have been redundant somehow. Before I could think to speak he kissed me again and this time the enclave erupted in a cheer so deafening I hoped it would not bring the building down about our ears. The Elder grinned and clapped us both on the shoulders, then gave the word for the party to begin.

I thought I had seen the Dantassi celebrate with abandon but anything I had witnessed before this paled by comparison. As the music started and people began to dance and move about Thrawn simply held on to me. The whole world swirled and blurred around us as we stood very still. He brushed the tears that had escaped from my eyes and were sitting on my cheeks away with his thumbs. I was certain he was about to say something but Navaari intervened by pulling us both in a bone crushing embrace. I could not remember the last time I had seen him look so pleased with himself.

When Thrawn untangled himself from the huddle Navaari had created I laughed at the expression on his face. He truly had not seen this coming and while it had pleased him, it had also annoyed him, just a little.

Navaari gave him an enormous grin and clapped Thrawn on the back so hard I saw him wince. "Now we are even, Nikätza'arth'pavjäska!" He grinned.

"Indeed, I had suspected that she might try to initiate something but this did not occur to me. I take it I have you to thank for this elegant piece of jewellery?" He lifted his right wrist to show off the slender silver and gold metal band that glinted in the light.

Navaari nodded. "Wear it well, Kej'son," he said. The two men regarded each other for moment and what passed between them I could not say but they clasped each other's wrist and touched foreheads which I knew was sign of great honour and deep affection.

"And you little pup, are you happy?" He asked sweeping me up in a huge embrace, swinging me off the ground in a wide circle.

"Yes. Thank you, Navaari, thank you so much!" I told him as I buried my face in his neck and held onto him as tightly as I could wondering if it was possible to explode from loving someone so much. When he set me down on the ground again and I had to hold onto Thrawn's arm because I was so dizzy. He just laughed but before he or I could say any more An'jast'a had come up and tapped him on the back.

"Let them be, you old fool, after that display I do not think they have standing around, chattering to you on their minds. So come and dance with me instead!" She said grinning at me. I liked An'jast'a a lot and I was glad that Navaari had finally let her into his heart. I had hoped to see them bound before I left but I guessed that would be a little while yet. I just watched as she dragged him into the middle of the dancing crowd and then turned back to face Thrawn. He stared at me and drew a deep slow breath in and then let it out even more slowly.

"That was very well played, my dear," he said softly.

"Are you cross?" I asked, still uncertain about his feelings in this particular matter.

His eyebrow arched and a slight smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "No, not at all," He replied shaking his head to emphasize this and then he added, as he caressed my cheek with the backs of his fingers, "You honour me greatly."

"That's what you said the last time as well, but I didn't know what it meant then."

"And do you know now?"

"No," I conceded, making a face, "not really."

"Well, consider it something for you to puzzle out on your own then," he replied, giving me one of those smiles which said everything and nothing all at the same time, driving me crazy. I just sighed and shook my head, he enjoyed getting the last word in and sometimes it was better just to let him win. I didn't protest when he took me by the arm and began to lead me away from the dais. "So... shall we dance?" He asked.

"I thought you'd never ask!" I replied and laughed as we were swept up into the crowd.

## Chapter Three

How often, I wondered as I quietly wiped tears off my face, would I be saying goodbye to the people I cared deeply for. This parting was especially bittersweet. I had come to love Navaari and Hjal in a way I had never known possible and it was heart wrenching to leave. Thrawn, after having said his own goodbyes to Navaari had left us alone so that I might say mine. I had watched miserably as he vanished inside of the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* and begun the start up sequence. I slipped off my mask which was now decorated in even more carvings, the story of my life as a member of this enclave. I hated this and I wasn't making it any easier when I flung my arms around Navaari and clung to him, half sobbing in to the fur of his hood.

"I love you." I told him, "I love you so much...." These words, which were so powerful, which I could not seem to say to Thrawn but came so easily to my lips for Navaari to hear, sounded small and child like.

He just held me tighter. "I know that Kycsi'i. Don't cry, it isn't forever and you will always have a home here, always." The last vestiges of the wind from the storm made the powdery snow on the ground drift around us, hissing as it snaked across the flats. It was bitterly cold, freezing my tears on my cheeks and eyelashes. My breath decorated the air in lacy white puffs.

I didn't fight when he pushed me back. "Now, you should go, best not to keep him waiting. You know how to find me if you need me," he said.

I nodded.

He smiled at me, "Go, and don't look back. It's..."

"...bad luck," I said finishing the sentence for him. He placed the tips of three fingers on the middle of my forehead. I understood this gesture now. *My life, your life, by the will of Da'hajn are forever joined.* He nodded, letting me go. I had just stared at his face, committing it to memory, too choked up to speak and then because there was just no other way I turned abruptly around and walked into my ship without looking back. I made my way to the cockpit to find Thrawn was seated in the Pilot's seat. I was grateful that he had decided to take charge and let him know this with a small smile as I sat in the co-pilot's seat and strapped myself in.

Once we had broken free of the planet's atmosphere the trip to where the *Grey Wolf* lay waiting would be less than twenty minutes, barely enough time to sit back and enjoy the flight. I watched with detached interest as we approached the ISD and manoeuvred into the landing bay situated in the ship's underbelly. I slid my facemask back on. I didn't want anyone to see that I had been crying.

Thrawn put her down with a soft touch. Underneath the heavy Dantassi over coat he had now removed he wore his uniform and now, as he shut the engines down, he seemed an entirely different man, shedding the role of my Dantassi bond mate to return to that of Imperial Grand Admiral. I wondered, as I glanced out of the cockpit window, what these men who all stood to attention on the deck of the landing bay would think if they had seen him as I had seen him the night before, carefree and laughing. I could not help but smile at the memory of what had come after he had taken me by the hand after many hours of dancing and whispered in my ear, '*I believe this counts as later.*'

I followed Thrawn silently as we exited the ship, mindful of the surreptitious looks I was receiving from the men on the deck. Clad from head to toe in Dantassi clothing, my face hidden by my mask, my hair hidden by my hood I was an unknown, a primitive. Hiding behind my mask had been my idea but he had not argued against it. I watched as Thrawn returned the salute he was given and then spoke with the officers who were waiting there. A few more salutes and everyone scurried off to fulfill their duties and do what ever jobs it was he had asked of them.

When he was satisfied with his men Thrawn turned to me. "Come, Akiana'myshk'apavjaska I will show you to your quarters," he said in his native tongue. I nodded compliance. He issued orders in basic and my bags were picked up and brought by a stormtrooper whose face was just as hidden as mine but I could feel the curiosity and slight sense of superiority that came from him. That would have changed fast, I thought, if the young man in the white armour had known who I had worked side by side with two years previously. I stayed silent and followed Thrawn to the quarters that would be my home for the next few days while we travelled to Nirauan.

I did not think it was a coincidence that I had been placed in the VIP quarters and that once my bags had been dropped on the floor Thrawn waved the stormtrooper to wait outside. Once the door closed I removed my mask and looked around. The stark contrast of the Dantassi home I had been in to the cool Imperial design was almost night and day but there was a familiarity to it that made the transition easier.

"I thought you would appreciate a spacious cabin and some privacy," Thrawn said watching as I discarded my coat. He understood that sometimes it took a little time to adjust from one world to the next. I had been away from the Imperial one for a very long time now.

I nodded. "Thank you," I said. The words came out sounding cool and formal. I hated these transitions. On Hjal he was relaxed and more open. Here he was reserved and distant. No one would have even dreamed to think of the two of us together in bed let alone the dancing. It seemed so far away, yet the memories of the night before were still very fresh in my mind. Perhaps he read these thoughts on my face because he lost some of the stiffness in his posture and reached out to brush stray hair from my eyes.

"You should get some rest, you must be very tired," he said gently.

"No more so than you." I answered glancing up at his face. For a moment our eyes met and that familiar flash of heat seared through my gut.

His hand lingered to cup my jaw, his thumb stroking my cheek. "Hmmm," He replied with a smile that vanished when he added, "I shall be busy this evening I am afraid. There is much I need to catch up on. Shall I arrange for you to eat here or will you find your way to the guest mess hall?"

"I'd rather eat here," I said. The last thing I wanted was to be the topic of conversation and sitting eating alone in the small guest dining hall was never fun.

"Very well, I will have that taken care of. I also thought you might like this," he said handing me a data pad. I took it from his hand with a questioning frown. "It is essentially a rundown of everything that has happened since Endor. I thought you would like to catch up on recent history. There is a fair amount of classified information on that so try not to lose it, my dear."



"As if." I snorted setting it on the nearest table. "I'd like to speak with my father if that is possible."

Thrawn nodded as if he had expected it. "I have arranged for you to have access from here. Operating it will not be hard, you know how the system works and nothing has changed. Your clearance codes should still be active, if not let me know." He paused and then said, "There is a training room available for you and Rukh was asking if you would wish a sparring partner when you returned. I think he rather missed you."

"Good. It took me a long time to get my conditioning back I'd like to keep it. I am betting Rukh will enjoy some of the moves the Dantassi taught me."

"No doubt. I am afraid I do not provide him with much of a challenge in that particular arena." Thrawn smiled.

For a moment we just stood facing each other and then his comm went off.

"I have to go. There are things which require my immediate attention," he said.

I just nodded. All the things I wanted to say to him I had already said the night before. It seemed sort of pointless to create dialogue for the sake of it. He smiled and pulled my chin upwards with the crook of his finger. "It will not always be this way, this much I can promise you," he said as he leaned in and kissed me gently.

"Better not be or else there might be a war between us." I told him and then stepped back to let him go and solve what ever issue it was that needed to be solved.

"Well, when there is some quiet time we can discuss your terms and demands for a peaceful settlement but for now I am afraid I ..."

"...Must go to save the galaxy from evil, I know," I said finishing for him, flapping my hand in that *go away* manner that Lord Vader used to do to me. "I'll be fine. I am, as you pointed out, tired. I am going to have a bath, then I am going to order supper and then I will go to bed."

He smiled, planted a kiss on my forehead and then without any further comment he left me on my own. In truth I was grateful, I was exhausted and even if he had forsaken all of his duties to sit and chat with me he would have been talking to himself because I would have fallen asleep instantly. So I did exactly what I told him I was going to do and I ran a bath.

Navaari had slipped, among other things, several bottles of Crackerberry liqueur in my bag. "*So you have something that reminds you of us.*" He had said. I dug a bottle out and poured myself a drink; I wasn't prepared for the sudden wave of homesickness that washed over me as the scent of the liqueur drifted into the room. I grabbed my glass, picked up the data pad Thrawn had given me and went to soak in the bath. It took me all of five minutes to realise that reading about what had happened in the last two years would only put me to sleep even faster than lying in a tub full of hot bubbly water and drinking Crackerberry liqueur would so I set it aside on the little table, lay back in the tub and closed my eyes, my thoughts drifting to the night before.

We had danced. It had been a blur of motion and laughter, the music every bit as captivating as the first time I had ever heard it. I could not recall the last time I had felt so free. Many hours later Thrawn had tugged at my hand and we had slipped through the crowds only stopping once while he spoke to one of the Elders talking to Navaari. In the quiet of the apartment we had initiated another kind of dance to music that only we

could hear and to which only we knew the steps. We had woven our bodies together the way Da'hajn wove her threads and with each caress, ripple and thrust we had entwined ourselves together in a tangle of limbs until it felt as though we had become one. In the languid aftermath we had lain in the bed settled and drowsy curled around each other and as we so often did, we had talked.

I had traced my fingers along the winding metal threads of the bracelet he wore, the silver and gold contrasted brightly against the pale blue of his skin. For such a simple design it was beautiful. Navaari's hand work was always stunning, he was not just one of the best of the Jhal'kai he was also an extremely talented artisan.

Thrawn had watched my face and ran his fingers through my hair. "Why did he choose gold and silver, usually such a piece would be silver and blue?"

I had grinned I knew the answer to that, "Well, we didn't get officially married under Dantassi laws, did we?" I asked although it was more statement than question.

"No. That would have meant too many complications that neither of us can afford at the moment."

I nodded my understanding. I had always been more about ship's engines and flying rather than I do and happily ever after. "Well, then Navaari was free to use what ever colours he wanted when he made this, and gold and silver are the male and female. You told him once that your thread and mine were bound together, so this is you and me, "I said as I traced my finger along the twist of the metal strands, "But this isn't a marriage band just a pledge bracelet so Da'hajn's thread is not required. He made it different so that it was special. Do you not like it?"

"It is beautiful." He agreed. "I was simply curious," he had said with a smile that told me he had been deeply touched by the thought that had gone into the bracelet.

"Well then, make sure you don't lose it!" I had told him.

He had chuckled. "No fear of that happening."

"You never know, it isn't closed it could slip off, and then someone else might decide to wear it."

He had shaken his head. "You live with the Dantassi all this time and you still do not unravel all of their secrets." He'd chuckled, "It is designed not to come off and even if I should remove it no one else could wear it, it is bio-linked to me alone, much in the same way as your bone mask."

"Bio linked?"

He had smiled then had slipped the bracelet off his wrist handing it to me. "Try to put it on."

I had taken it from his fingers and had done as he had asked trying to slide my wrist through the space between the two ends. I was surprised to discover I could not do it. Much in the same way a magnet repelled the like pole, the bracelet was pushed back from my wrist, making my fingers tingle a little to hold it. "How do they do this?"

"Nano technology embedded in the molecular structure of the metal, another Dantassi mystery. No one but I can wear this now. I knew that as soon as it was slipped on to my wrist. I felt the recognition as it made my skin tingle as the bio link process began."

"So you are bound to my bracelet." I had laughed, it sounded funny. "Does it code just to a person's DNA?"

"Mostly, but also to a person's particular cellular structure, recognition through all the chemical patterns in the individual's cells the unique bio entity it has been linked to. It is a clever and intricate process, one the Dantassi keep quiet about. They do not use it for many things because the process is complex but bonding jewellery and the bone masks are good examples of places where it is used. He made quite certain that I and only I could ever be the one to wear this particular piece."

"So do you think he put a tracer chip in it as well?" I had asked with a grin.

Thrawn had laughed, "I very much doubt it. Unlike you, my dear, I do not get lost and therefore do not need to be found."

I had just given him a look as I handed him back the bracelet, watching him slide it back on his wrist. I liked how the white-gold metal contrasted with his skin and it was small enough, slender enough to be mostly unobtrusive. Navaari had designed it that way, designed it to be worn under the sleeve of his Imperial Uniform so that no one would see it. Jewellery was considered non regulation and with one or two exceptions was not allowed to be worn while on duty, but many people still wore things like pendants that could be hidden underneath the clothing and for the most part no one said anything.

Thinking about uniforms and regulations made me think about Jorae. I knew that he had worn a necklace his mother had given him, a Corellian good luck charm. He had shown it to me once, telling me its history of having been passed down through the family for several generations. Thinking about Jorae made me realise that I did not know what had happened to him. I heaved myself out of the bath before I fell asleep in it. Drowning would have been a bad move on my part anyway. Wrapped in my favourite robe I sat at the desk in the small living area and accessed the computer. I was relieved to see that all my access codes still allowed me to get into some of the classified areas and with a deep breath I called up the reports on the Battle of Endor, specifically the casualty list.

There were thousands of names on this list. So many people had died at Endor that it seemed almost surreal. I went down the ship by ship listing until I found the *Executor*. For a brief moment my gut knotted but this was an old wound known and although it still hurt it was a dull ache rather than a sharp one. I was not surprised when I found Jorae's name amongst the listed dead. He had been on board the flagship at the time it had plunged into the Emperor's Battle station probably on duty at his listening post in the communications room. He had loved his job and had been so proud when he had been posted on board the *Executor*. Sorrow at reading his name there flooded through me. He had been my first friend after I began working for the Empire and although we had rarely seen each other once I was no longer working on board the Flag ship he had still kept in touch. He had been a kind likable young man with a sweet smile and a good heart and now, like so many others he was dead.

I sat reading through the names, almost all of them I did not know scanning for ones that were familiar to me and feeling a sense of loss and pain each time I found one that I could put a face to. I was grateful to realise that I had not seen C.J.'s name but when I did a data base search on him, nothing came up. I wondered where he was now and how he was doing and how he had felt about the Emperor's death, after all he had

been a part of the Royal Guard. Thrawn had told me that after the death of the Emperor, the Guardsmen had added a strip of black to the bottom of the red cloaks as a sign of mourning and respect. Isard had tried to make them take it off but they had simply ignored her. The Emperor's Royal Guard were not easily intimidated and who could blame them, after all next to the Emperor, Isard was a pale imitation of a ruler despite her cruelty and deviousness. While we were on Hjal, still stuck indoors due to the storm, Thrawn had talked about her taking over and the slow downward spiral that the Empire had taken under her command.

"She does not see the bigger picture," he had said as we lay awake in bed talking. "She looks for ways to gain revenge on an event that has irreversibly changed the course of history without realising this is like battling the wind. She would be much better off trying to work out a plan to consolidate the Imperial powers and gain better control over all the various factions out there now gearing up to fight for a piece of the Empire than trying to get back at the rebels for winning at Endor."

"Why does she not recall you to the Core?" I simply did not understand this at all.

He had given me a small laugh. "The short answer is that she fears I will wish to step in and take over, become the next ruler of the galaxy and claim the title of Emperor for myself." He had explained. "Personally that is not really a job I would wish to take on, I am more a war lord if anything and even that is a stretch. I have started to work on a plan that would hopefully bring the separate factions back in line and restore law and order to this very chaotic galaxy but I do not have the man power to execute it yet. We lost too many good men at Endor, and there have not been enough new recruits to fill the spaces left by the dead."

"I suppose this is where a clone army comes in handy." I had said as a joke but the sudden arching of his eyebrow told me that he had considered this idea and he wasn't laughing about it.

"Indeed." He had said, "The trouble with this idea is the amount of time it would take to grow a fully battle ready cloned army and the other problem is where to find the cloning equipment to do this. The Kaminoans could grow a clone to maturity in ten years but Kamino's cloning facility is no longer available. The Empire used Spaarti technology, cutting this growth time down to a year but where the Emperor placed the spaarti facilities is still unknown. He and a few trusted aides who are now all dead were the only ones who knew the locations of these facilities. The Emperor did not trust anyone lightly with his cloning information. I am still searching for locations but until then, our military numbers are too small to do much about the rising attacks of the various factions that want a piece of the Galactic pie. If things stay as they are I can foresee Coruscant falling, if not to the rebellion then to one of the other larger factions out there and that would be most undesirable."

I could not imagine Coruscant under the rule of someone else. It would forever be linked to the Emperor in my mind. He had imposed his will, his personality on that planet the way a sandstorm shapes the desert and undoing all that he had achieved would be a monumental task. Our conversation had drifted on to other things and sleep eventually over took us both, but the thought of clones and where the Emperor would

have created them nagged at me and, like the title of a half forgotten song, the answer was on the tip of my tongue.

Now as I sat staring absently at the computer screen I wondered about the idea of clones and where the Emperor might have hidden such facilities. The Emperor had been full of secrets and lies. I was certain that there were answers to be found on Coruscant, but exactly where and how to find them would be a whole other story, one I would have to think carefully about.

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The journey to Nirauan was a slow, uneventful and once I had caught up on my sleep, I spent the rest of it catching up on what had gone on in the galaxy. During the trip I saw Thrawn only a few times, usually when he was able to join me for dinner. Our discussions were mostly centered around the events of the last two and a half years. One of the biggest surprises had been reading about the capture of Soontir Fel at Brentaal IV.

Brentaal IV, a small, dry world, was the fourth planet in the Brentaal system of the Bormea Sector of the Core Worlds and sat at the strategic intersection of the Perlemian Trade Route and the Hydian Way. It was a wealthy world, with a thriving economy making it attractive for investors and traders. During the Emperor's rule it was governed by a man named Lon Isoto, a weak minded leader who was known mainly for his ineffectual leadership style and his greed for pleasurable things.

Thrawn's lip had curled in disgust when he had spoken of Isoto and I could not blame him. It was primarily Isoto's fault that Brentaal IV had fallen to the Rebellion, now calling itself the New Republic, as he had essentially given up the planet without much of a fight. It had only been the 181st, under the command of Soontir Fel that had offered any hope of protection from the raiding rebels but even they had not been able to win. The debacle discredited the ruling Cabal and Sate Pestage which, Thrawn had postulated, had been Isard's plan all along.

"What happened to Isoto?" I asked as we sat in the quiet of the small dining room eating supper.

"He was apparently shot by one of his concubines," Thrawn replied. "At first he was reviled as a coward but the Imperial propaganda machine marches onward but now, part in thanks to the rumour that Fel actually defected to the New Republic and Rogue Squadron, he is considered a hero."

"Fel? Did he really defect?"

"Yes and no," Thrawn answered carefully. "I do not believe that he would have allowed himself to fail deliberately in order to join the other side, but I believe once he realised that he and his men had been sent in on what was essentially a suicide mission in order for Isard to gain more power from Pestage he decided the Empire was no longer upholding the same ideals it once was and that corruption was not an honourable master to serve. I am quite certain it did not hurt him any that he is married to Wynssa Starflare who happens to be the sister of Rogue Squadron leader Wedge Antilles. I believe that part of his reason for the defection was to gain safety for his wife." Thrawn paused to stare at his glass, "Men often do foolish things in order to protect the people

the love and care for, especially their families." He added, giving me a pointed look. "Isard was trying to overthrow the Cabal. She felt that as the current ruling body of the Empire it was useless and riddled with counterproductive bickering and politics. She was vying for power that would set her up as the next Empress, so to speak. Perhaps she does not use this title for herself but she wanted to be the sole ruler of the Empire and she was willing to do what ever it took to have this power even if that meant sacrificing the best pilots we had at the time to do so."

I sighed. Why did it always come down to this petty bickering about who had the bigger title? "Well now she has what she wants and the Empire is still being eaten away bit by bit." I grumbled.

"A leader who is only concerned about their own power gain is not a leader at all," Thrawn replied tartly. "Power is not taken but given and no one gives her anything freely."

"So why don't you just remove her then?"

"All in good time, my dear. All in good time."

Sate Pestage, accused by Isard of treason after the debacle at Brentaal, had fled Coruscant to seek refuge from her and the Cabal. He was arrested by Leonia Tavira, a Corsair ship captain and held pending the arrival of Admiral Krennel who had been given the job of bringing Pestage back to Coruscant to stand trial. The details of what happened are somewhat sketchy but there was a fairly large battle between the Imperials under Krennel and the New Republic's Rogue Squadron who it seemed felt that rescuing Pestage would be a good thing to do. When all was said and done, Pestage was dead along with Tribune Caller and Plumba, two members of the Cabal ruling council. Once the last member of the Cabal was captured and imprisoned, Isard was free to assume full command of the Empire, which she did so with no let or hindrance from anyone else, making her the most powerful woman in the Galaxy.

Some months after this incident rumours began to surface that the Pestage Isard had killed was not the real one and was in fact a clone. Around the same time other more strange stories about the Emperor began to surface from the Deep Core which led to whispers that he was still alive. These stories led to Thrawn's old supervisor, Dark Jedi Inquisitor Jerec to be charged with finding the secret Valley of the Jedi, a place of supposed great power and secrets. If the Emperor had found a way to clone himself and revive his spirit I did not sense it and as no one actually ever saw him I suspected the stories were the fabrications of pilots who had spent too much time in Deep Core space and who were now no longer quite right in the head. Still this did not stop the publications of books that were supposedly the works of the long dead emperor himself.

"Do you happen to have a copy of these works?" I had asked Thrawn.

"I thought you might ask. I have managed to procure the first volume," He had smiled and later on had handed me a small pile of data chips. "It is wordy and mostly rambles about a long dead religion and its many permutations. You might find it of interest given your talents in the areas discussed."

I had looked at the data pads with a mixture of distaste and disbelief. "Do you think it is true? He really is not dead and has just vanished off to some remote world to become an author instead?"

Thrawn had arched an eyebrow. "You were the one having dreams of him being reborn in a different body, you tell me."

I had just shrugged, "If he is alive somehow I don't understand why he doesn't announce it and come back to take his place as Emperor again."

"I cannot answer that, but perhaps those might," Thrawn had answered, nodding to the pile of data pads I touched gingerly. "If nothing else, reading all of those will keep you out of trouble for the duration of the journey to Nirauan."

The book was indeed lengthy and it did ramble but as I had read through it goose bumps had rippled up and down my spine. I did not think there was another being alive in the universe with his knowledge of the Dark side of the force. If these were forgeries and fakes then they were very, very good. I could almost hear the Emperor's voice whispering in my ear as I read words so familiar it was as though he were sitting next to me reciting them rather than me reading them. The Emperor had often lectured me on how he saw the Force and its uses. He had provided for me a secret library so that I might learn more and become better skilled in my own small force abilities. He had had plans for me and I had shivered at the terrible memory of our last meeting. If he was truly still alive, and had somehow managed to cheat death, I did not want to know about it. I was not so sure that if he were still around I would be able to escape him a second time.

In the two and a half years after the Battle of Endor the power that held the galactic empire together had fractured. Isard's power base was constantly being challenged by Moff's and war lords who felt she was neither strong enough nor deserving enough to lead the once mighty Empire. The petty squabbles and bickering were more to blame for the advances the New Republic made in heading towards Coruscant than anything else. The Empire's forces were divided, its troops spread thin and the once vast and powerful fleet reduced greatly in size.

"They will come for Coruscant, make no mistake." Thrawn said, "Some months ago there was an attempt by the New Republic to liberate Borleias which failed. There has been another subsequent attack which was also unsuccessful. I believe that the fight for the core has begun in earnest."

"Why don't you go and try to stop this?" I asked this question so many times I was beginning to feel like a stuttering holovid.

Thrawn only sighed. "I have told you, I do not have the man power and I will not waste what precious resources I do have to save a world that Isard should have taken care of," he said, "And even if I did have all I needed, Isard would only see this as an attempt on my part to usurp her power. I have other plans and I am hoping that she is smart enough to see what might happen were she to let her guard down."

"If Coruscant falls to the New Republic it would mean the end of the Empire all together."

Thrawn's smile was nasty enough to send shivers down my spine. "Hardly, my dear. The Empire is an idea. One may occupy a planet to remove the current governing body but it is more difficult to replace an idea. I have said this before; this fledgling New Republic will not find governing an entire divided galaxy so easy. Forming a coup and bringing down a ruler is relatively easy in comparison to setting up the next government

that functions in its place. I know for a fact that they will have serious problems getting along with each other well enough to form any sort of coherent ruling body based on a democracy. The Bothans alone will make this job almost impossible."

I nodded. Bothans were a race of beings known for their ability for subterfuge. Officially they had remained neutral during the primary conflict with the Empire but unofficially they were the reason for so much information trafficking. It was a well known fact that Bothans made excellent spies and politicians. The problem was that they not only excelled in this area they let everyone know about it as well, constantly reminding anyone who would listen that they were willing to sacrifice everything to help out. I had never had many dealings with Bothans but the few encounters I had unfortunately had with them had left me angry and frustrated. Bothans were amongst the most bureaucratic and officious beings I had ever encountered, able to twist words and deeds until they always came out looking like the victims or the good guys depending on which situation suited them better. After a particularly frustrating encounter with a Bothan working at the Ministry of Pilot licensing and Applications Division I swore to stay the hell away from them for the rest of my life. Now it seemed that Bothans had managed to make themselves an important part of the New Republic's ruling body. Served the Rebels right, I thought nastily. Dealing with Bothans was a pain in the rear and I didn't envy the New Republic this job one bit.

"So what do you think is going to happen next?" I asked.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly with his left shoulder. "My guess is that the New Republic will make another attempt to take Borleias and if that happens they will advance forward to the Core. Ultimately they have to retake Coruscant if they are to have any validation as the seat of power for the galaxy."

"Do you think that will happen?"

"I hope not but that will depend on Isard. I can only hope that she has devised a plan that will keep Coruscant out of the hands of the New Republic but even if the Core World falls, it is not the end of things," he said, "The New Republic wants Coruscant. They see having dominion over this world as a sign that they are meant to take over rule of the galaxy. It is a symbol more than an actual power base. Coruscant has always been considered the center of the galaxy, and as such, the seat of power for the ruling body. To have ownership of this planet would give the New Republic the advantage of perceived power but again, they are divided amongst themselves and weak in terms of military might. Even in its lessened state the New Republic is no match for the Imperial navy. The bigger problem for us is lack of true and insightful leadership. Too many good men and women were lost at Endor and insufficient funds and time have gone into training new leaders. The current ones are too focused on personal gain to be effective in their positions and until this changes I do not see us winning against the New Republic's current push towards taking Coruscant which they see as the foundation for a new era of rule."

"I still think you should just go and take over," I said crossly. This whole discussion annoyed me. It was all sneak attacks and back room politics.

Thrawn smiled, "I know you do and the thought is not without its appeal but in reality it is simply not as easy as that. Isard lies to me about the status of things hoping it will placate me into staying where I am. I know she lies she is aware of this but we play



the game never the less. I send her requests for more troops and she denies this on the grounds that they are spread too thin as it is, I send requisitions for supplies and somehow the requisitions get lost in the shuffle. Fortunately for us I am resourceful and have established a solid base out in the Unknown Regions. I do not need supplies from the core when I have what I need out here. The manpower shortage will be dealt with as soon as I find a way to re-establish cloning without all the subsequent problems that arise from this method of growing troops quickly. In the end it all comes down to numbers and strategy and time. The first item on that list is a problem the second two things I have in abundance."

"I wonder if there is anything in the Imperial Palace Archives about clones," I said softly. "There must be information in the Emperor's files somewhere."

"I am certain there is, my dear, but getting to them would be most difficult."

"But not impossible. I *could* probably do this you know."

Thrawn regarded me with a steady gaze. "You are not a spy and such a mission would be highly dangerous."

"I know my way around the palace better than most, probably even better than Isard does. I have been well trained in the art of Jhal'kai and I can fight to the death if I have to, though really I'd prefer not to do that. I know some of the secrets the Emperor kept, I've seen some of them myself. I remember the way to get to these rooms. You know I would do this for you, if you'd let me."

His stare burned but I did not look away and in the end he simply nodded. "I will consider it."

We had discussed this before and the last time his answer had been the same. I backed down knowing that the memory of almost losing me was still fresh enough that he wasn't about to let me go charging off on my own without a fully formed plan to follow first. I hoped he would not take too long to consider what I had offered. I was fairly certain, given the reports I had read, that we were running out of time and that Isard was going to do something more stupid than smart. That was the trouble with megalomaniacs, they were so busy worrying about how to hold onto their power they didn't notice it trickling through their fingers, like sand, one tiny grain at a time.

"Don't look so worried, Tekari," Thrawn said breaking into my thoughts by reaching out to caress the side of my face. "I have things well in hand."

In that moment I believed him. He was a man who could do just about anything in near impossible odds; I had seen this before with my own eyes but the sense of unease remained.

"We have plenty time to plan on how to hold Coruscant and turn this tide back again." He added as he turned his attention back to his spiced 'caf.

Sadly, this was not the case and by the time word would reach him of what Isard had done it was already too late.

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Nirauan was every bit as odd and as cold as I remembered it to be. An arboreal world which orbited a weak red giant it was primarily covered in jungles and lakes. The

base, which Thrawn had set up, was located in a pre existing building that had been made from a stone which absorbed energy. It had been Voss Parck who had initially called the base 'the Hand of Thrawn' as a joke, a play on the fact that the five towers which made up the stone structure vaguely resembled the fingers on a hand reaching for the sky. Over the years the base had been added to and modified to be a formidable hideout, with the highest tower serving as the command center. It reminded me greatly of the bridge of Lord Vader's Super Star Destroyer, not from a size point of view but from a technical standpoint. Had anyone from the New Republic managed to sneak a look at this base they would have shuddered in fear. What the base lacked in man power it made up for in technological advantages. Thrawn's ability to use and combine other species' technology was astounding and the engineers he had working under him had worked miracles.

The last time I had been on Nirauan I had not been in a particularly good state of mind. This time I saw it with different eyes and had been more than impressed as Thrawn had given me a fairly in depth tour of the entire facility. The base itself was remarkable, if the Empire had been as well run as this place was it would never have fallen. The end of the tour had coincided with the Med-lab where much to both my surprise and Thrawn's Doctor Thracer had greeted me with a surprising enthusiasm.

"Well, Miss Gabriel, Look at you!" He exclaimed as he clasped me by my shoulders. "I see that planet he shipped you off to suited you well. Welcome back. I hear you will be staying with us for a while now."

I nodded.

"Good," he said, "now I have someone to play dejarik with who won't always beat me in three moves!"

I wasn't sure if that had been a compliment or not but that he was happy to see me made it perfectly okay either way. I had not expected his warm welcome and for the first time since stepping foot on Nirauan I felt as though I might have a place here after all. At least, I had thought as we had left the med lab so he could show me my quarters and my office, I have one friend here already.

The rooms designated for me to use as an office and a language classroom were located on the other side of the compound in the South East tower. The office was nice and the class room suitable to teaching a group of people up to ten or so. I was dubious about the whole language teaching thing but I kept my doubts to myself.

"You have computer access and there is a library as well. What you need will be provided for you within reason." Thrawn said, breaking the silence as I stood just inside the small room staring at it, trying to imagine me as a language instructor. The image was coming to mind. While I had taught basic to some of the Dantassi it had been an informal thing, this was going to be a whole other game and I wasn't sure I liked the idea of it. I suppose he read my uncertainty on my face because he smiled. "You will do fine," he said.

I just glanced at him and shrugged in a way that said *whatever*. "So how about you show me where I will actually be living," I said which made him smile again.

Thrawn's personal living quarters were located in the North West tower, separate and quiet from the rest of the habitat areas of the base and far away from his official

work area and offices. He had decided that it would be best if I were to live in the same place and I had been surprised to see that my rooms, though separate, adjoined his.

"You are my bond mate, Tekari," he said frankly. "While I do not see any reason to actively advertise this fact, it is not a secret and sooner or later people here will figure out that you and I are a couple if they have not done so already. There are others here who have their mates with them and, although at the moment it is not exactly a desirable thing due to circumstances, perhaps there might even be a place for families here one day."

His explanation surprised me a little but it also made sense. On board his ship he was distant, always on duty but being on Nirauan allowed him some personal time and I supposed that made the difference. I was not going to complain. I had not come here simply to be a language instructor or anything else, for that matter, I had come here to be with him.

The rooms I had been given were surprisingly spacious and light with a view that overlooked the forest to the West. While sparsely decorated I could see it was a place I could come to like, and perhaps, given enough time, even call home. Though, I thought ruefully, really where ever Thrawn was, was home to me. I noticed that my belongings had already been brought to my rooms and all that remained for me to do was to unpack and settle in. It would take me a little while to adjust to Nirauan local time, unlike on all the Imperial ships which all ran on Coruscant Standard Time this planet had a twenty-nine hour day and a six day week. The planet had a steady, circular orbit which allowed for little variations in seasonal changes. According to Thrawn at the moment it was autumn, or as close to it as was possible. The temperatures were a little cooler and it rained more often. I didn't mind rain. It was still a novelty for me to see water fall from the sky and I loved the scent of damp foliage and wet soil which always accompanied such weather. I glanced at the chrono on the wall, it was the middle of the afternoon planet side but for me it still felt like early morning. I was in desperate need of stim'caf.

"The training facility is open to you and there is a swimming pool in the subbasement." He continued and then added with a sly smile, "You still remember how to swim don't you?"

"I think I can manage not to drown, if that's what you are asking," I said as I began to open my bags and unpack my clothes. "I don't happen to have any swim wear with me though. I don't suppose this planet has a ladies wear boutique near by?"

"No I am afraid we are rather lacking in a viable commercial district but we do have a passable tailor who might be able to create something suitable for you. He is no Cati but he is skilled in his craft."

"You have a tailor here?" I asked.

Thrawn nodded. "Yes, it was easier than trying to continually requisition clothing supplies from the Core. We acquire the materials from local systems to produce most of what we require here on the base. It saves time and makes us more efficient. Ordering and obtaining many supplies from the Core was next to impossible not to mention an enormous waste of time and resources before the Emperor's death, now it is an impossibility so we became self sufficient."

It made perfect sense. Reliance on the Core for supplies was time consuming. I just had not really given it much thought before. "Well, I guess I will have to meet with him then."

"That can be arranged, my dear."

"What about going outside?" I asked.

"Well," He said carefully, "I will not restrict you if that is what you are asking but this world is wild for the most part and we have not yet been able to catalogue much of the indigenous life forms so I would not recommend leaving the base unarmed and alone." He turned to look out of the window. "There are some avian creatures, mostly considered a pest, which dwell both in the underground caverns and on the cliffs nearby. As far as I have been able to assess they are nonthreatening and for the most part stay out of our way. There have, however, been incidents with an insect that also makes its home in the caverns. They travel in swarms and devour just about anything living, as far as we can tell. We lost several good men to them so I would prefer that you stay out of the caves."

"Insects? Swarms of flesh eating insects?" I shivered. That sounded like something out of a really bad horror holovid.

He nodded.

"Is there anything in these caves worth seeing that would make ignoring your request worthwhile?"

His lip twitched in amusement. "Not especially."

"Then I suppose I can give them a miss," I said.

"I would be grateful if you would," he said, "Please do not go out alone. While I trust that you can take care of yourself I'd prefer not to have to waste time or man power on a search party should I be wrong in this."

I nodded. Surprisingly enough I had learned my lesson in that particular arena. "This teaching thing won't be full time will it?" I asked.

"No, depending on what schedule works best for you, perhaps a few hours a day or every two days."

"Then I will need something else to do in between," I said, "I don't suppose you need a personal assistant, do you?"

Thrawn smiled. "From time to time, I dare say I could use your skills in this area, but this would also not be a full time job. However I have given some thought as to how to keep you occupied and out of trouble. I have told my chief grounds mechanic of your skills with ships and engines; he assured me that should you wish a place on his staff you would be more than welcome. He can always use a certified mechanic and you are more than qualified, my dear."

I smiled at that, somehow it felt as though I had come full circle. I had been working as a mechanic when I was handed the job working for Lord Vader and now, after nearly seven years I felt as though I was right back to where I had started from, well almost. It was a good thing I liked working on ships' engines.

"Well, I will go and speak with him; I'd like to get the *Sigiri* sorted out."

Thrawn nodded, "Yes I thought you might. It would be of use to have another Imperial shuttle in operation; although she is your ship I am sure you would not mind occasionally doing some flying for me, would you?"

I glanced up at him, "That would depend on where you wanted me to fly to I suppose."

He paused for a moment giving me a look I could not decipher then replied carefully. "Well at some point soon you will be returning to Coruscant to pick up some things from the flat there as well as your old place in the Palace. Perhaps along the way you might also need to clear out your old office as well."

I regarded him carefully for a moment and then said, "So you're going to allow me to go back there after all to do some digging?"

"Yes, I thought about it and decided that your idea has some merit. I will send a message to Isard letting her know that you might be returning to clear your office there so that you might work full time for me. This way, when you decide to return to the Core, she will not have any reason to impede your stay there." His answer was casual but his stare was not.

"Do you think she will be suspicious?"

"Of course she will be, she is suspicious everyone and everything. She did not get to be the head of Intel and the leader of this Empire by being naïve and trusting, but you, my dear, have certain talents that will aid you in alleviating her of these suspicions I am sure."

"If you are talking about twisting her mind, that won't be happening. Being able to give suggestions to a person only works on the weak minded and she is not weak minded."

He nodded his agreement. "No she is not but I am sure that after working in close proximity with Darth Vader a face to face meeting with Isard will not prove terribly challenging to you. And, I am sure there is enough for you to do to keep your reasons for returning to the Core straight and believable."

"How much time do I have to prepare?"

"As long as you need."

"That is not very specific." I chided.

He sighed. "Well, I want you to design a lesson plan for teaching basic so that I can get it added to the duty schedule and I thought it best if you repair your shuttle as that would be the ship I think you should fly to Coruscant in," he said, "So I guess it will depend on how long it will take you to repair the *Sigiri*."

"Well, I haven't seen her yet. So that depends on how badly she was damaged and the availability of parts." I shrugged, "I got the impression from Voss that she was in damned bad shape but at the time, to be honest I was not thinking very clearly so I don't know what needs to be done off the top of my head."

Thrawn nodded slowly. "Well, let me know when she is space ready."

I just stared at him for a long moment. "You are not happy about this idea are you?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you letting me go do it then?"

"Because I need your help in this matter and you are the best chance I have to obtain information that is not tainted or simply Isard's propaganda."

"Don't you have any spies on Coruscant at all?" My curiosity was getting the better of me.

"Yes I do, but I assure you none have the vast knowledge you have of the palace layout and none have the opportunity you have to simply waltz in the front door more or less welcome."

I nodded, toying with my necklace. "I have some ideas about where to find information she might not know about."

"I trust that you will be subtle and professional, that you do not wish to end up incarcerated or worse. The Lusankya Detention Center is not a very welcoming place." He warned.

I nodded. It was not my plan to end up in prison or dead. "I will be careful, I promise," I said then added, "You won't be sorry."

He made a face which said *I am not so sure about that* and then tilted his head slightly to one side. "I will be giving you dispatches to take to Isard, updates and information she has been asking for. It will make this trip seem more legitimate. When you are ready, I will be sending the ISD *Fearless* to Bilbringi for supplies, you will travel with them and once they are in orbit, you may fly the *Sigiri* on to Coruscant with an appropriate accompaniment," he held up his hand before I could protest, "It would look odd if I were to allow you to fly solo with no protection at all, you will be carrying Imperial dispatches with valuable information, armed guard is a must so there will be no discussion on this. Do not try to talk Captain Grayson out of this either because he will be under orders to make sure this happens or else shoot you."

"Okay." I agreed after a moment unsure if he was actually joking about the shooting part or not.

"We can discuss the details of this mission once you have settled in a bit," He replied the hardness in his voice softening a little. "Will you feel up to joining myself and Voss for dinner this evening?"

"That would be nice," I said, "I need to speak with him anyway, I owe him an apology."

"Yes, you do," he said a little more tartly than I expected he meant to but it hurt anyway. I suppose it showed on my face because he reached out and caressed my cheek in a way that said *I didn't mean that to sound so harsh*. I just smiled and leaned into his touch. It felt good to be so close after the cool separation on the *Grey Wolf*.

"I'm sleeping with you in your bed tonight, you know." I told him as I pulled away to finish up my unpacking.

His smile reached his eyes. "I had expected as much."

"As long as that's settled. What time is dinner?"

"Oh nineteen hundred hours in my private dining room," he replied. "Wear something nice but it's not formal."

"I think I can manage that."

"Very well, my dear. I will leave you to settle in. If you need me I'll be in my office. If you need anything else just ask the Quarter Master, he knows you're here and he's been told to assist you in any way he can," he said giving me an absent kiss on the cheek before he headed out.

I sat down on the bed, amidst the remnants of my unpacking and let out the breath I felt I had been holding since forever. Coruscant, I had not been there in over two years and now I would be going back not just to pick up the remaining pieces of my

life there but to hopefully set up some sort of spy network for Thrawn so that he could obtain information from the Core without Isard censoring it first. The prospect was a little daunting. I was certain this could be done but I would need some help. I hoped that Shiv was up to the job and then smiled. His last holo vid to me had been light hearted and full of news from everyone I knew but I had read between the lines easily enough and I knew he was worried. He did not like Isard and he did not like what she was doing as leader of the Empire. With a sigh I heaved myself off the bed and put away the last of my things. I had not actually expected Thrawn to allow me to do this and now that he had I had needed to think about it, because this would require some planning and some work. I was glad we had brought the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* from Hjal, she contained a copy of the exacting blue prints of the Palace and the old Jedi Temple that I had once found in the small, secret library the Emperor had granted me access to. Thrawn did not have to tell me twice to be careful or consider well what I was going to do, if he thought I would find a face to face meeting with Isard easier than working for Lord Vader then he was sadly mistaken, I was terrified of Iceheart and with good reason where Lord Vader had been hot headed and bad tempered she was cold and cruel and unlike Lord Vader she saw no value in me what so ever. She would not hesitate to have me shot or worse if she thought I was going against her will.

I shuddered at the prospect and then, because I really didn't know what else to do, I went off in search of some stim'caf and the docking bay to check out just how much work the *Sigiri* needed. At least that was something I could do to keep me occupied and out of trouble until dinner time.

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It was just past four in the morning when Thrawn's comm went off waking us both up. He got up with the ease of those used to being woken up to deal with situations that required instant awareness and answered the comm.

"Yes?"

"Grand Admiral, I am sorry to disturb you but the news could not wait." It was Voss Parck and there was an edge to his voice that suddenly had me also on alert.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Sir, we just got word that Borleias has fallen."

There was a moment of weighted silence in the bedroom and then Thrawn moved. "On my way," he said crisply. I sat up, hugging my knees watching him. Light from the low moon filtered into the room illuminating his body as he dressed. "Go back to sleep, Sji'u Tekari, there is nothing you can do."

"This is sooner than you predicted." I commented, ignoring his instructions. I was also wide awake now; even if I wanted to I could not return to sleep.

He nodded. "Yes. I am guessing that incompetence on the part of whoever was in charge of the garrison on that planet is in part to blame."

"What will you do?"

As he fastened his white uniform jacket he glanced at me, the red glow of his eyes seemed brighter, sharper in the dark. "I do not know yet."

"Coruscant will be next?" I asked although it wasn't really a question and I already knew the answer I just wanted to hear him confirm it.

"I am certain of it," he replied, "It is simply a matter of when and how."

I nodded. Hearing him say this made it real and suddenly I was afraid. "I have friends on Coruscant, people I care about," I said quietly, thinking of Shiv and Cati.

"I know."

"If you want me to go to the Core using the *Sigiri* I still need ...."

He held up his hand. "I know that as well, but even I cannot make space travel any faster," he said with a touch of impatience. "Go back to sleep. There is nothing you can do to help this situation."

"I could make you spiced 'caf," I said swinging my legs over the edge of the bed to sit up. I wasn't even remotely sleepy now.

His gave me one of his rare smiles. "I retract my statement then, that would be a help indeed and I am certain that Voss would not complain either. We will be in the command briefing chamber," he said giving me a light kiss on the cheek before heading out.

Borleias was considered an important planet in terms of the fight for the Core. Now the New Republic fighters would push for Coruscant, just as Thrawn had predicted and I was scared for my friends. If the battles I had seen had been anything to go by, an invasion of Coruscant would not be pretty. I sighed as I got up and headed for the shower, this was going to get ugly, I could feel it in my bones.

Once I was clean and dressed I made my way to the small kitchen and prepared a large carafe of Spiced 'caf. It had become something of a treat for Thrawn and the officers who enjoyed it and I didn't mind making it since I liked to drink it as well. Once I had delivered the tray to the briefing room, I went to the hanger.

"Morning Miss, you're up early." The deck officer on duty said as I walked into the hanger bay.

I smiled. "Couldn't sleep, figured I'd get some work done here," I said nodding to where the *Sigiri* sat.

He grinned back. "No matter how hard you stare at her, Miss, that ship's hyperdrive will not magically come back to life."

I returned his grin. It had become a running joke that if I could have created a new hyperdrive just by wishing alone it would have happened a dozen times over. I had known that her engines were shot. It was a wonder that she had made it to Nirauan at all considering the extent of the actual damage. I had hoped I could repair them on my own but as it turned out, while the sublight engine could be fixed with a lot of work, the hyperdrive was completely beyond repair and I needed a new one. There were no spare class one hyperdrive engines to be had on Nirauan so that meant waiting on a supply ship from Bilbringi. The waiting was driving me crazy.

"I know." I told him. "But miracles sometimes do happen."

He just shook his head. "If you are looking for something to do there are a couple of TIEs that need attention," he said breaking into my thoughts. I laughed. TIE fighters always needed attention.



"Well, I guess it is a good thing that I can't sleep then," I said and I went to pick up my tool kit. Thrawn had been right about the need for mechanics and the Chief engineer had been more than happy to have me onboard as part of his pit crew.

I had been on Nirauan for almost four weeks and for the most part things had been relatively quiet. Once I knew that I couldn't fix the *Sigiri* and that I would not be allowed to rip the hyperdrive out of one of the other shuttles I settled down to a routine of teaching language classes three times a week and the rest of the time helped out in the pit. As I had feared, teaching basic to a small group of taciturn Chiss was not a lot of fun. At first they had not really wanted to be taught but were there because Thrawn had ordered them to be there, however things changed a little once they found out I could speak their language. I had not let this secret out of the box, hoping to teach Basic by simply speaking it. Sometimes total immersion was the best way to go but the Chiss, as well as being brilliant, were also incredibly stubborn and while they attended the classes they did not go out of their way to learn a language they considered to be beneath them. They were fluent enough in many of the Outer Rim trade languages so learning basic was not high on their list of priorities. They all did just enough work that I could not bitch about them to Thrawn and for the first week we got nowhere fast. During the second week's classes I got fed up of the whispers in Cheunh, and when one snide comment was made, just loud enough for me to hear it I lost my temper and hurled an insult of equal nastiness right back at the young man who had made the joke. The silence in the room was deafening and then one of the others broke it.

"You speak and understand our language?" He had asked in utter astonishment.

I had nodded.

"Why did you not say this?" Another had asked.

"Why should I have to, I am here to teach you Basic, not chit chat in Cheunh."

"Why should we learn Basic at all?"

"Because all knowledge is worth having and the more languages you speak the more knowledge you will accumulate." I replied. "The Admiral believes that by learning the most common language spoken in this Galaxy you will have a distinct advantage. Not learning it because you don't like it is foolish." I had told them all tartly. My temper had gotten the better of me and I was too annoyed to consider the fact that by Chiss standards I was being rude.

"Most non Chiss do not even try to speak our tongue, it is too difficult for them but you have learned well."

"I had a very good teacher and I wanted to learn more about your culture. In order to do that learning the language was tantamount. No language is beneath me, all serve to teach. Your prejudice against Basic does not serve you or Grand Admiral Thrawn well at all."

The younger one who had made the joke in the first place had nodded. "Well, if you can learn our tongue then I will try to learn yours."

After that things had gotten easier and I was greatly relieved. Still, I was glad when the class was over and I could head back to my favourite place, the engineering pit, and relax by fixing ships. It was the one thing in my life that felt uncomplicated.

About four hours after I had begun working on one of the TIEs that needed some repair, hunger and the need for stim'caf got the better of me. I had just finished putting my tools away and was about to head to the mess when my comm beeped.

"Miss Gabriel? The Grand Admiral wishes to see you in the briefing room right away."

"Roger." I nodded although the person that belonged to the voice could not see it and made my way to the other side of the compound.

Thrawn stood with his back to the door, arms behind his back, staring out of the window reminding me sharply of Lord Vader. For a split second a wave of sorrow flashed through me and I was surprised that after all this time I still felt his loss so keenly. In spite of his temper and his violent nature I missed Lord Vader and his strange force presence in my life. It still felt as though he had yanked a piece of my soul from my body when he had severed the tie between us. Sometimes I dreamed of him but these dreams were mostly incoherent jumbles made up from memories rather than the eerie flashes into the future that I sometimes got.

"The *Dark Wing* will arrive in twenty seven hours. I have confirmed she is carrying a class one hyperdrive for the Sigiri and some spares as well as two back up engine, class ten. How long will it take you to refit the shuttle?"

"About twelve hours if I have some help," I said, and then added. "And if there are no complications."

"This includes a test run?"

"No." I told him.

"So how long before she would be space worthy?"

"In theory, two days if all went well, longer if there are problems."

"You're hedging," he said coolly.

"Well, that's because a hyperdrive is a pain in the rear to replace with all the right dock equipment which we don't have here so it will take longer. I have already been through one ship disaster I don't think you or I want another."

He sighed, I watched as his shoulders heaved. "I have the ISD *Fearless* on standby and as soon as you are ready to go I would like you to leave." He still had not turned around to face me and I could hear both anger and worry in his voice.

"The news from Borleias is that bad?" I asked.

There was a moment of silence and then he turned around. "I believe it will not be long before the New Republic push to take Coruscant and I am concerned that Isard has not done enough to secure the core planet or the Imperial Palace. If it falls I would prefer to have more information rather than less. You tell me you can help and I believe you." He was furious. Now that I could see his face I could read just how deep the anger went but that didn't make sense. The capture of Borleias had been expected so there was something else which had stirred his ire.

I nodded and for a moment we just stared at each other. "What is it?" I finally asked.

He picked up a data pad off the desk and handed it to me. "You should read this."

I sighed as I sat down in the chair in front of his desk and trigger the data pad. I read through the report puzzled, there was nothing out of the ordinary here to make Thrawn so angry. The planet had fallen surprisingly enough to a small squadron of X-

Wings. The now infamous Rogue Squadron. According to the report, they had come at the planet from the moon's side using one of the system's meteor showers to hide their approach and then had destroyed the main power supply conduit which allowed the rebels to gain control of the base. I glanced up at Thrawn wondering what it was that had him so riled up but he said nothing instead he gave me a look that said *come on find it, you are not so stupid that I need to spell it out for you*, so I scanned back to the start of the report and began to read it again.

I found what he wanted me to but I couldn't believe it. "This report is dated almost two standard weeks ago."

His jaw clenched in anger.

"How is this possible? You should have been given this information as soon as it this happened. I know that the holonet system is not that reliable out here but a runner could have delivered a message in less than two days."

"Isard obfuscates the truth at every turn, hoping to keep me from interfering in her pursuit of galactic domination but she is throwing it all away. This information was deliberately withheld long enough to make it of little use to plan any sort of retaliation." He spat the last few words out and I tried to recall the last time I had seen him this angry, if I recalled correctly it had been shortly before he had sent me away with Navaari.

I looked at him and set the data pad on the desk. Time was running out and we both knew it. Waiting for a hyperdrive seemed pointless to me, especially since any information he received from official channels seemed to be falsified or worse withheld until it was too late. "I can fly the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* to Coruscant," I said, "Go on world as a civilian. Isard doesn't have to know *how* I arrived on the planet does she?"

"The HWK is a fine ship but I would much prefer you had some back up in terms of fire power, it is not the best time to be flying solo in the galaxy at this time." He countered.

I shook my head. "I disagree. Imperial ships are now prime targets, and a lambda shuttle, even one with teeth, is no match for a rebel cruiser or a battle ship. I could probably out run an X-wing, maybe two but not a whole squadron. I'm not a trained combat pilot and I would not want to try and test my skills against those who are. I understand you are worried about me going off alone but I think I'd be safer in a civilian ship, especially one as antique as mine instead of an Imperial ship with an over abundance of fire power. I am, after all, a civilian pilot. I have the papers to prove it."

He stared at me for a moment then turned back to the window. He knew that I was right and I was certain that this idea had also occurred to him, he just didn't want to use it, or me. Attachments... they sure had a way of bugging up well laid plans but I knew that Thrawn could set his aside and see the bigger picture at work. The situation had changed significantly since we had devised the original plan for my return to the Core. An Imperial escort would be a hindrance now, not an asset and he knew this. I was just saying out loud what we were both thinking.

"I do not like you going alone," he said after a long, weighty silence.

"I could get help." I countered.

"Who?"

"My uncle Vahlek," I said thoughtfully.

"The Tze'yusha'Jin?" Thrawn's eyebrow arched in surprise, he had not considered my uncle at all.

"Can you think of anyone better suited?" I asked mirroring the raised eyebrow with one of my own.

When he pursed his lips I knew I had won. "Alright if you think you can convince him to aide you then I suggest we discuss a plan because if I know you, you haven't exactly thought this through."

I smiled a little. "What is there to think through? I make it up as I go along."

"Yes and that is what scares me the most." He retorted.

I sighed. "Okay, but can we do this over breakfast?"

"Haven't you eaten anything?" He asked in surprise.

"No, someone got me up at four a.m. which isn't exactly breakfast time." I retorted making a face. I wasn't the biggest breakfast eater anyway and the thought of food at such an early hour was repulsive. I had to work up to the thought of eating first thing in the morning.

"I did tell you to go back to sleep." Thrawn replied smugly.

"As if that was going to happen! Anyway, I am in dire need of decent stim'caf, the stuff they make in the pit could be used as coolant fluid!"

His lip twitched in an almost smile. "As well as a shower. As usual, you are covered in engine grease."

I frowned, wiping at my nose, making the grease spot worse. He shook his head in the manner of those who had long given up. "Go and get cleaned up, my dear and we will discuss these matters over breakfast in my private dining room. While I think your ideas have merit I want more than just spur of the moment making it up as you go along. If you are going to do this for me you need to have a well thought out plan and some backups in case things go wrong because knowing you, things will go wrong."

I just grinned and nodded. While the idea of heading back to Coruscant for a possible face off with Isard was worrisome, the idea of getting away from frustrating language classes and a planet full of flesh eating insects to seeing my friends again was exciting and if I was brutally honest I could not wait to go. I loved being with Thrawn but Nirauan was not exactly the center of the universe and I could feel the edges of boredom slowly nibbling away at my soul. I suspected he knew this and even understood it and while he tried to give me work to do we both knew it was not what I was used to. Thrawn needed a personal assistant the way Lord Vader had needed bone china dinnerware. I was glad to have the chance to do something that at least felt useful.

As I made my way back to my quarters to get cleaned up I began a mental list of the things I would need to take with me and just exactly how to word a message to my uncle so that he would get the point but no one else would.

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I landed in Kor Vella with the minimum of hassle. It was easy enough to pretend to be just another transport ship heading back to the Core, after all my papers were in perfect order and Corellia had not officially joined the New republic and was, to the best of my knowledge, still following Imperial Law. Once I cleared through planetary

customs, paid the landing and docking fee and got the ship's papers sorted out I made my way to the starport lounge. I ordered a Corellian ale, then found a dark, quiet wall-side booth and sat down to watch the holo-screen that was playing mindless music vids on the far wall. I was a little early so I had some time to relax. It was mid day local planet time and it was raining outside. Corellia was a beautiful world by most human standards, with a temperate climate and varied landscapes ranging from large wild mountain ranges, forests and grassy flatlands to sandy beaches which edged wide bodies of fresh water.

Kor Vella was a small city that sat on the hillside which over looked wide flat grasslands, there was a branch of most governmental office here but the main place of commerce and the primary destination for most travellers was Coronet, the capitol. The starport had been built at the foot of these hills and seemed sleepy and quiet more because of its location than lack of traffic. Enough off-worlders passed through Kor Vella that no one would really notice me and because it was, more often than not, a transit star port, one person sitting alone waiting for someone was not out of the ordinary.

I nursed my ale which was disgusting so drinking it slowly wasn't hard to do. The message I had sent Uncle Vahlek had been short and cryptic. I wasn't even sure it had reached him but since the only way to find that out was to show up at the designated meeting point I had come anyway. Thrawn had not been happy about it but he had no better ideas. When I had left early in the morning, Nirauan time, due to something that had come up at the last moment which required his attention he had not been at the docking bay to see me leave. Just as well in the end, long drawn out goodbyes were not our thing and even less so given the current circumstances we lived in. He had made his feelings for me plain enough the night before and I much preferred his method of showing me how he felt in the privacy of the bedroom to than stiff and formal farewells in a public area.

I smiled at the memories thinking about him brought up and toyed with my pendant. His way of communicating, without actually speaking, never ceased to astonish me. His hands became words, his lips became expressions and his body had spoken entire paragraphs telling me how he felt. Together, it seemed to me, we wrote entire books on the art of physical communication.

"Do you know how beautiful you truly are?" He had whispered in my ear as his fingertips trailed over the skin of my belly. I had shivered under his caress; goose bumps had rippled across my flesh the wake of his touch. Warmth had flooded through me making me whimper for more. It had made him smile, knowing his touch could reduce me to the role of supplicant whispering his name with a need so intense it threatened to swallow me whole.

When I had had enough of his games I had wrapped my legs around him and pulled him to me, feeling the shape of him mould to me, become a part of me, gasping at the wonder and sheer pleasure such a simple act could bring. He had made it last, despite my urging, ignoring my pleas in favour of the rules he made up as we went along, using his weight, his strength and his often astonishing stamina to play for time. He knew me too well but this worked both ways, after many years I now knew him as well. I had dug my nails into his back leaving dark indents, like little crescent moons in

his beautiful blue skin, marking him as mine through pain and pleasure, smiling at the moan of need that escaped from the back of his throat. In the bedroom, in our bed we shed the masks we wore day in day out in front of everyone else on the base. Only here could we share openly and I could not love him more for this stolen time, these precious moments, where I was allowed to see into his soul with no holds barred. With our hearts pounding against our chests, breast to breast we reached that place where time seemed to stop, where a universe imploded and the pleasure so intense it was almost painful. Then that moment sprang forward and swept through us both like a raging storm, leaving us panting and exhausted in its wake. Wrapped around each other, speechless and languid we finished what we had begun with kiss and caress, his fingers tracing ice across the heat of my flushed skin.

In the quiet of the aftermath we had talked about the journey I would take the next day. Originally I had wanted to travel in Dantassi guise but he had talked me out of that saying it was unusual for the Bone Traders to be seen so far into the Core so the disguise would actually call more attention to me than draw it away. Still, I had packed my Dantassi clothes anyway; everything was on the ship just in case I'd need it, hidden away in case someone actually could bypass my security to get in and toss the ship. In the end it seemed pointless to travel in disguise. After an fairly extensive and interesting search of the New Republic's most wanted lists I discovered much to both my chagrin and relief that I was a nobody, considered just another of the palace public servants and utterly unimportant in the overall galactic scope of things. While a part of me was a little perturbed that I didn't even warrant a mention in the end I was glad. It made travelling a whole lot easier when one was not on the list of the Republic's most wanted. I wondered what any of the CorSec patrols I had passed by on my way out the Starport would think if they had known who I had worked with. It seemed surreal to me that Lord Vader was dead and that Coruscant loomed under the shadow of invasion by the very forces his own son was a part of.

I sighed, shaking myself out of the reverie of memory. "*Be very careful.*" Thrawn had murmured in my ear just as we were falling asleep. "*I don't want to have to come chasing after you.*"

I had only nodded and burrowed into the warmth of his body to fall asleep. When I woke he was already gone, on duty and working.

I sipped at the ale which was bitter and too warm for my tastes then pulled the news flimsies I had bought at the small tourist shop out of my bag to read the latest gossip and news. I had been away from the core for long enough that I didn't recognize half the names in the scuttlebutt section and the news of the Fall of Borleias was either too old or the government had censored it because there was no real mention of it in any thing I read. The only thing that really caught my eye was a small news blurb about random pockets of strange illnesses showing up on Coruscant being blamed on rebel terrorism or faulty water processing depending on what news agency was doing the reporting. It was a peculiar sort of virus though as it only seemed to target aliens because so far no human had been struck down with it. For some reason these stories made the skin prickle and my stomach knot but I shrugged the sensations off and went on reading.

Mostly the gossip seemed to center itself around the general antics of Luke Skywalker and his sister Princess Leia Organa as well as that of Han Solo which made me smile. Leia Organa was unknown to me but Luke had been a whiney Tatooine farm boy that his friends had once nicknamed Wormie. His friend, Han, had been an Imperial Academy dropout turned smuggler. Now, according to the flimsies, the three of them were the heroes of the Galaxy, running around doing great deeds.

I wondered if Lord Vader had known that he had also had a daughter. I also wondered if that would have made any difference to how things had eventually turned out in the end. I doubted it, sometimes fate just did what it wanted to and you had to make do with the hand you got dealt. In spite of the fact that the New Republic consisted of many people and species, it was Leia Organa who seemed to be the most prominent figure head of the new government, although she didn't exactly rule it was her everyone seemed to turn to for answers. I stared at the holo image of her embedded in the flimsy and sighed. I couldn't see any family resemblance to Luke but I had seen images of her mother and she was definitely Padmé's daughter. I wasn't too sure what side of the family Luke took after though; in the images of him he looked haunted and worried, as though the entire fate of the whole galaxy rested solely upon his shoulders. The last of the jedi, the reporter had called him and it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Maybe that he was the last of the jedi but he wasn't the only Force user around. I wondered how he planned to start a new movement of jedi knights and set them up as the galactic peace keepers, as was mentioned in the article I read. I wasn't sure how this was possible seeing as how he was supposed to be the only one around and I sure as hell wasn't about to apply for membership. That sounded an awful lot like indoctrination for my tastes. While I did not believe everything the Emperor had told me about the Old Jedi ways I knew for sure that some of it had been based on truth. I had my birth mother's diaries, and I did not want to lead the same sort of life she had led, running around the galaxy doing the bidding of some noble minded council forsaking any chance of a life of my own. I wondered what Luke would do if I were to go to him and tell him I was the daughter of a jedi and a clone, that I had been trained to use my force powers by his dad and the Emperor. My guess was it would scare him silly and he'd brand me as some sort of a Dark Side heretic and have me shot on sight. That thought made me laugh out loud.

"Now just what is so funny?" A voice from behind me said softly in my ear, making me jump, just a little.

"Zte'sa! I wasn't sure you got my message. You're earlier than I thought," I said folding the flimsy away, not turning around to look at him.

"You let your guard down. I thought you had been taught better than that." Uncle Vahlek chided softly.

I just shrugged to hide the fact that he was right. "I knew who you were." I lied as I got up to face him and then after a staring at him for a second, I flung my arms around him. He hesitated for a moment then returned my embrace, but I could feel his uncertainty.

He pulled back from my hug, holding me by my shoulders at arm's length and looked at me as though he were trying to place the memory of the face he knew with the

one he was actually staring at. "You look well, a little thinner than I remember, but well," he said after a bit.

"You sound surprised."

"Well, the information we got was that you had almost died at Endor then you essentially vanished off the radar for over two years. I am wondering if you are who you say you are," he said coolly.

I sighed. "When I was small you gave me a toy fambaa. I named it Boo. It still sits in my bedroom in the Mos Eisley house on Tatooine on a shelf next to a box which holds things that belonged to my mother, the woman who raised me, not the one who gave birth to me. While we still lived in the house near Bestine, the doll got torn one day, when I tripped and fell, running with it in my hand coming to see you when you returned to visit from some trip you had taken. I cried so hard that everyone thought it was because I had scraped my left knee but really it was because Boo was hurt. You carried me and Boo into the house and while my mother took care of my bloody knee you sewed up Boo for me and the stitches look like little exes. There are five of them," I said.

For a moment he stared at my face, searching my eyes for signs of deceit and then, when he could not find anything to make him think I was a spy or worse, he relaxed. "We missed Lei'lei. Everyone has been so very worried," he said pulling me back into another hug, one that was bone crushing and genuine. I breathed in his scent deeply. He smelled of sand and wind.

"I sent news and letters." I protested, my voice muffled in the folds of his coat.

"Visiting would have been better." He scolded, letting me push back from him.

"Well there were reasons for not doing that!"

He backed down a little. "Yes, there were and your Admiral friend explained them to your father but still, you should have come home."

I looked at my flat, warm disgusting ale on the table. How was it that no matter how old I got my Uncle could always make me feel like a four year old. "Well, it was complicated." I finally said which made his lips twitch, just a little.

"Well if there is time perhaps you can uncomplicated it for me," he said in a tone of voice I knew only too well.

"Well, if you feel like taking a little trip to Coruscant with me, I am sure there'd be time enough."

My uncle raised both his eyebrows and gave me a look which said "*Are you out of your mind?*"

"I have to go back."

"What are you playing at Lei'lei?" he hissed.

I glanced around. The starport cantina was starting to fill up, it was evening now and people were getting off work, stopping in for a drink before shuttling home. "I have a friend I need to visit," I said by way of explanation.

Uncle Vahlek looked around and assessed the room, then returned his gaze to me. "When was the last time you ate?" He asked suddenly changing the subject.

"This morning, by planet-side time."

"Well then, I guess we should order some food because if I recall you are a terrible cook and I know a place not too far from here where they make great food. It's



quiet and we can catch up," he said and before I could protest he had all but dragged me by the arm to the ticket terminal and before I knew it we were shuttling out to a nearby city I had never been to before.

Pax was more of a small town than a city and was nestled between the foot hills of the Bra'd'orian Mountains and the river Rye'sa. My uncle had occasionally spoken about this place, he had worked here for a while at one point in his life, but it was not a popular spot on the destination map of most tourists. Like most small towns it had a few shops, some pretty houses, a med center, its own shuttle port and a town hall but the majority of the people here commuted to work elsewhere on the planet. My father would have called it a sleeper town, a place for those who didn't want to live in the hustle and bustle of big city life; I probably would have called it boring.

It was still raining when we stepped off the shuttle. My uncle tugged my arm and we walked swiftly to the local watering hole, a little cantina called the Laughing Svelt. It was homey and quiet inside and more importantly warm and dry. We shed our wet coats and I followed as Uncle Vahlek made a direct line for what I guessed was his favourite table.

"Sit, I'll go order us some food and something to drink," he said and before I could protest he had vanished to the bar. When he came back he was holding two drinks that did not resemble the horrid ale I had been nursing at the Star port bar. "Selnia, the cook here, makes a wonderful meat pie, so I ordered that as it is on the menu today." He pushed a glass at me and I sniffed at it suspiciously. "Forvish Ale, try it. Much better than that swill you were trying not to drink in Kor Vella."

I did as he suggested and was pleasantly surprised at the slightly sweet taste the cold ale had. "Much better."

He nodded. "Aye, most Corellians will never admit it but Corellian ale is not exactly the best of beers in the galaxy." He sipped his own drink and then settled back in his chair, looking at me. "You've changed, Lei'lei, you look...grown up."

"It's been a while since you saw me last, that was bound to happen," I said gently.

That earned me a look. "Well, like I said, you should have come home sooner."

I sighed. "I couldn't," I said, "I thought that Thrawn told you all why."

"The messages we got were simple and without detail. The first one which arrived about a month after the battle of Endor essentially said you had been injured badly, that you were alive but in critical condition. The second one said that you were still recovering but were unable to be moved. The third message said that you were well but were being transferred to a safe place for rehabilitation. After that the only news we got were the small and, I might add, cryptic letters from you along with the very occasional update from your friend, the Admiral."

I made a face and drew a very deep breath and then as plainly as I could I told my Uncle everything that had happened from my meeting with the Emperor until I woke up in the med lab on Nirauan. It seemed surreal to talk about it, to place it in some sort of context with a coherent time line. I had lost many months in the coma and speaking of it just made that seem all the more bizarre. When I was done my uncle just stared at me, his eerie pale green eyes searching into my soul for answers to questions that I wasn't sure he'd ask out loud.

"We never knew how bad it really was. If I had known I would have come out there and so would your father no matter what the danger or what your friend said."

"I think that was why he never told you. He was so angry with me and so many other things were going on. The medlab where I was recovering is in a place that is secret, almost no one knows about it. He was not going to risk that even for me." As I said these words I knew it was only partly the truth. Thrawn would have told them if I had been dying, I was sure of that. He had other reasons for his secrecy; I just hadn't quite figured them out yet.

"Perhaps." Uncle Vahlek said quietly then he shook his head, "Honestly, Lei'lei, you are sometimes remarkably stupid though. What ever possessed you to go charging off into unknown space alone?" Uncle Vahlek snapped at me then bit back on his obvious anger.

"I wasn't thinking clearly at the time. Now I just don't know what I was thinking," I said wearily, this was a question I could not answer to anyone's satisfaction, not even my own and I was getting tired of it cropping up every time I spoke with someone.

Uncle Vahlek made a face but backed down. I suppose he knew a thing or two about spur of the moment actions that had long lasting consequences. "So where did he send you to heal then?"

"With the Dantassi on Hjal."

Uncle Vahlek smiled a little. "Your enclave?"

"Yes," I said, "I spent a long time recovering there and learning under a master Jhal'kai. What happened to me, what the Emperor did...." I shook my head. The horror of Palpatine's plan for me and my awful force talents still made me shiver with fear. "Healing was a painful, difficult process Zte'sa and I couldn't have done it on Tatooine, not with the warrant Isard had out for my arrest, not with worrying that at any moment the Empire I had worked for and been loyal to would break down my door to drag me off to a detention Center. Thrawn was right to send me with Navaari. There was no other place for me to go. I found peace on Hjal."

He looked at me steadily for a moment, then gave me a curt nod and looked away. He understood these things, I was certain of it. "So, are you and your Admiral still together as a couple?" He asked carefully.

I couldn't help my smile. The flash of memory from the night before and thinking about the bonding ceremony on Hjal made me miss Thrawn as well as the Dantassi. "Yes, despite my idiocy, he is my chosen bond mate and I am his," I said looking into my uncle's eyes so he would get the full impact of my words.

"Bound? Officially?" He asked in surprise.

I shook my head. "As official as it will ever get without difficult clan legalities getting in the way. It's complicated."

"With you, everything is complicated," he said, shaking his head. "Did you just pledge to each other then, privately?"

I shook my head and told him about what Thrawn had done and then how I had answered him after the fact.

"I have not heard of that being done in many years," he said softly, more to himself.

I was taken aback. "You know about this?"

"Lei'lei, you are not the only one who has experienced other cultures besides human." He reached out to pat my cheek. "He makes you happy?" He asked steering the topic away from him and the barrage of question I suddenly wanted to ask.

I nodded. "I suppose papa will want him to marry me properly?"

"Marry you properly? Lei'lei what in Sarlacc's name do you think he did?" My uncle chuckled. "That he bound to you in a public ceremony will suit your father well enough." His pale green eyes bored into mine. When I didn't get the message he shook his head ever so slightly. "Foolish child, you don't need papers and officiates to make a binding true. Marriage, in the way you think of it, is just a contract to protect rights and property. In some cultures you would have been considered wed the moment he bedded you," he said with a gentle expression I didn't quite understand. "As I recall, the Pen'nai Da'ataith is an old and powerful rite in Dantassi lore but I have never heard of it being used to bind a 'traeth before now. Your admiral is a very clever man to have pulled off what he did with you and the Dantassi. He must love you very much to have done things this way." He spoke thoughtfully, considering his words with care.

"Perhaps," I said with a shrug that I hoped came across as offhanded.

"Or perhaps that should be rephrased; he loves you enough to put up with you for life."

I made a face. "Well, I think that works both ways Zte'sa." It occurred to me that Thrawn was not exactly the easiest man in the galaxy to cleave to permanently either.

"Aye, so it does," He replied thoughtfully.

We were quiet for a moment, stopping to sip the ale and it seemed strange to me that I would feel as though I had to reacquaint myself with someone that I had known my whole life, but I had hurt him, hurt my whole family by staying away for so long, by almost dying and not giving them a chance to say goodbye. Navaari had told me that I would pay for the error in judgement I had made for a long time because it had such far reaching emotional consequences. Up until now I had not really believed him. When I couldn't stand the silence any more I broke it. "Have you heard anything from Jyrki at all?"

If my question surprised him he did not show it. "No, but I did not expect to. For quite some time we thought you had died at Endor. I assumed he thought the same if he did not also fight in that battle and die himself. If he thinks that you are dead, he has no reason to come near me or your family."

I nodded. I had not heard anything from or about Jyrki since before I left Coruscant, long before the battle of Endor but I couldn't say it made me sad. "I don't think he was at Endor, at least not in the middle of the battle and I don't think he's dead at all."

"What makes you so certain?"

"I would have felt it if he had died, I am certain of that."

My uncle simply stared at me with raised eyebrows for a moment then nodded gruffly, if he had anything more to say on the subject it was interrupted by the arrival of our food. It was surprisingly good and we ate, for the most part, in silence. After finishing our supper which included a very nice desert, we shuttled back into Kor Vella Spaceport and boarded my ship without any hindrance or problems. As I started the engines, my uncle strapped himself into the co pilot's seat without a word. Once we had

cleared Corellia's atmosphere and headed out towards the Corellian Run hyperspace route he turned to look at me. It was an expression I had long come to associate with patient lectures and being told off.

"So, Lei'lei, why don't I go make us some tea and when you've set the auto pilot you can come back and join me and perhaps explain what I am doing here and why we are headed to Coruscant?"

I just looked at him and nodded. Tea sounded good but conversation didn't. He wasn't going to like what I was going to tell him, and he would like it even less when he learned why I was doing it. Still, I was grateful he was with me and I had missed him and the rest of my family more than words could actually express. When I was done giving him the gist of my plans and he was done telling me how stupid and rash I was for attempting this I would nag him for news from home. One of these days I hoped I could go back and spend a well earned holiday on Tatooine, though I was certain most of it would be spent either explaining and apologising for what had happened or filling Bel in on all my romantic stories. At least, I thought ruefully, as I set the auto pilot she would be happy for me because that was one part of the story that was mostly a happy end and Bel loved happy endings.

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Coruscant never changed, I thought, as I guided my ship down through the thick fog to land on the private landing pad that belonged to Thrawn's apartment. It was as full and busy as ever, even in the early morning. The spires of the tall buildings poked through the fog looking a little like long nailed fingertips reaching to the sky, the hands of the condemned raised up looking for rescue. It felt odd to be back here, and the weight of the past which crept its way into my gut made me sullen and quiet. I guess Uncle Vahlek understood this because he didn't say anything as I shut the ship down and gathered my things. In many ways this was a homecoming for me because I had been happy in this flat with Thrawn for a while. It had been a place of safe refuge and love. As I entered the lock code opening the door I felt a terrible wave of sorrow and of loss but I didn't understand why, it made me hesitate at the entrance of the flat.

"Are you alright Lei'lei?" My uncle placed his hand on my shoulder, his concern was genuine and palpable. I had to fight the urge to turn around and burrow myself in his arms and cry like I had done as a small child. Instead I just drew a deep steadying breath.

"Old ghosts from happier times," I said with a shrug and we stepped over the threshold.

The flat smelled unused but clean. The faint scent of Thrawn's soap lingered in the air reminding me sharply of him but his presence was no longer here and the flat felt empty in spite of the furniture and décor. I suppose I understood in that moment that no matter what happened in the future I would not live here again with him as I had done before Endor. I think that Thrawn had known this too when he, exiled and publicly shamed, had removed his most treasured possessions and art work, many of which now adorned his private quarters on Nirauan.

I sighed as I dumped my bag on the floor, ignoring my uncle, and went to the kitchen to look in the cupboards and cold-box to see what I would need to buy. I had no idea how long we'd be staying here but I didn't plan to starve or order out. I was surprised to find a note on the kitchen counter and even more surprised to read it was from Shiv.

*Hey Rim Girl, I heard you might be paying us a visit so I stocked up on the essentials for you. Word came that you needed to tie up loose ends here. I have looked in on the place from time to time as the Admiral requested so there should not be any nasty surprises, like Dathomir spiders hiding in the bathroom. Buzz me when you get in, we have a lot to talk about. Missed you tons. Love Shiv.*

My uncle vanished into the spare room and dropped off his small pack. His ability to travel so light never ceased to amaze me. I set the water cooker on to make tea and searched the freezer for something we could use for breakfast. When I had left this flat to go with Lord Vader to Endor it had never occurred to me that I would not be coming back for well over two years so there had been food in the fridge and things left about. I looked around and knew that Shiv had taken care of everything. That Thrawn had trusted him enough to give him the access codes made me grateful. I found some pre-made breakfast scones, heated the oven and shoved them in to cook.

I needed to wrap my head around the fact that I was actually back on this crazy world and that a huge chunk of time had passed since I was last here, because for me it felt as though I had only been gone for a couple of months not a couple of years. I wasn't sure I understood how this was even possible, but I guessed as I set breakfast things on the counter it was to be expected when one slips into a coma and then vanishes to a planet on the edge of the galaxy where time just moves differently. While my Uncle showered and changed I made stim'caf and reacquainted myself with the place I had once called home. I knew that the very first person I should probably try to see was Ysanne Isard but she could wait instead I decided to see if Shiv was awake.

"Merly?" said a sleepy looking holo of Shiv.

"Surprise!"

He yawned and ran a hand through his tousled blond hair. "Surprise? Where are you?"

I nodded. "Just got in, wanted to say thank you for taking care of the flat."

He was still half asleep and I could see him trying to wake up. "Wait, you're here on Coruscant in your flat?"

I nodded again. "Listen, you feel like having breakfast with us?"

"Now? Us?"

"My uncle is with me and yes now, though if you could pick up some cream and some butter on the way that would be good. I'm baking scones."

"Uh...okay...be there in about fifteen minutes," he said. He was still not quite awake. I signed off and went back to taking care of breakfast, waiting for my uncle to finish so that I could take a quick shower. Shiv arrived twenty minutes later to the scent of freshly baked scones and stim'caf. I heard him come in and went to greet him, unable to say even one word before he had swept me up in a huge hug.

"We thought you were dead." He whispered in my ear holding me so tightly I thought I heard ribs crack.

I just hugged him back and nodded. What was there to say? When he finally let me go to look at me I could see that he had aged a little and that worry and stress had eaten into his boyish good looks.

"Siavaan, it is good to meet you." My uncle said from behind me.

Shiv grinned and shook my uncle's offered hand. Then he handed me a bag of groceries. "I bought cream, jam, butter and some fresh fruits."

"Well breakfast is done, so let's eat. I'm hungry," I said.

As we sat and ate I told Shiv my story before he could bug me about it, this time I did not leave much out so there were a lot of things that my Uncle had not heard before as well. When I was done both he and my Uncle just looked at me in stunned silence.

Shiv sighed. "We heard about Endor but the news was censored. The backlash from Lord Vader's and the Emperor's death was pretty awful. Coruscant was in total martial law and people were being shot if they were out after curfew. Of course, that all settled down after the memorial service and once Pestage was recognised as the official leader. It was chaos, internally but from the outside things seemed to carry on as usual. When Pestage was killed and Isard took over things began to get a little odd but even that settled down into some sort of normal routine. She doesn't interact much with people like me so it isn't as if I have much contact to the inner circle any more. All the Emperor's concubines and consorts were given severance packages and told to go home, most of the palace is quiet as the work force has been cut down by nearly a half. Isard tends to run things on a tight military style schedule, she doesn't have time for civilian bureaucracy."

"I need to see her," I said, "I have updates from Thrawn for her."

"Well if you are lucky she's here but most of the time she's not on Coruscant that much these days. Theory is she spends most of her time at some secret base of operations, though I don't know much about that. If there is a hidden base some where it is really a well kept secret. I do hear a lot of whispers about the Lusankya Facility, which she heads up. People go in but they never come out. She had a lot of her own staff members taken to that detention center and no one and I do mean no one knows where it is. The latest theory is she has some ISD in space but no one really knows for sure," he said with a sigh. "I don't do much work at the moment, it seems she has little use for the fineries that the Emperor did, but they haven't actually fired me yet either."

"What about this sickness I've been reading about?" I asked.

Shiv shrugged. "No one is really certain about that either. It breaks out in pockets, mostly in the alien sectors and it is pretty deadly but because no humans have contracted it yet and it isn't wide spread there has been very little said or done about it as far as I know. At first they thought that it was an issue with the water purification system but that checked out all right now they think it is some bacterial thing brought in on imported fruits. The word around the palace is that the rebellion has been testing some biological weapon but personally I don't buy that. They wouldn't target aliens for a start and I don't think they have the facilities to create weapons like that." He sighed. "So really no one knows, but I can tell you this, bacta apparently cures it so as long as there is enough bacta to go around, no one seems too worried."

I blew out the breath I had been holding and sipped at my stim'caf. "I need to get into the palace."

Shiv shrugged one shoulder. "Well that won't be difficult, you have active clearance, you still work for the Empire and you carry official documents from a Grand Admiral."

"How easily will I be able to move about in the palace?" I asked.

"Depends on where you want to go."

"My old flat, Lord Vader's office, the Emperor's inner sanctum."

Shiv made a face. "Hmm, your old flat won't be an issue. That part of the palace is hardly ever used any more. Not sure if Lord Vader's office will be doable or not and the Emperor's inner sanctum won't be accessible at all. Isard had all his rooms restricted and shut off, but left untouched, which was odd. It was as if she expected him to come back. There are armed guards posted at all entrances to his quarters and offices and the whole area is under constant surveillance, you'd never get by any of that without being detected."

I nodded. I didn't tell Shiv that there were ways of bypassing the security and I had alternative routes to gain access to some of the rooms I wanted to go to.

"Well, my first order of business is to see Isard or at least get Thrawn's dispatches to her. After that, my time is my own."

Shiv looked at me and then at my uncle who had remained very quiet throughout most of the conversation. "Why are you really here?"

I stared back at him for a long moment then said, "I need to set up a reliable information network for Thrawn."

Much to my surprise instead of being shocked Shiv just nodded, "I thought it might be something like that."

"You did?"

"No one, absolutely no one, seems to know that there is a surviving Grand Admiral out there, it's weird. I mean Thrawn was sort of a secret to begin with but Isard squashes all talk or mention of him. The rumour is that he is dead or was a myth to begin with. He was exiled and he vanished, remember? But even weirder is all holo news or gossip mention of him has been erased, you too for that matter. It is as if the pair of you never really existed," he said, "I thought this was very strange given how good your Admiral is with strategy and planning so I did some quiet digging. Seems Isard is scared to death that he will come back and remove her from power to take over as galactic emperor. So she has essentially wiped all traces and information about him off the system. As far as the outside galaxy goes he does not exist."

I nodded slowly. "She's been lying to him about how things have been going between the Empire and the rebellion. He needs a way to gain information that hasn't been censored or altered by her and her people."

"Spying is considered treason and is punishable by death. If you get caught you'll be shot." Shiv warned.

"I know that, I don't plan on getting caught."

"No one ever does." Shiv said with a snort. My uncle laughed.

"Well I don't plan to rush in and rummage around her drawers!" I replied. "I have other possibilities."

They both nodded and the three of us lapsed into silence as I poured more stim'caf.

"So, give me the gossip!" I demanded after a few moments. "How is everyone, Master Kjestyll, Cati, Bobbyn, Maxxi and Ynyth?"

Shiv drew a deep breath. "The Bunduki masters vanished shortly after the Emperor's death. In fact the entire school seemed to disappear. No one knows where they went but I can tell you they were not killed," he said.

My uncle nodded. "They would have relocated the school to a planet that was remote and outside the reach of the Empire and the rebellion. It is possible that they went to Anzat," he said, "I had heard that all the Bunduki schools had suddenly vanished after the Emperor's death. The news that a new Jedi had returned to the galaxy may have been enough for them to wish to return to their underground ways of teaching. The Bunduki form was founded on the premise of beating force users without having to be force sensitive or a trained Jedi."

"Why Anzat?" Shiv asked looking at Uncle Vahlek.

"People fear the Anzati but some of the best assassins come from there. It is a good place to have an underground Bunduki school, though I suspect that there are many worlds the masters would have gone to. They spread their training out and they are mobile. Anzat is just difficult to explore or invade. The Anzati can be quite deadly, you know."

"You don't think they were killed do you? I mean, that is possible." I asked.

Shiv shook his head. "No, they vanished. One day there were classes and teachings and all the equipment was still there, the next it was as if they had never existed and Isard was not happy about it, I can tell you that for nothing. No, they were not suddenly wiped out or secretly eliminated, they left of their own accord right under her nose without her knowing."

I felt a small amount of peace knowing that Master Kjestyll was safe and teaching someplace else but also a certain amount of sadness that in all probability I would never see him again. "What about Cati and the others?"

"Well, I told you in the last letter that Bobbyn went home. I haven't heard from him since. Personally, I think he was glad to get out of Coruscant while he could. His family owns a hotel so he could just go and work there. Maxxi vanished. I think he joined the rebellion if you want my honest opinion but who can really say for sure. One day he just didn't show up for work anymore. I know that Antygra's death really changed how he felt about the Empire so it makes sense he would want to fight back. Ynyth and I are still together. It is a lot easier now that she got a job in the civilian sector but our schedules clash more than they used to, she's at work right now but she'll be thrilled to hear you are back safe and alive. Cati is still the same. I know she'd love to see you. She asks about you whenever I get the chance to talk with her. Her work keeps her busy. It doesn't seem to matter to the rich and bored that the Emperor is dead and Isard is in charge, they still live as though nothing bad had happened. So the demand for fine clothes has never gone out of style. Cati is as busy as ever."

I smiled and looked at the Chrono. "I should get ready and go see if Isard is home. The sooner I get this over with the sooner I will be able to do what I came for," I said.



"I'll come with you. They know me so it will help you with security, even with your clearance they'll ask questions. You are unknown to most of the guards now." Shiv said, helping to clear away the breakfast dishes.

"What about you?" I asked my uncle.

He just smiled. "I have some friends to look up and need to buy some things for your father. You have your comm, when you need me use it or else I will see you when you return here for lunch or supper, unless there are other plans?"

"No plans, at least not yet," I said, "First I need to reacquaint myself with the Palace and make sure Isard doesn't think I am anything other than a dumb assistant."

My uncle laughed. "I do not think she even cares about you, Lei'lei. I am certain that the only reason she will even blink your way is because of the disks from Thrawn that you carry. If you had been on her mind she would have had you hunted down and murdered a long time ago."

"That's very comforting, Zte'sa."

"He speaks the truth though." Shiv agreed.

"She had an arrest warrant out for me!"

Shiv nodded. "Yes, you and dozens of others because she thought you might come back and try to somehow contest or threaten her position but as soon as that idea was squashed you became no more important to her than I am. It was only because the Admiral actually requested it that the arrest warrant was rescinded, mostly I think she just forgot about it. In the few months after the Emperor's death, Isard went nuts trying to get rid of any would be threat. One of the few people she was truly worried about was Mara Jade. She had her arrested but in the end Jade escaped and Isard hasn't seen or heard from her since."

"You both make me feel very unimportant," I said half pouting, half relieved.

"Good, be thankful that you are unimportant in the eyes of this new regime. It will make the job you plan to do a lot easier." My Uncle said gruffly.

I sighed, knowing they were right. In the overall scope of things, as far as the Empire was concerned, I was an office girl whose boss had died. It was long enough ago that most people would not really remember me if at all. I glanced at Shiv who just nodded and smiled. It was time to go and test this theory out.

"Be careful Lei'lei." My uncle said as I slipped on my long coat.

"We will," Shiv replied with a grin, making my uncle smile.

I checked my satchel to make sure the data disks with Thrawn's messages to Isard were still there then slung it over my head and followed Shiv out. I hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come that the weather grid had somehow decided to anoint my homecoming with a deluge of rain.

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The palace had not changed much, though it did seem a little run down, darker, gloomier somehow and there were not nearly as many people wandering around as there had been during the Emperor's reign. I guessed Isard had slashed departments and staff to save credits. It was strange to be back, as though nothing had ever changed but the atmosphere was definitely different. During the Emperor's reign, while he had

been a powerful leader, people who worked at the palace on a day to day basis did not fear him, it was more like they were in awe of him. Now as I walked along the corridors with Shiv I sensed fear and lots of it. Isard terrified people and she both knew this and used it. With every step that brought me closer to her office I considered just how risky and how stupid what I wanted to do here in this building really was. If I got caught I would most likely be condemned to death for treason or something along those lines. Thrawn's advice to me as I had mentioned this possibility had been to tell me dryly *"Well then, my dear, don't get caught."*

We were stopped three times and asked for ident cards and clearance codes. All three times nothing happened except some offhand conversation between Shiv and the one guard he knew by name. For the most part everyone seemed a little bored. What ever Thrawn had done with my security clearance had worked, there were no raised flags or cause for alarm and the only comment that I did get from one of the guards on duty was "Welcome back, Miss Gabriel."

"It would appear you are either lucky or unlucky." Shiv told me after speaking with the receptionist droid, in the waiting area outside of Isard's Palace offices.

"Why's that?"

"She's actually here today so you will get to see her when she has a few minutes, but it will mean waiting." He explained.

I rolled my eyes, made a face and nodded. While I didn't like sitting around much, at least I knew the data disks Thrawn had given me would be placed directly into her hands and not those of some lackey who may or may not give them to her. Shiv walked with me to the austere waiting area.

"I'm not sure how long this will take and I have some things to do so I'll be in my office, comm me when you're done," he said.

"Okay." I replied. "Thanks Shiv."

He gave me a smile and a nod and then left. The waiting area was designed to appear comfortable and welcoming but as I sat there I noticed that in fact it did just the opposite. It was clever really, how the chairs were just uncomfortable enough that one could not relax while sitting on them, that the lighting was somehow irritating and the room after a few moments began to feel oppressive and claustrophobic despite its spaciousness.. As I studied my surroundings I was surprised that the lessons I had learned in the past began to come in to play. Thrawn, Master Kjestyll and Lord Vader had indeed taught me well. This room was created in such a way to make the person waiting ill at ease so that by the time Isard called them in for their meeting she had the advantage and they were completely off balance without ever even knowing why. It made me shake my head, this subtle art of power play and in some ways it diminished Isard's aura for me. Lord Vader had never needed parlour tricks to make people uncomfortable or ill at ease nor had the Emperor or even Thrawn for that matter.

I smiled to myself as I sat in the quiet and it did not go unnoticed by the young guard standing by the main office door. I had not forgotten the calming techniques I had been taught and I used them now as I sat, fining my center, becoming the stillness. I had nothing to fear from this woman. The worst she could do was to kill me, although unless I gave her reason to I didn't think that she would and I had already met death a few times in my life anyway so this possibility didn't scare me all that much anymore. I

watched with feigned disinterest at the people who came and left her office. Primarily military officers bringing reports, I assumed. Eventually she found time for me and after what seemed hours a young man, an aide, told me my waiting had come to an end.

"The Director will see you know, Miss Gabriel." He spoke crisply and gestured for me to go into the office through the door that had just opened silently. I nodded my thanks, and walked in to my first face to face meeting with Isard since the fall of the Emperor. I would have been lying to say I was not a little nervous but I worked at not showing it.

She was standing, her hands clasped behind her back, staring out of the large window into the morning fog. Her posture, this scene were so reminiscent of how Lord Vader often stood that I wondered if it had been a deliberate move on her part to put me off balance. Then I wondered with a rueful smile if I was not giving her too much credit. She was smart and she was cruel but in the end I was unimportant. I stood a polite distance away from her and said nothing. I was used to this manner of treatment, meant to discomfort and intimidate, it actually had the opposite effect. Lord Vader had done this with me for years, I was used to it. I waited until she turned around to look at me before speaking.

"Miss Gabriel, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" She asked. Her voice was rich and deeper than I remembered.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn sends his greetings, Madam Director and has asked me to personally deliver this into your hands," I said retrieving the data disc from my satchel and holding it out to her.

She stared at me for a moment and then after too long a pause had passed she gingerly took it from my hand and glanced at it disdainfully before setting it on her desk. "Thank you." She replied.

I did not back down from her stare but I didn't challenge her either. She had aged since I had last seen her and the tell tale signs of stress from holding what was left of the Empire together showed on her face. She was still beautiful in a strange, austere sort of way, wearing her long hair loose so that it framed her face and fell over her shoulders to contrast starkly with the blood red uniform she had on. Her eyes, which bored into mine were mismatched. One was an icy blue, reminding me sharply of Jyrki, the other was blood red, like that of an albino animal. It was said they were exact mirrors for the two aspects of her personality, cold and unforgiving, fiery and unpredictably violent. None of which were exactly comforting. For a moment in time it seemed as though she were trying to delve into my very soul to unravel any duplicity I might have locked away in there but she was not a force user and in the end all she could do was read my expression which I hoped said *I am just doing my job, as I have always done*. After what seemed forever she gave a small nod and then turned to look at her desk and the data disk that lay there.

"I see you have fully recovered," she said, "I was informed that you very nearly lost your life at Endor."

I nodded slowly. "Yes," I said. I wasn't sure how much of the details she knew but she hadn't asked so I didn't feel like giving her more information.

She paused to draw a deep breath. "I am curious as to how you ended up in the Unknown Regions and not with the rest of the fleet when they jumped to hyperspace."

"My shuttle was damaged in the explosion from the space station. I had no time to plan a course or try to find the rest of the fleet I jumped blindly in to hyperspace. I did not realise at the time that there had been significant damage to the hyperdrive and when I came out of hyperspace, Nirauan was the closest known Imperial base to my current location."

She paused for a second, digesting what I had told her then gave another curt little nod. Thrawn shown me the report he had sent her concerning this so she already knew what I was telling her. "You served Lord Vader well, Miss Gabriel, he spoke highly of your work for him. I trust you have returned to full active status and are now ready to continue serving the Empire?"

I nodded. "Yes, Madam Director."

"Grand Admiral Thrawn has asked that you be allowed to remain on Nirauan to assist him in ...various duties. I see no reason to deny this request; I have no need of a civilian such as yourself working here for me." She spoke coolly and as she did so picked up another data disk that had been sitting on her desk. "You may take this to the Grand Admiral, confirmation of your transfer to his office."

I took the disk from her hand and slipped it into the small pocket in my satchel made for exactly this purpose. There was a sudden flash of memory from the disk which caused me to suck in my breath hard. I hid my surprise at the disjointed and frightening images which smashed their way into my head for a split second with a half feigned coughing fit.

"Is everything under control, Miss Gabriel?" She asked with disdain but I heard something else underneath her words that I could not quite read.

I nodded and stopped coughing. "Yes, thank you, I will see that the Grand Admiral gets this." I patted the side of my satchel which now held the little disk.

"Be sure that you do." She bit back sharply and for a second I saw the creature that everyone feared underneath the polished veneer of civility. She stared at me, her eyes moving up and down over my body. While I could not read her thoughts but I sensed the question she was about to ask, in her position I would have asked it as well.

"What happened at Endor, Miss Gabriel?"

"Ma'am?" I asked.

"You were there, an eyewitness. You were one of the people closest to Lord Vader in all things. I want to know what happened."

"Are you asking me if the rumours are true? That it was Lord Vader who betrayed the Empire and murdered the Emperor?"

"I am asking you to give me your version of what went on at the Empire's biggest military disaster."

"Well, there isn't much to tell from my version," I said carefully wondering if the two officers the Emperor had sent to baby-sit me had actually told the truth of what happened.

"Tell me what you do know." Her voice had gone ice cold and the expression in her eyes reminded me of some bounty hunters I had met, empty and soulless. She gestured for me to sit and I did without thinking.

I closed my eyes for a moment, calling up from memory images of that moment in time. Then with a sigh I told her what had happened. I told her how the Emperor had

revealed to me his plan to capture Luke Skywalker and destroy the Rebellion once and for all. I did not tell her how the Emperor had dumped this information on me, she did not need to know this. I told her the little I knew about the Emperor's plans to use the deception of a half completed battle station to lure the Rebels out into an all out space battle that they could not possibly win. I was certain that she knew most of this but I had some details to give her that would satisfy her curiosity.

"So they actually captured Skywalker?" She asked.

"It was my understanding that he gave himself up to save his friends. He was on the battle station at the time the space battle began." I replied.

"How did he defeat the Emperor?" She asked.

I couldn't help the shrug I gave and I sense the wave of annoyance it created from her. "In truth, ma'am, I don't know. By the time that occurred I was no longer on the battle station. The Emperor had sent me on an errand and I was in the middle of my run when, if you will forgive the term, all nine Corellian Hells broke loose." In my mind's eye I watched the sequence of events unfold like a flower to the sun. I described to her the fall of the *Executor* as it crashed into the battle station, the warning cries over the comm about the explosion that was to come only moment later. I described as best I could what happened in the minutes that followed up until the part where I got the hell out of Endor space. My words were calm and cool but it did not escape her notice that my fingers trembled and I suppose this added credibility to my tale, after all I was recounting the death of the Emperor of the galaxy.

"How did Skywalker escape?" she asked after a very long silence.

I looked up at her in surprise, "I have no idea. I only know that he was with Lord Vader and the Emperor just as I left the Battle station. In order to know what really happened in that room you would have to ask Luke Skywalker."

She snorted and I guessed that this had already crossed her mind. "I am surprised that you do not know more," she said a little too casually.

"Why is that?"

"I was led to believe that you were force sensitive. Is it not the nature of your kind to be able to sense more?" She asked. She was digging, she didn't know for sure and I was surprised by this. I guess Lord Vader had kept my abilities more to himself than I had thought. I suppose it made sense he hadn't told the Emperor about so why would he tell Isard?

"My talents are small and limited and my ability to sense things of that nature is nonexistent. I don't read minds or see the future," I said blending truth with lie. "Lord Vader often commented on how useless I was in this area. He called me disappointing." My uncle had once told me that a touch of truth will add credence to more lies than straightforward lying.

"Yet he kept you at his side," she said snidely.

"While I may not have much use in other areas of service to the Empire, I am a very good personal assistant," I said coolly. "I always assumed this was why Lord Vader kept me on."

"That and you had the favour of the Emperor."

I glanced up into her mismatched eyes. "The Emperor favoured many young women he considered pretty and decorative, he also let me know that I was useful because I kept his pet alien amused." I retorted.

She smiled and it was cruel. "As you still do, I see."

I played along and sighed, bowing my head as if I carried shame in my heart for my liaison with Thrawn. She underestimated him in all things just as she also underestimated me. "There was nowhere else for me to go, Madam Director," I said in a quiet voice.

"Just so," She nodded. I could feel the sense of smug satisfaction coming from her in waves. She did not like or trust Thrawn, she feared him. She also thought that he had bought her lies and was securely tucked away in the Unknown Regions doing his thing far away from her. She had wanted to see me to get a sense of whether or not he was planning to return, my demeanour and remarks allowed her to believe she was, for the time being, safe to continue her own way. She was hiding something terrible but I could get no real sense of it at all.

"I am sure that Grand Admiral Thrawn will find suitable work for you and being in the Unknown Regions will offer you a unique perspective on the Empire," she said coldly.

I merely nodded unable to reply because at that second the inter office comm buzzed.

"What is it?" Isard asked.

"Kirtan Loor is here to see you Madam Director." The droid said.

Her whole body posture changed. "Here?"

"He requested to tell you that he has urgent news about progress with the ...."

"Tell him I'm busy, he'll have to wait a moment." She snapped cutting the droid off. She was angry at this Loor person and she had not expected his visit either. I watched her in silence, pretending to be bored, and wondered what it was about this man that had rattled her cage.

"Is there anything else?" She asked me after a moment, as if she had momentarily forgotten I was there.

"I would like to request permission to spend some time to pack up my belongings from when I lived here and to sort out the mess in my previous office before I return to Nirauan, the Grand Admiral gave me leave time so that I might set my affairs in order, he wished there be no reason for me to have to return here and deal with any unexpected issues that might occur in the future."

The expression on her face was peculiar and I couldn't decipher it yet it sent shivers up and down my spine. "Yes, getting your affairs in order is a wise move all things considered. Take all the time you need. You are Thrawn's responsibility not mine, if he allows you to slack off in this manner then that is his choice."

"Thank you," I said ignoring her barb about Thrawn. She feared him. I could taste that in her words every time she spoke his name. Me, she thought of as nothing more than office fluff. I had been known as Vader's Handmaid and most people had assumed that he had kept me around because I was simply good at my job as his assistant, among other things. The rumours that the Emperor had taken a liking to me had not hurt this any either. If Isard had hoped to glean new information from me about what had

happened at Endor she had been disappointed. I offered nothing new, just a different spin on the story she had already heard a dozen or more times. She knew that I was force sensitive, just not how deep my talents went or exactly what I could do and she did not really place any faith in something she considered a dead religion. Her worries were about Thrawn and about something else I could not figure out. I had come here expecting to be challenged or worse, instead it was as my Uncle had said, I was nobody and Thrawn was not coming to overthrow her from her place of power. Once she had confirmed these two things I was of no more interest to her, if anything I bored her and my visit to her office was a mild inconvenience in her otherwise busy day. She had other things on her mind.

I waited for a few seconds then asked, "Will there be anything else, Madam Director?"

She flapped her hand dismissively at me. "No, you may leave."

And just like that my meeting with her was over. I stood up and gave her a small polite nod then left her office. On the way out I brushed past a harried, gaunt officer who for a split second reminded me a little of Grand Moff Tarkin. As I stared at him for a moment our eyes met then the reception droid told him he could go in to Isard's office. He stomped in as though the entire galaxy owed him everything and before the door had even closed he had started the conversation with a terse "Derricote is complaining! You are rushing this project...." He began.

She cut him off, "Is it ready yet?"

"No. He says it will take time to ...."

I watched as the door closed shutting out anymore conversation wondering what they had been talking about. I waited until her door closed then asked the droid about the man who had an eerie resemblance to a long dead Moff.

"That was Kirtan Loor, Miss," The droid answered not really telling me more than I already knew.

"What does he do?"

"Oh he works for the Director," The droid said promptly then added in a quiet voice, "He hunts down rebels."

"Oh." Was all I could think to say, "What about Derricote?"

"Evir Derricote?"

I nodded assuming there was only one.

"He is doing biological research for the Director." The droid answered. I guessed that so far I had not asked any questions that would be considered classified because usually protocol droids were easy to programme against giving out such information.

"If I needed to see him where would I find him?" I asked.

"At the biological and chemical research facility but I believe he is very busy Miss, I could try to make an appointment for you?"

I shook my head. "No thank you I was just wondering why his name seemed so familiar to me."

"Perhaps because he was once the commander of the one-eighty-first and then in charge of Borleias before it fell." The droid answered.

"Ah of course. Thank you," I said, more confused than ever. If he had been in charge of Borleias when it fell then why wasn't he dead? It made me wonder what he did

that was so important that Isard save his life. I wondered where the research facility was but didn't dare ask. If Isard caught wind that I had been pestering her reception droid for information that was considered classified she might be less inclined to think of me as harmless. I walked out of the reception area feeling as though I had overlooked something important or forgotten something but I could not for the life of me figure out what it was so I shrugged it off. If it was important sooner or later it would come to me. In the mean time I had things to do.

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"I don't know." Shiv said looking from me to my uncle then back again. We were in the middle of supper, discussing Derricote and Loor. After my meeting with Isard I had not felt much like doing anything else. The journey to Coruscant had been tiring and mostly I just wanted to relax a little and think. I had swung by Shiv's office to find him mostly bored, convinced him to come home with me, stopping along the way to pick up take away food. My uncle was at the flat when we arrived, if he had gone out and run his errands I didn't ask. I was glad we had bought enough food for three.

I drummed my fingernails on the counter top until my uncle gently clamped his hand on top of mine. I was annoying him with my impatience. "Lei'lei why do you think this is important? It has nothing to do with why you came here?"

I sighed and sat back a little, picking at the Zabracki food with my food sticks. "Isard is hiding something, something big. She was almost nice to me and that's just plain weird." I fiddled with the cup of stim'caf. "Why would she keep this Derricote alive? If he was responsible for the fall of Borleias he should be dead. She doesn't tolerate failure." I hadn't spoken about the flash of memory from the datadisk. I was still trying to make sense of what I had seen.

"Well he must have a use then." Uncle Vahlek shrugged.

"The droid said Biological and chemical research facility. Shiv do you know anything about this place?"

"No. But you might be able to access Derricote's file you have high enough clearance."

I shook my head. "Even with my clearance a query on something like that would be flagged and she'd be able to back track it unless...." I stopped mid thought.

"Unless what?" Uncle Vahlek asked carefully. He didn't like the expression on my face. He knew it far too well.

"Lord Vader's Coruscant city home had direct access to the Palace mainframe that bypassed Intel security. I used to work from there a lot so he made sure I could get in without all the annoying security stops."

"Wouldn't Isard have had that shut down?" Shiv countered.

"I don't think so. I don't think many people actually knew about it to be honest" I said, "Lord Vader pretty much had the run of the system though most people would never have guessed this. He did a lot of things without going through official channels," I said.

Shiv gave me a look.



"I could go in and look at classified personnel files if I wanted, I don't think anyone except maybe the Emperor knew just how deep into the system Lord Vader had my access allowed." I clarified.

"How did you get that?" Shiv asked in surprise.

"Lord Vader got fed up of me bothering him every single time I needed to do a deep core search, he went in one day and upped my security level, bypassed the usual Intel application and poof, suddenly I could go anywhere in the system." I answered with a shrug. "He jokingly used to call it emperor mode."

"How the hell did he do that? I thought there were security systems in place to prevent that?"

I made a face. "Oh please, he built a pod racer and a protocol droid by himself before he was even twelve years old, do you think he didn't get to know his way around the Imperial computer system? Spying was an art form and Lord Vader did it remarkably well. He used to say in order to stay ahead of the Emperor's game one had to know how to bend the game rules."

"Oh." Shiv said.

Uncle Vahlek nodded. "Anakin Skywalker was a very talented pilot and engineer; I do not think it is such a leap of faith that, as the Emperor's second in command, to think he could not bypass the system here. You think this clearance is still open, Lei'lei?"

"I am sure it is," I said, "Lord Vader made sure that when I needed to retrieve information for him I could do it without having to ask for permission and more importantly without anyone knowing. He didn't tell anyone about it and neither did I. I didn't think it was prudent to let that sort of information slip." I looked at them both. "Not even Thrawn knows about this."

"And you think you can do this safely from his Coruscant residence?" Uncle Vahlek asked thoughtfully.

I nodded. "I think that in the madness that followed the Emperor's and Lord Vader's deaths no one has even thought about his home and all the stuff that was there. He had several residences on this planet and most people never even knew about them. No one... well almost no one, could get in without going through the security checks. It was very heavily guarded and the security system was impenetrable, well mostly." I amended thinking of Jix, wondering briefly what had happened to him.

"I thought you wanted to clear out your office in the Palace and see about trying to set up some sort of information network for Thrawn. He did not send you here to spy on Isard!" Uncle Vahlek said not liking the direction I was starting to go.

I looked at him. "Isard is up to something. I need to figure this out so I can pass on the information to Thrawn and maybe he can stop it and bring back some sanity to the Empire."

"You are not one of the Emperor's agents. Saving the galaxy from Isard is not your job." He countered.

"The difference between setting up a way to pass on information and actually doing some digging for actual information myself is minimal. It would not be the first time I have done something like this" I said, although the last time I had tried it had nearly ended up with Zaarin having his way with me but I didn't think they needed to know that. I grinned and added, "And besides, it will be fun."

Shiv glanced at my Uncle. "Fun?"

My uncle frowned, "Do not encourage her, Siavaan." He turned to me and pursed his lips. "Concentrate on the job you came here to do Lei'lei. Isard's machinations are not your concern and I am certain your bond-mate would not be happy if you were to be incarcerated or shot for treason."

I sighed and rested my chin on my fist. "Well I am not about to do anything crazy right now anyway," I said looking at the chrono on the wall. "I want to wait till tomorrow evening before I head back to the palace. It will be quieter then and since I told Isard I would be packing up things it won't be unusual for me to be there."

Shiv's eyes followed mine. "Damn, this has been fun but I have to get home," he said getting up. "Will you be free to have lunch tomorrow? I can get a hold of Cati and Ynyth if you want?"

I grinned. "That would be great!" I said as he pulled me into a hug.

"It's good to have you back, Rim-Girl," he said quietly in my ear. I just nodded and watched him leave with mixed feelings. So much had changed, even he had changed. I sighed as the door to the speeder parking area closed. The sky was streaked with red and purple as the last light from the setting sun painted the sky. It was beautiful but not quite as impressive as the sunsets on Nirauan were. I shook my head and made my way back to the kitchen. My uncle was staring at me thoughtfully when I returned to sit at the breakfast counter.

"What?" I asked.

"So, what was it you were not telling us that has got you suddenly tied up in knots?" He asked.

"I don't want to talk about it just yet," I said as I began to clear up the dirty dishes.

"Did Isard say something to you?" He dug.

I shook my head. "I saw something when she handed me a data disk." I told him. "But I am still trying to make sense out of it. Lord Vader once told me that sometimes if the images I saw from an object were jumbled and without meaning that it was better to allow the visions to sit for a little while and not think on them. To let the subconscious mind work them out."

Uncle Vahlek nodded. "Very well. So now what do you want to do?"

I smiled. "Nothing. I'm exhausted. I thought I would make some tea, curl up on the couch and watch some HoloNet and then go to bed early. I have stuff at the palace I want to do tomorrow that doesn't have anything to do with Isard."

For the first time since arriving upon the planet my Uncle seemed to relax. "Tea and HoloNet sounds wonderful," he said, "I didn't feel much like chasing you all over Coruscant tonight anyway." He added with a slight smile. He looked as tired as I felt.

The HoloNet News showed an increase in the number of strange deaths from the mysterious illness that seemed to find its way into pockets of the planet. It was virulent and deadly. The images they showed scared me. They were graphic and terrifying. It was not a pretty way to die at all and apart from complete immersion in bacta early on there was nothing anyone could do. The report hinted that contaminated water was to blame and that anyone seeing suspicious behaviour should report it. The planet was apparently crawling with rebel spies trying to eliminate the population to take over. I was curled up

on the sofa, the Dantassi blanket wrapped around my shoulders. My uncle sat in the large comfortable chair, his ankle resting on his knee. His face was expressionless as he watched the images but I could sense his own anger at what he saw.

"This isn't natural, is it" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"You don't think it is the rebels either do you?"

He glanced at me before answering. "It is not their style, but there are other factions out there who would love to bring down Isard's government who do not have the lofty ideals of the New Republic and I am quite sure they'd not be so hesitant about using biological warfare to get what they wanted."

"You don't think that Isard would have anything to do with this do you?"

"Why would she poison her own planet Lei'lei? That makes no sense at all. How would you even come to that conclusion?"

"She is cruel and evil?" It wasn't really an answer and Uncle Vahlek knew I was stalling. He gave me a look which said just spit it out.

"I saw her in a medlab, an observation room watching someone infected die, it was terrible," I said carefully. The image had been momentary and almost too quick to really understand at first but allowing myself time to unwind it, slow it down I understood better what I had seen. "She asked the man standing next to her if it was ready? He told her no, he needed at least another month. She told him to hurry up that they were running out of time."

"That could mean any number of things, least of all that she is to blame. It could be she is trying to find a cure to prevent this disease from spreading further, after all if the planet succumbs to a pandemic she does not gain anything by it and everything to lose. Things won't get out of hand unless there is a bacta shortage."

I nodded, feeling both a little relieved because this answer was the most plausible and a little foolish that I had not come to this conclusion first. I had let my fear and my dislike of Isard cloud my judgement. It certainly made sense and it would explain why she had kept Derricote alive. He was some sort of a biological engineer who could probably come up with a cure. No wonder she wanted to keep this a secret though. If word got out for certain that this virus was planted there would be mass panic on the planet. "Why doesn't it affect humans?"

"If it is an engineered virus it would have been made that way. Xenophobia is not new to this galaxy and the Empire is not the only ruling body that is prejudice against non human races."

I sighed. "Everything is such a mess. If the Emperor had never died none of this would be happening."

"Perhaps," Uncle Vahlek replied cryptically, "But Palpatine was no saint either." He reminded me. "He had no problems with such tasty little things as slavery, genocide or even wiping out entire planets if it helped him achieve his goals."

My uncle's not subtle reminder about Alderaan was not lost on me and the Emperor had been number one on my top ten most evil beings in the galaxy list but somehow I could not help shake the feeling that were he alive there would be less chaos and more order. I wasn't sure what was worse, a dictator who kept the peace at any cost

or a democratic government that allowed a free for all, leading into a descent into anarchy.

"Lei'lei, the whole foundation of Palpatine's rule was fear. It was how he rose to power in the first place. He played one faction off against the other using their weaknesses and their insecurities to boost his stature and seemingly benign nature. No one knew what had happened until it was too late. He played everyone to achieve the ultimate goal, galactic domination. He had the entire Jedi Order eliminated in such a way that the majority of the beings in this galaxy thought they were the ones who had tried to overthrow the very government they had sworn to uphold in the first place. People are nerfs, especially in a herd or a mob. They follow where ever they are told and whomever they are told without thinking that maybe, just maybe something isn't quite right with the picture at hand. When Palpatine told the galactic senate that the Jedi Order had attempted to assassinate him to take over the government there was not one voice that day which opposed him. If people had risen up against him at that moment you would be looking at a very different galaxy today."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

He drew a deep breath. "Because I was there when he made that speech," he said, "I was working for the Old Republic at the time and I snuck into the gallery to hear what he had to say. I know that there were people who opposed what he had done but no one spoke up, not one. He managed to fool them all and they let him do it gladly with a thunderous applause, thinking that he had saved them all from a fate worse than death."

I swallowed. If this had never happened my birth mother would never have been hunted down and killed and I would never have had the life I had known. I would never have come to work for the Empire and worst of all I would never have met Thrawn. "So this is why the rebellion began?"

He nodded. "The galaxy was at war and they saw Palpatine as a way to end that war, which he did. He had the military might and once the Jedi were no more he had the freedom to do as he pleased without any major opposition. People don't really care who rules, for the most part as long as they are fed, clothed and can make a decent living. A few disagreed with his policies and his taking of absolute power under guise of uniting the galaxy. They saw it as an infringement of their rights and freedoms, but they were too afraid to fight him openly and they were vastly outnumbered so they began an underground rebellion which became what you now know as the New Republic. They fought against Palpatine because they thought he was evil and to some extent they were right but the majority of peoples and planets did not see it this way."

"And Isard took over where he left off," I muttered.

My uncle snorted, "Isard is a pale imitation of Palpatine. She is nothing more than a power hungry megalomaniac without vision. She will lose because unlike Palpatine she does not have the charisma or the manipulative skills to hold this galaxy together and she has made enough enemies that few would wish to fight for her if they think she would fall easily enough." He shook his head. "The Empire is not what it once was and she is not the leader to bring it back."

"Thrawn could," I said quietly.

For a moment my uncle regarded me his head tilted slightly to one side. "Your faith in him is admirable Lei'lei but it would take a miracle for him to pull such a thing

off. Perhaps had he moved in directly after the death of the Emperor this would have been the case but now, there are so many divisions and so many factions all fighting for a piece of the galactic pie that he would not only have to have a brilliant plan but a whole lot of luck as well."

He was right and I sighed with the knowledge but it didn't shake my faith. I had seen what Thrawn could do and unlike Lord Vader or the Emperor who had ruled by fear, Thrawn inspired people to follow him. The men and women under his command would die for him and never think twice about it because he would do the same for them.

"What would happen were he to somehow accomplish the goal of winning back the galaxy for the Empire? Do you think he would hand over the power to Isard without a say in the matter? What if he chose to rule the Galaxy instead of leading the military? Would you stand at his side as his queen or his Empress?" Uncle Vahlek asked breaking into my thoughts.

I looked at him, not wavering under the questioning gaze of his pale green eyes. "It wasn't something I ever thought about, Zte'sa." I sighed. Being queen of the galaxy had not ever been on my list of things I wanted to do with my life and somehow I could not see me in that role ever but as his bond-mate I would stand at his side no matter what he chose to do.

"Perhaps you ought to give it some thought. If he were to win and take over as supreme ruler of this galaxy things between you would change, he would change."

I shook my head. "I don't believe that he would." I refused to believe this even though I suspected what he was telling me would be true.

The smile that graced my uncle's lips was sad, almost pitying. "Power always changes people, no matter what. It is simply a question of how they are changed by it and how well they are able to use it rather than be corrupted by it."

"You make it sound like something terrible."

"That is because it can be. Although we are speaking theoretically here since the task we are discussing is a damned near impossible one."

"That may be so but I think he will try anyway, although when you put it this way I don't really know why he would want to."

"With a man such as he, it is not a question of want; it is a question of must," he said thoughtfully. I sighed because I wasn't quite sure what uncle Vahlek meant by that and I was too tired to ask and this just made him smile at me. "Though if you do somehow manage to become empress, or queen, or princess of the galaxy you must promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"You will write more than once every three months to your father!"

I laughed. "I guess that's a promise I can make and maybe even keep," I said as I stifled a yawn. It was late and it had been an incredibly long day.

"Go to bed and get some sleep." Uncle Vahlek said after watching me try not to yawn again. "You have no deadlines to keep and you be far better off being well rested if you are going to go sneaking around the Imperial palace behind Isard's back than beat out like an over worked ronto."

As usual he was right and before I fell asleep on the couch I decided that bed was a far better choice. Thrawn's couch was very nice but it wasn't the most comfortable in the galaxy and I knew this from firsthand experience. With a kiss goodnight on his stubbled cheek I left my Uncle to his own devices and went to bed.

It seemed strange to slip between the clean sheets of the beautiful antique bed that Thrawn and I had shared all on my own. Lying awake in the dimly lit bedroom I missed his presence and his guidance more than ever before and wondered, self pityingly, if he missed me at all. As tired as I was I couldn't sleep. My uncle's words kept marching through my head over and over driving me crazy. He was right about everything he had said, which made it worse. I desperately wanted to be able to talk to Thrawn about it all but he was more light years away than I could count in a place where the HoloNet did not reach so relaying a message was the only way to get in touch with him, or by courier. I sighed feeling very alone.

Eventually, some hours later, I slipped into an uneasy, nightmare filled sleep that had me waking up sweat soaked and crying out in the early hours of the morning. I could not recall the images that had spiralled around me but the terror they had left in their wake remained. There was no going back to sleep after that so I got up. Wrapped in the warmest robe I could find I made my way to the kitchen, found the bottle of Corellian Brandy and poured a generous glass then headed out to the balcony only to find my Uncle had beaten me to it.

"Bad dreams?" he asked, turning his head to look at me. He was standing at the railing staring out over the city.

"Did I wake you?"

"No. It seems that sleep eludes us both tonight," he said sounding weary.

"What is bothering you?" I asked.

"How did you put it earlier? Old ghosts," he replied.

I came to stand beside him and sipped the brandy slowly. "Why did you come with me? You didn't really have to."

"You are not the only one with unfinished business here, Lei'lei," He answered cryptically, taking the brandy glass that I offered and sipping from it.

"Jyrki?" I asked.

But uncle Vahlek did not reply instead he turned back to continue staring out over the city skyline as if that would give him the answers he was looking for. I followed his gaze and as I watched the never ending stream of lights from the traffic I hoped that coming back here had not been a colossal mistake. If the truth in my heart were to be spoken out loud, I had a terrible feeling about it all and the desire to haul tail and go back to the safety of Nirauan and be with Thrawn was far greater than I could ever have admitted to. For the first time in a very long time I was afraid but I didn't know what it was I was scared of. My uncle must have sensed this because he put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me into a hug.

"Whatever you are worrying about hasn't happened yet," he said.

And before I could sensor myself I said, "I know but it will and that frightens the hell out of me."

At a loss for words my uncle just glanced at me then nodded grimly. I suppose he had known enough jedi and force users in his time to know when to accept a bad feeling

for what it was and leave it at that. Somehow it was comforting to be with someone who wasn't trying to sugar coat the truth. I just hoped that when whatever it was that I was sensing finally came, it wasn't as bad as I imagined and I was ready to deal with it.

## **Chapter Four**

If there was one thing that drove me crazy it was the terrible sense of impending doom countered by the fact that nothing terrible or out of the ordinary happened. Although I woke up almost every night bathed in sweat, stifling screams with my fists, the next day brought an eerie normality. It was so normal in fact that sometimes I even forgot the Emperor and Lord Vader had died. It was eerie to spend time in my old office going through old business, getting my affairs in order and sifting through three years worth of interoffice nonsense. Every now and then I would look up from my desk half expecting to see Lord Vader walk through the door way, barking orders in his usual acerbic manner. I missed him still although the ache had lessened but it was enough that I still had not gone to his Coruscant mansion to search the Imperial Data base from his computer there.

I took my time when it came to dealing with the office stuff. My droid had been destroyed when the Executor had blown up and I was saddened by his loss. While he had been an annoying chatterbox he knew his job and had done it well. I did not feel like training a new one in so this mean I did all the sorting out myself and this was far more time consuming than I had imagined. In between the work, Shiv made certain that I was not left alone much and whenever he had the time we went out to lunch and met with friends. It was so good to sit amongst people who knew me almost better than I knew myself, to laugh about mundane stuff and forget the terrible things that had happened. I was never sure if Shiv had told everyone not to bring the subject up or if enough time had passed that no one really thought about it anymore, but what ever the reason I was glad not to have to talk about Endor or my own stupidity afterwards. Even my relationship with Thrawn seemed to be a topic that was kept quiet until Cati joined us for dinner. Once we had settled at the quiet table to chatter about everything she had asked the one question no one else dared to.

"So, how is your gentleman doing?"

Everyone had stopped and stared at me, then at Cati then at me again. She had just grinned and given me a look that only a Rodian could which said...*so are you going to answer me or what?*

After a careful and considered sip of my drink I told her and everyone else about my adventures with Thrawn and what had happened between us, in an abbreviated form. After I had finished the questions never seemed to end but it was Ynyth who had the presence of mind to raise her glass and propose a toast to the 'happy couple.' It felt a bit odd to say the least but I had smiled anyway, accepting their congratulations and good wishes with a blush.

Cati was always a welcome addition to our small gatherings. Her bright cheerful curiosity always made for fascinating conversations and this time was no exception. She knew even more gossip than Shiv and imparted it with a cheerful glee. It was interesting to hear how many things had changed but also to see that things had stayed the same. Despite the death of the Emperor and Lord Vader things, on the grand scale, had not really changed all that much.



We met often and I was grateful for the company. My uncle sporadically vanished, saying he had business to attend to, leaving me to my own devices which would have been spent alone had Shiv not seen to it that this was not the case. Before I knew it almost three weeks had passed and I was no closer to finding a way for Thrawn to get more information than before but I was fairly sure he would not mind so much. It had occurred to me after the first letter from him had arrived that he had half expected me to forget about my self-appointed mission and settle back into a routine on Coruscant again. He understood, I was sure of it, that seeing my friends again was be good for me and I suspected that a break from me would do him good as well. By the end of the third week my life on Coruscant had almost become routine and only the terrible holo-news casts about the outbreaks of the mysterious disease that was killing aliens seemed to disrupt the day to day comings and goings but even this, like most other news which did not directly concern me, eventually got pushed into the back ground. I probably would not have given it much thought at all had it not been for the continuing dreams that woke me up almost nightly.

Gasping for breath and soaked in cold sweat I had gotten up and showered because I knew there was no going back to sleep from that. The nightmares were disjointed and made no sense, more often than not simply a collection of terrifying images that I could not put any meaning to. More often than not I had woke up as a crowd of alien beings surrounded me, their skin sloughing away from their bodies, craziness in their eyes crying for me to help them. In my dreams I could smell the rotting of their flesh and the memory of this stench often made me sick upon waking. My uncle got used to my screams shattering the still of night and had long since stopped running to see if I was being murdered in my sleep. Instead he would sometimes come to stand hesitantly at the door way to the main bedroom before I alleviated his fears by telling him I was okay. If I asked, he would keep my company while I got up to get a drink, sitting with me as we sipped brandy listening when I wanted to talk about the nightmares and keeping his peace if all I wanted was not to be alone. It was during these times that I missed Thrawn desperately. I spent a lot of time at the Palace in my office. I was a place I felt comfortable and safe, though I was never sure why. Time slipped away from me there and without Shiv badgering me to join him and Ynyth for supper or going out to meet up with the gang I had a tendency to forget the passage of time and work until I was almost falling asleep. I always had an excuse to not go home it seemed and this time it was because at the last minute Cati had called off the get together we had planned due to a headache.

During our last get together, I had been describing my time with the Dantassi when she had asked about the clothes they wore. Despite her high fashion designs she maintained a keen interest in the traditional clothes from other worlds. I had told her I would bring my Dantassi clothes over for her to see. Since both of our schedules were fairly flexible I didn't mind her putting this off till later. I had told her I would drop by the next day and that had been fine with her. She had sounded exhausted but that was not too surprising as she had been busy with a large order that had her going a bit frantic and the last time we had all been together Shiv had commented that she ought to take things easier because she looked tired. She had told him tartly that he should try making ten dresses in four days and he had backed off but I had had to agree with him,

she looked tired so I wasn't too surprised when she messaged me to let me know she was making an early night of it. I, on the other hand, was not. I was almost done with the major sorting out and I wanted to finish it so I ignored the fact that I was yawning my face off and continued to work despite the late hour.

I suppose I should not have been shocked when a letter arrived for me from Thrawn but I was. I was even more taken aback that it was Jarack who delivered it because I had not seen or heard from him in ages. He found me sitting in my office going through the last of the paperwork which I felt I had to sift through. He grinned as he walked in but before he could say anything I had surprised him by jumping up and flinging my arms around him in a huge hug.

"Thrawn had told me you were still alive but until now I hadn't believed it," I said in a rush as he gently and somewhat embarrassedly untangled himself from me.

"I could say the same about you Miss Gabriel." He chided as he pulled out a letter from his satchel and laid it on my desk.

"Cup of spiced 'caf?" I asked.

"Don't mind if I do," he said and then, with his hands wrapped around the small cup for warmth he chatted to me about the latest news to come from Nirauan.

"So he's busy?" I said after Jarack had finished telling me about the work to expand the Empire's presence in the Unknown Region.

"Especially in the last week. They began the push out past the Braxant Sector but of course it is slow going. You know the Admiral; he likes to make sure that all his dejarik pieces are in place before he sweeps the board."

I nodded, that certainly sounded like Thrawn. "I didn't think that I had a way to send mail to him so I didn't write anything," I said as he finished his drink and handed me back the cup.

"He expected as much." Jarack replied. "He told me that he would enjoy surprising you for a change." When I rolled my eyes at him he grinned. "Well, I will not be leaving for twenty hours or so, my ship needs some repairs and I have some other business to attend to here, so if you can write something for me to take to him in that time I can swing by tomorrow to pick it up.

"I can do that." I nodded.

"Good then, I'll see you tomorrow," he said cheerfully then added. "It is good to see you again Miss Gabriel."

"You too." I replied, meaning every word.

Only once he had left did I pick up Thrawn's letter and allow the barrage of images that flowed with it to wash over me. They made me smile. He knew I would see these pictures and had planned accordingly. I loved him for it but would wait until I was done here before I opened the envelope to read what he had to say. As usual, I got home later than I had planned. I had decided to stay and finish up so that in that in the morning I could close all the open files and essentially be done. This meant that I could then begin the clear out of Lord Vader's office which would be both short but painful. I still was not quite ready to face going into his house.

The flat was dark and quiet when I arrived. My uncle had left early in the morning the day before and had not yet returned. I had long since given up on questioning about his mysterious ways and accepted that he came and went much the

same way the wind did. I showered, dressed for bed, made a cup of tea, settled down to read Thrawn's letter and then once I had read his news I wrote him back, telling him everything that had happened so far not leaving anything out. I described the nightmares I had been having, similar to the ones I had had on Hjal when he had come back and wondered if he would have any interpretations for me. Once I was done, I sealed it and then went to bed but I couldn't sleep.

Thrawn's letter had been cheerful and chatty but underneath the banter was something else. He was busy with the expansion into the Unknown Regions, even more so than prior to the Emperor's death but he was also preparing for his return to the core, a long term plan that would take several years and he was looking for a way to increase his military numbers. The word Clone popped into my head, although he had not written it and I knew it was on his mind as well as mine but the problem of how to get clones grown fast was the hurdle that seemed impossible to overcome. There was also the issue of where to find reliable cloning facilities. I wished that Lord Vader was still alive, because I was sure he would have some answers for me on this, and then I smiled because if he was still living this problem would not be on the table to begin with. Still this problem weighed on my mind and I wrestled with it as I fell asleep.

*I walked down a long dark corridor flanked on either side by doors with transparasteel windows which showed into small padded cells. The corridor seemed endless. As I passed each door I glanced in and saw that these cells were inhabited. Without thinking about I started to look inside each cell. Alien eyes looked back at me, blank and staring. Some of them were screaming and clawing at the walls, others were simply sitting and staring, their skin sloughing off their bodies and faces. Despite my horror I could not look away.*

*"Tragic, isn't it?" asked a voice from behind me.*

*I wheeled around to stare directly into the face of Ysanne Isard. "What is wrong with them?"*

*"They are dying." She stated as blandly as if she were speaking about the weather.*

*"But you're working on a cure," I said.*

*She simply looked at me, her mismatched eyes boring right through me. "A cure?" she asked. "Bacta is the cure."*

*"Bacta? Then why are so many dying?" I asked as we walked down the corridor some more. I tried to shut out the screams of agony which wailed all around us.*

*"Perhaps you should ask the rebels that question, after all, it is they who keep interrupting our supply line." She replied calmly.*

*"Why don't you stop them?"*

*"It is all a matter of numbers and force and I do not wish to leave Coruscant unattended in the event of an attack."*

*I shook my head. "Grand Admiral Thrawn could help you," I said.*

*Her lips twitched in a slight smile. "He too, is alien," she said gesturing to the door we had stopped in front of.*

*I could not help myself as I looked into the room. Gorge rose in my throat as my eyes met those of a Chiss male, writhing in agony as he lay twisted and bent on the*

*floor. I could not tell who it was because his skin, including his face was full of broken and oozing sores and pustules.*

*"Who is he?" I whispered, sure it was not Thrawn.*

*"Why don't you go in and ask him?" Isard asked as she opened the door and pushed me in.*

*I fell on the floor, hands sprawled out before me. The first thing that hit me was the stench of decay and waste. The second thing that I realised was that there were suddenly more beings in this room than the Chiss. I got to my knees and looked around me. I saw faces that seemed familiar but were so badly distorted and destroyed it was impossible to tell. They all stared at me and then before I could move or do anything they began to close in on me, their ruined hands outstretched calling my name until I knew that these had all been my friends once upon a time. I tried to back away but there was no place to go and I ended up backed into a corner, curled up as small as I possibly could.*

*It was the Chiss who reached me first, his hands cupping my face before I could stop him. I looked up into his eyes because there was no place else to look and realised that I knew him as well but I could not be sure if I was looking at Thrawn or Navaari because his eyes kept changing from one to the other.*

*"Help us," he said and puss oozed out from cracks in his lips. "Help us Tekari." And he leaned in to try and kiss me. I went berserk fighting him off but he was strong and the others, their faces so familiar to me, were at his side, their hands reaching for me, clawing at me all the while moaning for me to help them. I could not get away from them and from outside in the corridor I could hear Isard laughing as she ignored my screams.*

I woke up so suddenly that there was not even time to think before I bolted to the 'fresher to vomit. I sat with my head resting against the lid of the toilet bowl catching my breath. A soft knock on the door let me know that at some point in the night my Uncle had returned and I had woken him up. When he knocked again I yelled that I was okay and he came in, I heard running water and then accepted the glass he offered gratefully.

"These nightmares, Lei'lei, they're getting worse," he said after a few moments, helping me get to my feet and watching while I brushed my teeth.

I nodded although he had not actually asked me a question.

He sighed. "Come on, I will make you some tea and you can tell me about what you saw."

I shuddered I followed him into the living room and once he had brought tea recounted the dream that had made me sick to my stomach. When I was done he sat back in the chair and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I don't envy you, these dreams are terrible," he said, "But you know that Thrawn is alright and not anywhere near this planet and as far as I know the outbreaks are all contained to Coruscant."

I nodded glumly. "I know he is fine, I got a letter from him today. This wasn't about him, it's about something else but I can't seem to define it or put my finger on exactly what it is. Half the battle is trying to unravel what the hell these dreams are really about."

"How do you know they mean anything at all? News of this virus is all over the holonets. It is in your subconscious and you are particularly sensitive to your surroundings, something which comes with the territory of the force sensitive I'm afraid."

I sighed and cupped the hot mug of tea in my hands grateful for its warmth. "Because firstly, they have that feel to them and secondly, it is virtually the same dream every single night." I sighed. "Ever since I returned to Coruscant I have been dreaming the same thing over and over again. It doesn't make sense and it's driving me crazy."

He regarded me for a moment then nodded. "Maybe there is no direct message. Perhaps you should stop looking so hard at the dreams themselves, try not thinking about it and the answer will come to you sideways."

As odd as that sounded, he was right. We talked until I began to doze in the chair.

"Go back to bed and get some sleep, Lei'lei," My uncle said nudging me to get up. "As you keep telling me they are only dreams and if bacta is the cure then there is nothing to worry about is there? Not even the rebels would stop bacta from getting through if they knew that beings were dying from lack of it would they?"

I had nodded at him, too shattered to speak but I wondered if he was right. Then decided I was too tired to try and sort it all out. I needed to sleep I had a dinner date with Shiv, Ynyth, Cati and the others. The last thing I wanted was to be told I was starting to look like I was back working for the Emperor again.

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My uncle was right. I worried too much about things I could do nothing about and the days passed one after the other without me doing much at all. I supposed that the time I had spent working so closely with Lord Vader and under the Emperor's piercing gaze had made me a little paranoid. It was a hard habit to break. I had gotten used to being wary, always getting a sense for Lord Vader's current mood in order to dodge when necessary. I remembered the ever increasing sense of doom when the Emperor showed up or requested my presence, although I could hardly be blamed for feeling that way especially after my very last meeting with him. I still shuddered involuntarily when I thought about what he had planned to do. However, these two men were no longer alive and the galaxy had moved onwards for almost three years. I wondered why I could not seem to let go of some of my past. When I voiced these thoughts to my uncle had nodded and then suggested I stop avoiding the job I had come here to do and simply get on with it. I explained that my biggest issue was that I did not really want to go into Lord Vader's home on my own. Uncle Vahlek's solution was simple.

*"Well Lei'lei, if that's all that's stopping you then I will come with you," he said.*

The truth was that I wasn't exactly sure what it was that was holding me back but I couldn't exactly argue with my uncle's logic and accepted his offer of help.

He had also wanted to return to the old Jedi temple and had been genuinely surprised when I had explained to him that Palpatine had removed everything of use

from the building shortly before heading off to Endor and I had no idea where he had hidden it all.

"He didn't want it to fall into the wrong hands, he had told me." I had said.

My uncle had made a face. "What about your little library?"

I'd shrugged. "I haven't been there yet, either. There are just too many memories here and I don't know what to do with them all." As I said this, I realised it was a terribly lame excuse for not actually wanting to get on with the task of cleaning out my life here so that I could really move to Nirauan. I had discovered that I liked being back on the Core world, I liked being with my friends who knew me almost too well and accepted me anyway. I liked the constant availability of shops and culture and everything else that went along with being on a highly populated planet with huge cities. I had stopped mid sentence as I had explained all this to my uncle realising that the place I had always thought of as too loud and busy had now become a place I felt I had missed terribly. When had that happened?

My uncle had simply laughed then. "Lei'lei you know what you are?" he had asked with a grin.

"What?"

"A jax who is always on the wrong side of the door."

I could not argue with him because it was sort of true. I had lived in so many places now that none of them really felt like home, yet at the same time, all of them felt like home. It was strange. No matter where I was I now missed being someplace else.

It was decided after this conversation that we would go into the library together and then to Lord Vader's home and get the tasks at hand done. Then, my uncle had told me, I could decide what I really wanted to do.

The Imperial palace was quiet when we ventured in through the mostly disused south entrance. Isard, Shiv had told me, was away at the moment. Not that I thought she cared a Jawa's damn about what I was doing. I was, on the scale of people she thought of as important or dangerous, somewhere around a minus one hundred, which was fine by me.

We walked in silence through the vast and empty corridors, our footsteps echoing around us in a manner I found almost melancholy. Once upon a time this building had been full of people, working and living here. Now it seemed more like a shell full of ghosts who couldn't let go. It was interesting that both the Emperor and Isard had terrible reputations for being cruel and strict but the Emperor's charisma had somehow counteracted his mean side. He had brought a sense of majesty and glamour to the Imperial court which had carried out into the rest of the palace daily life. Isard on the other was like a black hole that sucked away anything that smacked of frivolity. Under her rule the Imperial palace had become a place of quiet fear and drudgery, Shiv had told me. Most of the extraneous jobs had been eliminated and over half the staff fired or moved to different, more useful jobs. The sparkle of the court had gone along with the courtesans and courtiers as well as the rest of the hangers-on. I could not blame her for wanting to shake up the place but the atmosphere her changes left was one of quiet impending gloom and it made me a little sad.

"That is the difference between a military leader and a political leader, Lei'lei." My uncle had explained when I had voiced these thoughts. "The one sees only the bare essentials, paring down to nothing to get the job done. The court finery and all the trappings that go along with it are distractions and are therefore removed. Strong military rule and obedience keeps the workers in line not the promise of more wealth and a better life. The politician, on the other hand, dresses his will up in glamour and glitter to beguile the public into towing the line. He makes you want the better things and more things and promises you will have this life if you do as he asks."

"People loved Palpatine's court," I said.

"Of course they did, it was stunning but underneath all the twinkle and glitz, people were lobbying, manoeuvring themselves into better positions through the currying of many favours and buying their way to the top. Did you never notice these intrigues going on while you were here?"

I nodded. "Yes, Thrawn often pointed it all out to me but I thought it was stupid."

My uncle grinned. "Well, you never did like playing games. You always were rather direct in things."

When I opened the door to the little library the Emperor had long ago given to me I was not very surprised to see that it too had mostly been cleared out. I wandered around the now empty room and sighed. Brushing my fingertips along the various dust filled shelves I sighed with a resigned sense of loss I could not explain. When the sudden and short image of the Emperor flashed into my mind I was unprepared for it. He had known about my talent and I suppose he had known I would return here. Once I got over the shock of seeing and hearing him again I was just angry.

"What is it?" My uncle asked as I sat down hard on the ground to catch my breath.

"He took everything away," I said, "He didn't think it was safe here anymore." Which was partly the truth. I had seen him, standing almost exactly where I sat now, and as if he were actually speaking to me and not to thin air he had said, "*If you wish to further your education about the force and its intricacies you must come to me little one.*" My hatred for this man knew no bounds and I had to fight to get my heart rate back down to normal.

The books that were left I gathered up and put in the large pack I had brought with me. There were not that many but I wanted them anyway. My uncle took the heavy pack from my hands and slung it over his shoulder. With one last glance around the now empty and abandoned room we left and I wasn't sorry to say goodbye to this part of my life.

As we made our way back through the palace it suddenly occurred to me that part of the reason I found the place so gloomy now was that many of the really beautiful works of art and precious sculptures were gone. I found this very odd and wondered if the Emperor had foreseen something that everyone else was over looking. I had been going to suggest heading to the small private room he had once shown me to see if the little statue of the dancer was still there but I knew it would not be. He had coveted that sculpture, and his glee in learning its little mysteries convinced me that he would no more leave that behind than he would his soul if he even had one of those. Instead I urged my uncle to leave with me and we headed over to Lord Vader's home. Once I was

done here there would be no more real reasons to stay on Coruscant and I wasn't quite sure how to deal with that but I couldn't put this off any more.

Getting into his home was effortless. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting, after all I had a key and the security code passes, but still the ease of it all surprised me. Perhaps it was because I was very used to seeing the Dark Trooper guards he had stationed there and the many other people he had employed to keep unwanted people out. Now the place was deserted.

The silence around me was deafening and the sadness which engulfed me felt a little like drowning. Surprisingly enough, while getting into Lord Vader's home had been effortless, actually standing in it was more difficult than I could have imagined. I had not really been prepared for the sudden ache of loss that I experienced and it caught me completely off guard.

"Lei'lei, are you alright?" my uncle's voice was surprisingly gentle.

I nodded as I wiped away my tears, now grateful he had insisted on coming with me. I wondered if this dreadful sensation of missing someone ever truly went away. I took a deep breath and swallowed the rest of the sadness down. I had not come here to mourn. I had come here to do a job and crying would not help me at all. We walked through the lonely halls to my old office, the sense of gloom dissipated when I turned on the lights and I was grateful I had my own space to return to. I went over to my desk and sat down. I let out the breath I didn't even realise I had been holding noisily and switched the computer system on.

It did not surprise me that all access from this particular terminal was denied. I stared at the annoying words on the screen and then typed in the set of codes which I knew would get around the security lockout without letting the system watchers know. I had not used this ability I had been granted all that often while Lord Vader was still alive but occasionally he had wanted some information retrieved which had required bypassing the standard security protocols. I had never dreamed that I would be using it after his death to spy on the Empire for another Imperial. While it was one thing to log into the system it was quite another to find what I wanted to and my annoyance grew exponentially as I was stonewalled at every turn.

"What exactly is it that you are looking for?" Uncle Vahlek asked after about an hour of listening to me sigh in frustration.

"That's the trouble, I don't really know and the system is huge." I replied staring at the screen. "I suppose I am trying to find a listing of spy-ware that transmits long range or something that would help Thrawn get a handle on what is going on here but I have no idea where to even start looking."

My uncle shooed me out of the chair. "Here, let me," he said.

I got up and let him sit down, then stared in surprise as he waltzed through the system as though he had used it his entire life. What had taken me the better part of an hour took him no more than fifteen minutes. A complete listing of all the listening devices and their transmitter codes in the palace.

"How did you know how to do that?" I whispered in amazement.

"Evidence of a misspent youth," He replied cryptically. "Do you have a data-disk to download this onto?"



I nodded and gave it to him, watching as he initiated the information transfer like a pro. He asked for a second one to make a backup copy, something I might not have thought about doing.

"Shall I encrypt them?" he asked.

"Might be a good idea." I nodded.

I watched as he began the encryption process. "How will Thrawn know how to decode this?" I asked.

"I am using a Dantassi cipher he'll recognise it as soon as he sees it but it is insanely difficult for someone who does not know it to slice," he said.

There was a moment of silence while I digested this information and then I asked, "How do you know so much about the Dantassi, Zte'sa?"

He glanced up at me. "There was a time in my life when I wanted to join them," he replied.

"They don't let outsiders in," I said.

"I know that but at the time I had hope to prove my worth and become the exception to the rule, seems that you have that honour instead," he said and there was no mistaking the odd mixture of sorrow and pride in his voice. "But that did not stop me from learning all I could while I was allowed to. The Admiral will know how to decrypt this when he gets it." And with that I knew he would not talk any more about his past. He was too full of secrets and mysteries. When I was a child he had both scared and fascinated me now I just found his mysteriousness vaguely annoying.

The downloading seemed to take forever even though it was no more than a minute. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to reach out with my force sense, looking for danger, looking for the mass army of Stormtroopers coming to shoot us as infiltrators for slicing into the main frame but there was nothing. The place was quiet and as far as I could tell no one had discovered what we were up to. It surprised me that these back door pass codes were still good but then again if even Isard had not known about them who would have ever changed them. While no one knew I was rummaging around the system if they actually bothered checked the logs they'd know that this terminal had been accessed recently but they wouldn't know who had done so or for what reason.

"I'm done, is there anything else you need from here?" Uncle Vahlek asked breaking into my thoughts.

"I don't think so." I replied with a shrug, then a sudden thought came to me and before I had even thought about why I would ask for such a thing I said, "Wait, can you wipe all traces of me from the system?"

He glanced up at me. "What do you mean?"

"I want to disappear from official records the same way Thrawn has."

"Why?"

"If Coruscant falls and the palace is taken over then I don't want my name on any lists that people can call up. I don't want the fact that I worked here to come back and haunt me or my family," I said, "It seems to me that getting labelled with a faction that isn't the one in power could be a death sentence for us all."

"What makes you think that the New Republic will be able to take Coruscant?" He asked stopping to stare at me.

I swallowed. "I don't know, Zte'sa it's just a nagging feeling that something big and bad is coming. I've had it ever since we landed and I can't seem to shake it."

"Does this have to do with these dreams you are having?"

I shrugged slightly. "They may be part of it but there are other things going on here. The rebels took Borleias even though that world was supposed to have been well protected by the Imperials and from the report I just read it fell far too easily." This was not a very plausible reason but the truth of the matter was I had no concrete answers except the Emperor had removed everything of beauty, importance and wealth. He had taken away anything that could be used as teachings for people who were force sensitive and I knew that Lord Vader's son considered himself a Jedi. What was more valuable to a would-be Jedi than a room full of information about the history and the use of the force? It felt to me as though the Emperor had prepared for an invasion and now, more than ever I was sure Coruscant would fall it was a question of when not if. I wondered if Isard suspected or knew this as well and if she did then why was she not doing more to protect the planet.

For a moment Uncle Vahlek regarded me and then he nodded. "I can probably set that up so that your name is impossible to find, make you obscure and invisible but this will take a little time. If I erase you completely from the system you'll lose all access, among other things, and I don't think you want that do you?"

"No, losing access would be bad. I just want to vanish from all the records," I said quietly.

He nodded. He understood the need for anonymity and secrets. "Okay, but keep an ear out, this might raise a few flags if I touch the wrong thing."

I nodded and as he began the process of making me disappear I wandered around my office, restless and bored. Then because I had nothing else to do I vanished into the little kitchen area that Lord Vader had ordered built just for me and rooted around to see if there was anything left I could maybe make something to drink with.

My uncle accepted the cup of tea I had made him with an absent nod. I sipped from my own cup, watching the computer screen through the steam that curled into the air. My uncle worked the system with a slicer's ease that puzzled me. I knew that as Tze'yusha'Jin he was essentially a well trained assassin but slicing was a smuggler's tool.

"The Emperor once told me that papa was a smuggler. Is this true?" I asked suddenly, remembering Palpatine's biting statement as he had once tried to coerce me into doing his will.

Uncle Vahlek glanced up at me, his pale green eyes boring into mine. "Do you believe him?"

"Why would he lie about that?"

His shoulders heaved as he looked at me. "Your father has done many things in his life, Lei'lei," he said evasively.

I rolled my eyes at his non answer. "Oh for goodness sakes Zte'sa!" I hissed in exasperation.

"Yes, he was a smuggler." He admitted after a moment's stare down. "He was actually very good at it and for a while we worked together in this area but if you are asking if this is when and how I learned to slice the answer is no it isn't."

"Why did he stop?"

That made my uncle smile. "That answer is easy, your mother," he said, "He met her and his world changed. Her one condition for marrying him was that he find work that was legitimate. It took him longer than expected but eventually he bought the docking bay in Mos Eisley fulfilling his promise to her."

"So were you all on a smuggling run when you found me?"

"No that was a legitimate transport run, unless you call moving people from one star system to another, smuggling." He smiled at the memory.

"What did he smuggle?" I asked suddenly curious about this part of my father's life I had never known before.

"What ever was in demand and what ever he was paid to move. Smugglers don't generally choose their cargo unless they want to get blacklisted as picky and difficult to work with." He explained. "He didn't ask too many questions, he just did his job."

"Did he ever get caught?"

"No. Your father was very good at that job just as he is good at the one he does now."

I nodded feeling a sense of pride, wondering why no one ever told me any of this before. As if he had read my thoughts my uncle continued.

"Once he left that life behind it was in the past. He never saw any reason to talk about it because it wasn't relevant and he did not feel you needed to know and perhaps he was worried you would think less of him."

I shook my head. "That's not likely to happen Zte'sa."

"I know but maybe you should write home more and let him know that yourself?"

I grimaced at his suggestion but nodded anyway then, sipping my tea, allowed the quiet to slip back into the room so when my seldom used, private comm went off shattering the silence I jumped slopping tea on the floor. It was Shiv.

"Merly?" He asked, "Where are you? I've been trying to reach you at the flat for hours! I couldn't remember this comm's blasted code!"

"What's up?" I asked ignoring his question because something in his voice put me on alert.

"It's Cati," he said, "I think you'd better come."

"Cati?"

"We're at the Naberrie Medical facility in the Co-co district," he said and his voice wavered.

"Shiv, what is going on?" I asked.

"Just get here," He replied flatly. "Now." And then he shut the comm off.

I looked at my uncle who nodded that he was finished with what he was doing. He shut the system down and wordlessly we left as ghost like as we had come. Worry and fear gnawed at my gut as he drove us to the medical centre.

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Shiv along with Ynyth was waiting for us in the lobby of the Medical Facility and from the look on his face what ever he had to tell me, it was terrible news.

"Shiv, what the hell is going on?" I asked before he could speak.

"It's Cati...." He paused, "She has that virus that's been killing non humans. They don't think she'll last the night," he said not mincing words.

"What?" I asked not believing what he had just said, "She was fine we all had dinner together not that long ago!"

He shook his head. "That was over two and half weeks ago, and since then she's cancelled every time for headaches and such. I know it doesn't seem long but this virus works very fast and she never told anyone how ill she was. Now it is too late." His voice trembled and he was close to tears.

"I thought bacta treatments cured it?"

"If it is caught in time," he said miserably. "They say she is too far gone and there isn't enough bacta to spare for a patient in her condition. The medical centers have been overrun with new cases in the last couple of months and there is just not enough bacta to treat them all."

I was too stunned to speak. Not enough bacta, since when? I shook my head to clear it. "Can I see her?"

He nodded, "She asking for you. She knows what is happening to her so I guess she wants to say goodbye." He swallowed down his emotions as he began to lead the way down to the Isolation unit. Both my uncle and I were silent as we followed him through the dimly lit sterile looking hallways. "And Merly, it won't be pretty." He added as we stepped off the turbo lift into the isolation unit which felt about as creepy as it could get. There really had not been much of an attempt to make it welcoming or comfortable to the relatives and friends of patients. The dull, pallid green walls were covered with warnings and safety protocols. The waiting area was small and aside from the small reception desk, everything else was hidden behind door of thick durasteel with no windows.

"How bad is it, Shiv?"

"Bad," he replied. "The authorities were alerted when one of her neighbours heard strange sounds coming from her flat, they had the building admin open the door and then they had to call in the medics. I was called because I am her emergency contact."

I heard Ynyth sobbing behind me but I didn't dare to look at her because if I did I would start crying as well and it seemed to me that someone had to hold it together, this was my turn. I nodded my understanding too choked up to speak. I had seen the reports and heard the holo-casts about this virus which they had still not found a reason for, or a vaccine against. It was virulent and deadly, sweeping through the planet's alien population like sand in a wind storm. The demand for bacta had been so heavy that the suppliers could not keep up with it and now there was a shortage of the stuff which was the only known cure. The rumour I had heard was that the Rebellion was interrupting the flow of bacta from Thyferra in order to hoard it for their own people and word on the street was that if things didn't change soon things were going to get ugly on this planet very soon, very fast. The news reports hinted that Rebels had already infiltrated the Core, and that there were spies on every corner. I never paid these reports much attention because the news casts whispered of these things constantly, urging loyal Imperial citizens to be ever wary of suspicious characters.

Internal Imperial memos had suggested another theory, that the virus was a biological weapon most likely engineered by the War Lord Zsinj to gain a foothold on Coruscant by dividing the loyalties of the population. Zsinj was an Imperial Admiral turned rogue and he had declared independence from the Empire shortly after the battle of Endor. He had created an elite military force and set about dividing to conquer. I found it strange that Isard did not consider him much of a threat or at least that is what one of the reports I had read told me, because he was quite powerful. I thought about this now, wondering if it had been he who had somehow managed to set this all up, introducing some viral agent into the air or water supply to kill indiscriminately and cause mass panic.

If Isard was indeed hiring specialists to find a way to vaccinate against this virus, or another cure that worked as well as bacta she was dragging her heels about it. The numbers of dead rose daily and what had started out as nothing more than a few casualty reports was turning into a pandemic. Already star-ports were flooded with aliens trying to get off Coruscant and that in itself surprised me because if this virus was as contagious and as deadly as it was being reported I did not understand why a planet wide quarantine had not been put into place. There were too many questions and not enough answers and now one of my best friends was dying from this virus no one seemed to know anything about.

Shiv stood at the reception desk and spoke with the droid on duty after about ten very long minutes one of the doctors came out to meet with us. I knew right away from the set of his mouth and that look in his eyes that there was absolutely no hope. This place smelled like death and this doctor had seen a lot of it. The beings that came in here never left.

He came into the small waiting area looking haggard and much older than he should have. He repeated what Shiv had said, that she was too far gone and even if the bacta could help her she would have to have several organ replacements and there simply was not enough time or bacta or anything now that would help her.

"What exactly does this virus do?" I asked, my voice sounding far away and oddly calm to my ears.

The doctor shook his head. "That is the trouble, no one can agree on the path it takes. It is almost as if it were many viruses all bundled into one. It attacks each alien race slightly differently but the results, if left too long, are all the same, death."

"Differently?" I asked him. "How is that possible?"

He sighed and suddenly looked so weary that I wanted to tell him to go home and get some rest. "It jumps from one species to another and as it does so it seems to mutate, tailoring itself to attack that specific alien immune system. Gamorreans become dehydrated in the initial stages, with boils covering their flesh to the point that their skin cracks open..." he paused and looked at me wondering how much details to give.

"Go on doctor."

"The end-stage disease makes them restless, they cannot lie down but their skin opens up with sores, their internal organs break down and liquefy, essentially they bleed to death through every orifice. The Quarren patients we have seen so far differ in that instead of boils, their skin turns black as the decay sets in, their immune system seems to go crazy and ...well...dissolve to death."

I had to take a deep steadying breath as for a moment the world swam about me. "And Rodians?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Miss Akami is the first Rodian we have treated here at this facility. We had hoped the virus was simply a Gamorrean and Quarren disease but now we know it is worse than we thought. I have been in contact with the other facilities on the planet and there are no reports of three more separate alien races that have contracted it. We still don't know how it is spread and it seems to be getting worse as it jumps from one species to the next."

I nodded. "If she had been brought in sooner would that have saved her?" He sighed and shrugged ever so slightly. "I don't know. This virus has a short incubation time and patients can be asymptomatic until, for what ever reason, it breaks out then the decline is very rapid. It could be that she thought she had Rodian flu or maybe food poisoning. From what I have been led to understand the initial symptoms can feel like normal, treatable every day illnesses. We think, that as a general rule of thumb, the virus incubates for several weeks and then takes approximately seven days to fully break out but it is only in the last seventy-two hours that most patients realise something is very wrong with them by then for almost all of the infected it is simply too late. I am truly sorry."

"Just how long has she got?" I asked astonished at how business like my voice suddenly sounded. I could have been talking about the timer on a parking metre.

He gave me that *I wish I had better news for you* look and said "It is hard to say at this point. At this stage it can take anywhere from a few hours to a day. As I said before, we have no experience with Rodians having contracted this virus. She might last the night but not much longer than that."

"Can I see her?"

"Miss Gabriel, we don't know how this virus travels yet and I cannot risk you becoming a carrier." He shook his head.

"I won't let my friend die alone, doctor."

He looked at me for a second then said, "I will be honest with you, this is a terrible virus. I have never seen anything like it in my entire career. It isn't something you will want to see and I am sure it is not how you will want to remember your friend."

I stared at him for a long moment, suddenly realising that I had not noticed how blue his eyes were, reminding me sharply of Jyrki. It seemed strange to me that I would consider the doctor's eye colour while Cati lay dying not more than a few metres away from us. It took me a few more seconds to understand that he was still waiting for an answer. He looked at me in that pitying way doctors sometimes had and for reasons I could never explain it suddenly made me angry. Sorrow and pain I knew well enough but anger I could use.

"Listen to me and listen good," I began, my voice a low edgy growl, "Cati is my friend, one of my best friends. She doesn't have family any more so we are all she has got and I will not let her die alone! I don't care how you do it but make it so that we can be with her, am I making myself clear?" I had gathered the force around me and added a push of suggestion with my words. I felt him give in.

He nodded almost absently. "There is an observation room but you will have to cover your clothing and footwear as well as masks. Once you have seen her you can

decide if one of you wants to go into the isolation room to be with her. In order to do that you will have to wear a hazmat suit and I have to warn you, they are not very comfortable."

I looked at him. "Well I doubt they are worse than wearing an EVA suit and going for a walk in zero G."

Oddly enough that made the doctor smile. "You're a spacer?"

I nodded.

He looked at each of us and shook his head slowly. "Our quarantine and safety procedures are in place for a reason so do not break them or else you will find yourselves locked up in an isolation ward yourself."

We nodded and then followed him through the thick doors which separated the Isolation ward from the rest of the planet.

The first thing that I noticed was the smell, or rather the lack of it. There was a soft *whumph* sound as the doors had opened and the doctor had explained that the Isolation ward was on a different ventilation system and the rooms were kept under negative pressure. As we walked through the eerily silent sterile corridors I could feel the sense of horror prick its way through me, starting at the base of my spine and working its way upward until my heart raced with a sudden terror I could not identify.

In the small dressing locker room we were given clothes to wear and a pale faced medical assistant helped us with the protective gowns which went on over our own clothes. I felt as though I were a well wrapped Tusken by the time we were done, it seemed a bit of over kill at least that was what I thought until we were shown into the observation room.

I had thought that my nightmares were beyond bad but they were nothing to the reality of what I saw now. Ynyth made a muffled sound and turned away from the viewing window into Shiv's protective embrace. I felt my uncle move towards me but I held up my hand to stay him. If he showed me any sort of kindness, compassion I would break down as well. I saw when I glanced at him that he understood.

The isolation room was small, sterile looking and empty except for a bed and an Em-D droid. At first my brain could not decipher what I was looking at and then I realised that the small, foetal curled heap on the bed was actually Cati. The bed was a mess of smeared blood and other darkish looking fluids. I could see that her skin, which was usually a pretty green colour, had turned a vile, pallid yellow hue.

"I can't stay in here." Ynyth whispered and Shiv nodded, looking at me as he held her.

"Go, there's nothing either of you can do." I told him answering the question he hadn't actually asked.

"Merly?" His voice shook.

"I'm staying," I said surprised at the determination in my voice. "I won't let her die alone." I looked at the doctor who was watching us with an expressionless face. "I want to be with her."

"Are you certain, Miss?"

"She's aware isn't she?" I asked, avoiding his question, turning back to stare through the observation window. I could sense her through the transparasteel and I could feel her pain.

He drew a deep breath. "As far as we have been able to discern all the patients we have seen infected with this virus have been aware of their situation right up until the moment of death."

I whirled around to stare at him. "She knows what is happening? She feels everything?"

His nod was slight and resigned. "We do what we can but the pain is great. We understand so little about what this virus does or how it attacks the body that there is really very little we can do for our end stage patients except to try and make them comfortable and even that is difficult. It is as if her body is eating itself and we are powerless to stop it."

I glanced at my uncle but his face was impassive. Shiv stared at me, still cradling Ynyth protectively in his arms. "I won't let her die alone," I said again but even I could hear the small shiver of fear in my voice.

"You don't have to do that. She will hardly know you are there." The doctor said. He was lying.

"I will know. You said she is aware of everything then she will know too. No more discussion about this," I said, "Shiv take Ynyth home, I will call you when it's..." The words caught in my throat, "When it is over." There was a long moment of silence while he weighed what I had said then he nodded and without a word he and Ynyth left.

Lei'lei..." My uncle began but I interrupted him.

"I won't leave her to die all alone horribly, not like this." I kept saying the same words over and over again.

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked me directly in the eyes. "Child, what I wanted to say was that I will be here for you."

I swallowed. He had not called me that in a very long time. It was always his way of punctuating something he wanted me to pay great attention to. I just nodded and followed the doctor into the next room hoping I really did have the strength to do this and that it wasn't all talk.

The hazardous environment suit was a lot like an EVA suit but lighter and a little easier to move around in. I had to take a deep breath when the aid slipped the hood over my head and sealed it. The air in the suit hissed and my ears popped a little as the positive pressure made the suit puff out.

"You have your own air, separate from the room in the pack in your back, enough for four hours. Once it is depleted you will have to go through the decontamination room and be fitted with another pack." The young man who was fitting the seals around the suit said.

The doctor looked at me. "I will be close by if you need me and the Em-De droid in the room will administer pain killers, what ever she needs. Hit the large red button by the door when you want to come out." He told me. "And what ever you do...do not throw up in your suit."

This statement made me laugh but not in any good way. I was suddenly very scared. "How infectious is this?"

"We don't know. The current theory is it is transmitted through the bodily fluid and the water system. We know it doesn't affect humans but we don't know if humans can be carriers so we are not taking any chances." The doctor replied.



I nodded again and then after going through the strange double door system they had in place, I was allowed into the sterile, safe room where Cati was lying on a bed. Despite the single bed sheet that covered her small body, I could see that the ravages of this virus were worse than I could have ever imagined, making my nightmares seem like pleasant dreams by comparison. I swallowed down bile and the desperate urge to flee and went to her bedside.

"Cati?" I said, my voice sounding odd inside of the suit. I had to speak loudly to be heard through the clear mask that covered my face. "It's Merly."

She turned her head to look up at me and tried to smile though the sores on her decaying skin made this task both painful and difficult. "Guess... I won't be making you... any more pretty ball gowns to go dancing in," she said in a horse whisper. I was grateful the suit had a way of amplifying the ambient sound.

"Oh Cati..." I whispered but I couldn't finish because I had to gasp for air as I tried not to break down into sobs right then and there. Tears welled up in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. I blinked, then absently going to wipe them from my face I realised that I couldn't do that wearing this suit. I pulled up a chair to sit at her side. She reached over and put her hand on mine. It was covered in small open oozing sores but I was wearing gloves and I didn't pull away. Her eyes had lost their bright mischievous shine instead they looked dull and cloudy. I did not need to be a medical genius to see she was in terrible pain.

"Don't cry." She told me but I couldn't help it. How had this happened to her? What had she ever done to deserve such a terrible death and it would be terrible, there was no stopping this now. "I just wanted to say goodbye properly to one of my best customers and... best friends," she said slowly, carefully, because it hurt her to speak. "You don't have to stay... I know it is bad, hell I can't bear to look at myself either."

I glanced up to the transparasteel observation window where my uncle watched with concern and sadness. It gave me strength to know he was there and I turned back to look at my friend or what was left of her. "I'm not going anywhere, Cati. A few sores don't scare me, I used to work for Jabba the Hutt remember, I've seen far worse than this." I told her and was relieved to discover I meant it.

Cati turned her head to smile at me as best she could. "You never were one to shy away from much. I always liked that about you," she said and then winced in agony as a spasm wracked through her tiny body. I shook my head, swallowing down my sorrow feeling that awful prickle of tears again. How had this gotten so bad? Why had she not told anyone she was sick? Why had we not noticed because as I sat there watching my friend die I realised the signs had all been there and we had just been too blind to notice.

"I'm sorry, Cati," I said quietly.

"Not your fault," she said as fiercely as was possible. "I should have come to the Med centre sooner, I knew I was sick, I just thought it was the flu."

We should have done a lot of things I thought but it was all too late for those now. I just nodded.

"I don't think I have long so please listen..." She said urgently, gasping in between each word with pain.

So I nodded and leaned in as close as I could and she began, haltingly to tell me what it was Shiv and I were supposed to do once she was dead. She had no family so it

would be the two of us who would take care of her affairs once she died. I sat there as calmly as I could, almost business like, wondering if I had suddenly found myself in hell. I puzzled at how it was that Cati could be so accepting of her horrible fate when I could not. I wanted to scream and shout, rail against the powers that be for what was happening to my friend instead I sat at her bed-side, stifling in the protective clothing with the imagined stench of decaying flesh and death so strong I did not think it would be possible to ever escape from it. I listened to her carefully and after what seemed forever, but was really only a short time, she stopped speaking. It had become too painful for her and she had said all she had wanted to. The room seemed smothered in silence then, the passing of time every bit as slow and as agonizing as when I had been kidnapped by Jyrki. Shortly before she slipped into the delirium that would steal her from the world forever she turned to look at me.

"Thank you," she said.

I frowned, uncomprehending, "For what?"

"For coming," She whispered.

She went to touch my arm but her own hand was a mess of puss and fluids and it slipped off the slick material of the hazmat suit. It took all my self control not to burst into uncontrollable sobs. I simply reached out to lay my gloved hand flat on the bed where she could rest her own on top of it. I watched in silent horror as the person who had been my friend and confident slowly slipped away, her body disintegrating before my eyes. She said nothing more, only moaning as her body seemed to dissolve into itself. The Em-D droid hovered by her bed to administer more medication but even I could see it was doing little good. In the end there was nothing any of us could do to help her, nothing any could do to ease her excruciating pain and over the course of hours I stayed at her side, watched her die a terrible, slow and painful death.

When the alarm on the suit peeped letting me know that my air was about to run out I dutifully left the room. If Cati was still aware of my presence she made no sign of it but she was still clinging onto life. I stared in morbid fascination as her tiny chest heaved up and down with the effort of each breath. I knew that once I left this room I could not come back a second time.

"Goodbye, Cati," I whispered. The words sounded weird and tinny in the protective coverings I wore and suddenly I was overcome with a terrible sense of claustrophobia.

The decontamination process was not over soon enough for me and I almost panicked trying to get out of the suit which was had been hosed down, disinfected twice and then sprayed with bacta mist. Once I was out of the suit and pronounced clean and safe I was allowed to dress in clean hospital wear and go back into the observation room to rejoin my uncle who had been watching the entire time.

"That was a very brave thing you did," he said quietly as he gathered me into his arms. I just held onto him tightly and tried to remember how to breathe.

I didn't know if it was brave or not. I only knew it seemed as though time had somehow slowed down for me but for the rest of the galaxy it went on as normal. The doctor came in briefly and told us that she was in the end stage it would not be long and it would not be pretty. I wasn't sure it could get much worse but I nodded anyway.

Together my uncle and I watched and waited until an hour or so before dawn the Em-D droid pronounced Cati dead and I was grateful it was over for her as well as for me. For the first time in my life I hoped there was some sort of all encompassing deity and that it was vengeful beyond all belief because who ever had come up with this virus deserved to die by it.

The doctor, whose name I had forgotten and who looked even more exhausted than before, came into talk to us about what would happen to her remains but I only half heard his words. There was not much of her remains to do anything with, I thought, but what was left would be cremated to prevent any possible spread of infection. Cati was no longer a being; she was now simply a bed full of hazardous waste. I was in a state of shock. It felt as if I were only half there and that the world was very surreal. When the doctor finished we were allowed to go. As though I were on auto pilot I followed my uncle into the changing room where we dressed into the street clothes we had worn to come here.

"Lei'lei, let me take you home."

I glanced up at Uncle Vahlek uncomprehending and shook my head. "Not yet." I whispered. I didn't know how to explain that I needed some time to shake away the images in my head. I did not want to bring this terrible death which I felt sitting on my shoulders into Thrawn's beautiful flat. I did not want to contaminate the only place I had ever truly felt safe.

Uncle Vahlek seemed to understand. "The doctor mentioned to me there is a small quiet room on the fourth floor. Why don't we go there?"

I nodded and followed, trailing behind him as he wound his way through the medical facility like a lost puppy. The meditation room, as it had been oddly titled was thankfully empty and I let out the breath I felt I had been holding all night slowly. I suddenly realised that I hadn't cried, I could not seem to cry at all. There were no tears and that felt strange to me.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" Uncle Vahlek asked.

I nodded absently.

"I'll see if I can find a cafeteria," he said, he was giving me time alone to think, to come back to myself.

I nodded and watched as he left as quietly as he had come in. I waited a few moments then paced around. The room had been designed for exactly this sort of occasion, a comfort to worried or grieving relatives and friends of patients. It had been tastefully decorated, trying very hard not to look as though it were a part of the medical facility. It failed miserably. Everything looked slightly shabby and a little sad. I stopped pacing and stood by the large window, watching as the sun rose slowly over the cityscape of tall elegant buildings, the morning sky a blaze of angry looking reds and oranges. Watching the early morning traffic increase as thousands of beings went about their daily routine not knowing, not caring that someone I had loved had died. How was that possible? I thought. Why had the world not ground to a screeching halt?

As the sun's pale yellow rays slowly crept between the spaces of the buildings, I realised I would never see Cati again, never hear her teasing voice ask me about my love life, never see her create something beautiful to wear out of a simple piece of fabric and worst of all never again get to share laughter with her. She was gone forever. Suddenly I

felt as though I couldn't breathe, grief engulfed me and it was as though I were drowning in it but I did not want to let go, not here, not in this awful sterile public place so I stifled the sobs in the back of my throat, swallowing it down with my hand covering my mouth. The ache from the effort was nauseating and hot tears fell of their own accord. Too wrapped up in my struggle to not cry I did not hear the door to the room opening, I neither cared nor noticed who came and went and I was far too lost to my own thoughts to realise it wasn't Uncle Vahlek. Trembling with a sadness I had not thought possible, I didn't even jump when the person behind me spoke.

"Hullo Mouse," said Jyrki quietly.

For a moment I simply stood facing the window unmoving, wondering what terrible wrong I had done to deserve such a day as this and then after taking a slow, deep breath I turned around to face a man I had hoped never to see again.

I had known Jyrki Andando for a long time. He had been my friend, my teacher and the first man I had ever fallen in love with but somewhere along the line things between us had gone terribly wrong. For reasons I was still trying to sort through he had decided that my working for Lord Vader and the Emperor was terrible and that I had to be rescued. His idea of rescue and my idea of rescue were very different and the results of his attempts to bring me back to what he considered the right side of things had been pretty disastrous. The last time I had seen him had been long before Endor. To that this had not been a very pleasant meeting was a huge understatement. Since then, a long time had passed and I had not reckoned on seeing him ever again especially not here and now. He had aged. His once beautiful face was now etched with the battles he had been fighting and I guessed that being a rebel had its difficulties.

"I'm sorry about yer friend," he said after a lengthy pause.

I regarded him for a moment trying to decide what to do. My experiences with him the last few times we had met had not really been very happy and despite my calm demeanour my heart was racing. I knew that if he tried something here it would be pretty stupid and that my uncle would be coming back at any moment but Jyrki was dangerous and unpredictable. When I didn't say anything he sighed and moved towards me. I stepped back involuntarily, not even realising what I had done. I was scared of him and I had just shown him this.

He looked at me for a second and then nodded. "It is good to see yer alive. I thought that yer had died at Endor when the *Executor* was destroyed."

"Sorry to disappoint you," I said.

"Mouse...." he began.

"Don't!" I held up my hand. "You've done too much to pretend to be my friend now."

A puzzled look crossed his face, "I never stopped being yer friend," he said.

"So, why did you want to hurt me then?"

"I didn't want to hurt yer, I wanted to save yer," he explained.

"Save me from what?"

"From being turned into a tool for the dark side, being turned into another one of Palpatine's toys," he replied. "But none of this matters any more, they are no longer alive and yer no longer work for them."

I nodded. What could I say? Everything he had just told me, at least as far as he was concerned, was true. "So why are you here?" I asked.

"Yer are not the only one who has lost a friend today," He replied coldly. I felt rather than saw him swallow his own grief down. It had been someone he had cared deeply for and for a single moment a flash of jealousy sliced through me, surprising me more than I could have ever expressed in words. I looked into his eyes for a moment and acknowledged his hurt hiding my own unexpected and unwanted feelings.

"I'm sorry." I replied and I meant it. Having just seen what this horrible virus did to its victims I did not know what else to say and silence fell between us again until I broke it. "What do you want with me, Jyrki?"

He seemed to weigh his words carefully. "I had thought yer were dead, Mouse. When I saw what happened at Endor I mourned for yer. I could not believe it when I caught sight of yer in the hallway just now and I don't want to lose you again so I came in here to warn yer."

"Warn me?"

"Yer should get off Coruscant, go home to Tatooine."

"Why? Are you going to hound me to death for living here now?" I sounded tired, even to my ears.

He shook his head. "The Empire's days are numbered, Mouse. The government here will fall much sooner than anyone thinks," he said, "Isard won't fight for this planet. She can't because she doesn't have the numbers to keep out both the rebellion and the others who want to carve Coruscant up for their own. We have people in place already and it won't be long now before we prevail. Once the New republic reclaims its place here things will not be pleasant for people still loyal to the late emperor and his corrupt regime."

"People like me you mean," I said with an edge, wondering where the hell my uncle was.

"Yer worked closely with Vader and I have been told yer were also a tool of Palpatine's. Yer will be brought in for questioning and I am trying to help yer."

"Well, I don't work for either of the many more, you and your people saw to that," I said nastily. "Thanks to your rebellion I am out of work!" While this was not exactly true it was close enough to use.

He shook his head making his long black hair ripple about his face. "Mouse, I know yer are hurting right now so I know yer don't mean what yer say but yer should know that yer are not unknown to us." He told me. "Yer should get off Coruscant and go back to being a mechanic; it was something yer were good at."

"Just when is this so called change of regime going to happen?" I asked with a sigh.

But Jyrki simply shrugged. "Soon," He replied cryptically. "The sooner the better. If we were already in charge then maybe yer friend would not have died."

I glanced directly into his eyes and frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Did yer think that this virus magically appeared all on its own?" He asked.

"No, I think that it was engineered by your people."

"My people?" He asked in surprise, "Yer actually think that we would create something this terrible?" he shook his head. "Yer should take a closer look at yer xenophobic government!"

"Why should I not believe you would do something like this? You're terrorists; you are capable of anything I know I've experienced firsthand what you do when you don't get your way!" A not so subtle jab at when he had done to me, "You created this virus and your people are blocking the supply lines of bacta!"

His eyebrows beetled together as he tried to make sense of my words. "Yer blame the death of your friend on us?" He sighed, "Oh Mouse, we are not the ones halting the bacta."

"Oh really, and I suppose you destroyed the base at Borleias just for the fun of it?"

"Do yer know what was being produced there?" He asked and when I didn't answer he continued, "Alderaan goods that were being sold on the black market for a premium to fill the pockets of Evis Derricote and his minions." He shook his head. "The Empire's finest and greediest are profiting off the worst case of mass murder even known to fill its own pockets!"

"You have no right to talk about murder!" I snapped back. "Millions of innocent people lost their lives at Yavin and at Endor, people who were civilians working on the space stations and had nothing to do with your little terrorist actions!"

He was getting angry but he calmed himself down. Like me he had learned some measure of self control over his temper. "It is a war mouse, people die," he said softly.

I nodded. "Yeah, people die," I said bitterly, tears suddenly springing to my eyes as I thought about Cati, Lord Vader, Jorae and all the other people I had known and lost. "This is a war you started, you and your rebellion. People die because you murder them. Hell your people even murdered the Galactic Emperor and you all got away with it!"

For a moment I thought he would be angry but he looked at me as though he were seeing me for the first time. "Don't yer know what happened at Endor?" He asked quietly.

"I know enough." I snapped as Jyrki shook his head. "You blew up the space station and you murdered them both!"

To my surprise Jyrki didn't get angry instead he smiled just a little. "We didn't kill the Emperor, Mouse. Darth Vader did that himself to save his son."

I searched for lies in what he had just told me but found none, none at all, but I shook my head against his words anyway. "No, I don't believe that." I told him but part of me did.

Lord Vader had hated the Emperor as much as he had feared him and I knew that, no matter what anyone said, blood was thicker than water. His son was a part of him and a part of the woman he had loved so fiercely he had sold his soul to save her. I was sure that in the end if it had come down to a choice between the Emperor or Luke, Lord Vader would have chosen his son every time.

Jyrki shrugged. "Believe what yer want, in the long run it makes little difference, that evil old bastard is dead and it were Vader who killed him."

For a moment I just closed my eyes. The last few moments of my last meeting with the Emperor flashed through my memory making me shiver. "How?"

"According to Master Skywalker, Vader picked Palpatine up and threw him down a shaft."

"Why?"

"I told you, to save his son's life."

"Then how did Lord Vader die?" I whispered.

"The force lightening the Emperor was using to kill Master Skywalker damaged his suit's ability to maintain his life support. I was told he died in his son's arms and was cremated on the Endor moon. I suppose the irony is that in the end he and the Emperor killed each other," he said, "Master Skywalker wanted people to know that at the very end, when it mattered most, Anakin Skywalker chose the right side."

I could only gasp for air. I felt as though I had been sucker punched. When I could breathe again I simply nodded. Somehow it was a fitting end and it explained why the last few moments of the connection between Lord Vader and I had felt so strange. He had felt at peace when he had released me from the tie that had bound us together. Now I understood why.

My reaction was not what he had expected and he watched me puzzled for a moment. "Yer were glad when the Emperor died. I see the relief all over yer face." He whispered softly, as though he had just uncovered the galaxy's biggest secret.

"Palpatine was sometimes...unkind," I said choosing my words very carefully.

"Did he hurt yer?" Jyrki asked in surprise. The pity in his voice was the last thing I expected or wanted to hear so instead of nodding I lashed back.

"No more than you did," I said cruelly and watched as my words hit home.

Being compared to the most evil being in the galaxy did not suit Jyrki well. He must have seen the satisfaction in my expression but he saw something else as well, he saw the hurt and the bewilderment that I had tried to hide and obviously failed at doing so. More out of habit than perhaps anything else he moved towards me his hand outstretched to comfort me in a gesture that was as familiar to me as it was frightening but I jumped away like a terrified durni before he could touch me.

Hurt flashed through his eyes followed by anger. "Yer fear of me is unwarranted," he said, crossness lacing his calm voice.

"Oh, is that so?" I shot. "May I remind you that you kidnapped me, held me against my will, brainwashed me, physically hurt me and damned near killed me not once but twice!"

"Twice?" He asked puzzled.

"That Anzat blade you used to try and sedate me had residual snake venom in it. I very nearly died because of it and if you had managed to drag me off with you I would have because you wouldn't have had a clue what to do!"

He stared at me for a long terrible moment then nodded contritely. "That was never my intention, Mouse. I'm sorry."

"No I don't suppose it was, Jyrki," I said quietly. "What did you hope to accomplish?"

"I wanted to talk some sense into yer but yer weren't listening, and yer weren't going to listen." He explained. "But I don't need to now, yer are free from the grips of the Sith."

I shuddered. "You know nothing about the Sith except what the brain washing Jedi told you at the old Temple!"

His eyes narrowed to icy slits of blue. "And just how would yer know what I learned there?"

"Did you think the Emperor's interest in me was simply for my looks?" I asked angrily. When he said nothing I continued, "Not at all, he taught me about your jedi training and he also told me about the Sith teachings. I learned more about the force from Lord Vader and from Palpatine than you could ever hope to know!"

"So yer turned to the dark side then." The statement was flat, cold and full of fear.

I shook my head in disgust. "No! I didn't turn to any side!" I said, "I just learned how to control and make the best out of the gifts I have. There is no dark side or light side. There are only the choices that we make."

"That is a lie!"

I shook my head. "Anakin chose his destiny and so did you. Do you think your jedi teachers would have been proud of what you did to me? Your means do not justify the ends!"

"I do not use my power in anger!" He said and the taste of his lie was so strong I almost gagged on it.

"Yes, you do." I told him softly, "But that isn't the problem, the problem is you feel guilty about it which eats you up from the inside out and that isn't your fault."

"Shut up!" he hissed between clenched teeth.

"I know you did not have choice that you were brought to the temple as a baby and you never knew your real parents. You cannot help that you were brainwashed into the believing only one thing! I know how lonely you were and what that did to you! Jedi rules and Jedi ways...!You were a small, frightened little boy when the clone soldiers came; you saw the only family you had ever known slaughtered in front of you. No wonder it twisted you so much! No wonder you couldn't love me, you never learned to love at all."

He regarded me with a look that bordered on hatred. "How do yer know this?"

I swallowed realising that maybe I had said too much. "I found records," I spun the half truth and hoped it would be enough.

He took a step towards me, "Where?"

"In the Jedi Temple."

"How is that possible? Everything was destroyed." He shook his head against my words.

"Not everything. The place was sealed off, but there were ways in and out. Palpatine saved most of it, the books, the records, the holocrons and the archives."

Jyrki opened his mouth and then shut it again. His expression of anger was swiftly replaced by one of relief, almost joy. "Master Luke will be so pleased to hear of this. He has been searching for Jedi archives and records, anything that will help him in his teachings!"

"Well good luck then." I snorted.

"What do yer mean?"

I shrugged nonchalantly. "It is all gone now."

"Where?"



"I have no idea. The Emperor removed everything before he left the planet to go to Endor. When he died he took all his secrets with him."

Jyrki frowned. "Yer must have some idea, yer worked for him," he said, "I must know where those archives are."

I shook my head. "No. Everything is gone, even the mainframe was wiped clean."

"Yer lying."

I looked directly into his eyes, "No, I am not. The Emperor removed everything of value from the Jedi temple. The last time I was there it was completely empty. Even the ghosts have vanished."

"How were yer there? No one can get in there, the security is far too tight," he said, implying that he had tried and failed.

"I know. It is sealed off and a good thing too!" I said not actually answering his question. I did not want to tell him about the secret passage, the small library or anything else.

"But you have some of these archives? You have Jedi artefacts?"

I backed away from him, shaking my head and didn't answer. What I had I knew I never wanted him to touch. For a moment he wavered and then seemed to come back to himself. "If yer get caught after we take over this planet I cannot help yer," he said coldly. He stepped closer to me and I could see traces of the madness in his eyes that had scared me so much on Mattri.

"I never asked for your help and I never will." I hissed. "I know why you ran from the Empire and I understand it, I know why my father agreed to have you work at the docking bay, why you were too scared to love me back but things have changed. I am not that infatuated little girl anymore and you are not that little boy fleeing from the Clone troopers through underground passages to be farmed out all over the galaxy to strangers. That war ended Jyrki, it ended when Anakin slaughtered the children in the council room and turned to the dark side. It ended when Palpatine became the Emperor of the Galactic Empire and it ended with the destruction of the Jedi which I don't think that was such a bad thing considering the lies they told."

His face paled visibly. "How do yer know all these things?"

"I have gifts you never understood. My mother, my birth mother was a Jedi and she was killed in the Clone wars! She left me a diary describing her life at the temple, she even knew you! You are not the only one who lost everything because of Order sixty-six. You don't have the corner on the market of bad luck stories!"

The myriad of emotions and expressions which flickered across his face were as revealing to me as though I had managed to pull the living memories from him by touching his skin. "Who was she?" He asked quietly. I could hear both disbelief and sudden understanding in his voice, as though one of the little mysteries about me that had bothered him all these years had finally been cleared up.

I turned away from him then.

"Mouse...I..." he began but I held up my hand for silence and turned back to face him. The full force of my anger hit him like a wave and he took a small, involuntary step back.

My voice sounded cold and cruel even to my ears. I spoke slowly and carefully so that he would not misunderstand anything I had to say. "You hurt me in more ways than

I care to count. You do not get to ask me these questions and you sure as hell don't deserve any answers from me. You made your choice when you sided with the Rebellion and engaged in acts of brutal terrorism, slaughtering innocent people for the sake of a cause most of the galaxy doesn't even care about or understand. You chose your side and I owe you nothing. I do not love you anymore, but I pity you too much to hate you. You're pathetic."

For a single moment I thought he would let his temper get the better of him, I could feel it writhe around him like I had been able to sense Lord Vader's but then he backed away and gave me a curt nod. "Yer should know, it is the Empire that has a monopoly on bacta, keeping the supply limited and restricted. Go look that up, it is public knowledge. The Empire's ties with Thyferra are deep," he said coldly. "And perhaps yer should ask Isard where this Krytos virus came from because our investigation points in the direction of the Empire. Do some digging on a man named Derricote and find out what he has been doing here on Coruscant. Go ask yer precious Imperial leader why yer friend had to die so horribly. I don't think yer will like what she has to say."

I didn't answer him and we stared at each other at an impasse. The anger flaring up between us caused the force to crackle. The air felt electric, oppressive and then quite suddenly I was exhausted beyond all reason.

"Go away, Jyrki," I finally whispered backing down, backing away, tears glittering in my eyes. "Go away before I call security. This world is still imperial and you are still a wanted criminal." I should have alerted security the moment he had walked through the door but I hadn't and we both knew I wouldn't now, although I would have been hard pressed to explain these actions if I been asked to.

He nodded, "Get off this planet and go home." He repeated, "Go find some nice mechanic to marry and settle down with. Yer were a sweet kid once, Mouse, maybe yer can get some of that back again. Get out of this place before all hell breaks loose," he said and then almost as an afterthought he added, "And tell the Tze'yusha'Jin if I catch him following me again I will kill him. I know who he is and what he has done and I do not forget."

I could only stand and stare numbly at him, digesting the news of what had really happened on the second Death Star along with everything else he had told me. He had not lied about these things, not once and I wasn't sure what scared me more that fact that he had told me the truth or that I considered believing him.

For a moment our eyes met again and then without another word he left as quietly as he had entered. The door closed with a soft snick and I crumpled to the floor, sitting like a broken doll trying to digest the events of the last twenty six hours. I was beyond tired, beyond tears and beyond feeling anything at all. And this was how my Uncle found me when he finally came back holding two cups of tea.

He set the cups down on the table and then, bending heel to haunch, sat at my side. He said something so I looked at him uncomprehendingly. I could hear him speak but the words didn't register. The sun had managed to crawl high enough into the sky that its rays streamed into the room making the dust in the air sparkle as it danced about. It played off my uncle's long, straight white hair making his head appear to glow.

Concern flickered across his features but I just sat there staring at him, wordlessly. He cupped his hands around my face and made me look up at him. I saw sorrow, sympathy and concern in his expression but in his eyes I saw only love, deep and everlasting. This was what broke the spell. Tears welled up in my eyes and I couldn't stop them from rolling down my cheeks onto his hands.

"What is it, Lei'lei? Are you ill?" He asked.

When I didn't answer he stood up pulling me to my feet, sliding his arm around my waist. "Let's go home and I will make tea there. What I found here is probably disgusting and cold as I had to track through half the facility to find the cafeteria." With that we left the medical facility and in the glorious morning sun with Coruscant rushing all around us on just another ordinary day, we went home.

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*Grief comes upon us like a shattering tide.* This line from one of the books of Chiss poetry that Thrawn had once sent me stayed in my head as I sat sobbing in the dark of the living room. My own grief threatened to swallow me whole and it was all the worse for having been shoved down, shut up and stifled deep inside of me. When my uncle and I had returned home I had said nothing, simply gone to bed tired beyond all belief but somewhere in the dark of the night I had woken to a violent nightmare which had shattered my cocoon of calm.

My sadness poured out of me like vomit. I cried so hard I couldn't breathe and I suppose that was what woke my uncle up. He came to me as he had done when I was a child and gathered me protectively in his arms, holding on tightly as my sobs wracked through me violently. He spoke to me in the same tone of voice he had always used to calm frightened animals and he waited until the storm had subsided.

"You need to learn to let go, Lei'lei," He chided gently.

"How?" I asked like a petulant child. I hated being told this same thing over and over, no matter how true it was.

"Just let it go," he said, "Stop holding on so tightly to what has already passed. You cannot do anything about it, except let it go."

"How the hell can I let go of my past when it keeps coming back to haunt me?"

He frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Jyrki," I said through hiccups.

My uncle shook his head, clearly puzzled by the sudden twist the conversation had just taken. "What does he have to do with Cati's death?"

"He was at the medical facility. He came to me, he said this was Isard's fault, he said that Lord Vader killed the Emperor, he said tha...."

Uncle Vahlek held up a hand and silenced the jumbled tumble of words instantly. "Jyrki was there?" He asked in a low hiss.

I just nodded.

"In the quiet room at the Med center?" he confirmed.

"Yes."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Then what did he want?"

I shook my head. "I don't really know." I told him.

He sat back, pulling away from me and gave me a look. "I'm going to get us a drink and when I come back I want you to tell me everything that happened."

I nodded

"You should have told me right then and there," he said as he got up, his rough callused hands curling into fists as he did so. "I don't know why you didn't." He was angry.

I huddled into myself and looked up at him. "Zte'sa....?"

"What?" He said out of crossness more than curiosity.

"I didn't tell you because he said he'd kill you if you followed him again."

My uncle raised both his eyebrows. "Did he," he said flatly, in a tone of voice that sent a shiver down my spine and then without another word vanished to the kitchen.

I sat back on the couch, huddled under the Dantassi blanket for warmth, wishing, not for the first time, that Thrawn was with me. I missed him terribly and suddenly, when compared to what was going on this planet Nirauan didn't seem like such a bad place to be any more. I watched Uncle Vahlek come back from the kitchen and took the glass of brandy from his outstretched hand.

"Now then, Lei'lei," He said in a matter of fact manner, "Tell me everything Jyrki said to you and do not leave anything out."

And because I was exhausted, wrung out and beyond caring any more I did exactly as he asked. He listened with that eerie calm I had begun to associate with that side of him no one would ever speak about. His eyes had gone durasteel hard and the set of his mouth told me that he was anything but pleased to hear what I had to say. When I had finished recounting my conversation with Jyrki all Uncle Vahlek did was nod grimly and then get up off the couch to pace to the large window and stare out of it.

"What did he mean by if *I catch him following me again*, Zte'sa?" I asked, resting my head on my knees which I had drawn to my chest.

"I have been tracking him ever since the incident with the Anzati blade." My uncle replied as if that explained it all.

"Why?" I frowned.

Uncle Vahlek's glance at me spoke volumes. "The Anzati do not take very kindly to having one of their sacred weapons used in such a demeaning manner. They asked me to track the weapon and return it to them." He had evaded my question neatly but at the same time opened up a new avenue for conversation.

"It's probably in an evidence room or something." I snorted. "Thrawn gave it to Intel."

My Uncle sighed slowly. "It was. It has since been returned to its rightful owner," he replied.

I glanced up at the silhouette of my uncle shadowed against the early dawn's light cascading through the window. "How...?"

"I am very good at what I do Lei'lei," he said slowly, choosing his words with great care. "The Tze'yusha'Jin pride themselves on the arts of not being seen. Obtaining the blade from the place in which it was being kept was child's play."

"So if you got the blade back then why are you still after Jyrki?"

"There is a price upon his head for what he did with the blade, for what he did to you."

I frowned. "I thought that you said you were not a Bounty Hunter."

"I am not." He agreed. "But the price for Jyrki is not a bounty, it is an Anzati death mark. There is no monetary payment for his death."

I shook my head in ignorance. I knew next to nothing about the ways of the Anzati. "So what does that mean, exactly?"

"It means that I am required to right a wrong." Came his cryptic reply.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed, willing patience to come. "And what *exactly* does that mean, Zte'sa?"

"It is my job and my job alone to kill him."

There was a pocket of stunned silence that suddenly enwrapped us in its bubble. Then like the touch of a pin, my voice broke it. "But he might be your son...."

"Perhaps. That is still undetermined and even if it is his life, his safety is no longer my concern." The ice in my uncle's voice made me shiver. Something had happened between him and Jyrki that he wasn't telling me, and most likely wasn't going to tell me.

"But..." I began only to be silence by a minute gesture from my Uncle's hand.

"Lei'lei, I have told you this before but I will repeat it. I am sworn to protect you under oath and to the death if that is what it will take. No matter what else comes up in my life, no matter who else comes into my life you, and you alone, have priority for my absolute protection. Jyrki Andando has not just once, but several times, harmed you, perhaps that was not his intent but never the less he has done so. The last time he did this he brought you to the brink of death with a weapon he had no rights to possess and that is unforgivable."

There was another long silence which again I broke. "So... you are an assassin?"

This time my uncle nodded. "It is sometimes part of what I am required to do."

"And you are going to ...uhm... really kill Jyrki?"

"That is the task I have accepted, yes."

The room was still as I digested this piece of news then I said, "Well I guess, if Boba Fett were alive I could tell him not to worry about his promise to do that for me then."

Uncle Vahlek turned away from the window to look at me. "Fett promised to deal with Jyrki for you?"

I nodded. "Ages ago, shortly before the Battle of Hoth actually." Feeling a wave of sadness as I thought about him.

"What did you tell him when he offered?"

"That you had the situation well in hand." I replied. "He wasn't so convinced."

That made my uncle smile, "No, I don't suppose he would be." Then he asked with a puzzled look, "What makes you think he is dead Lei'lei?"

I recounted the images of his fall into the Sarlacc pit that I had drawn off the lightsaber the Emperor had forced me to read shortly before the destruction of the second battle station at Endor. When I was done my Uncle nodded and then looked smug. "Well, it would appear that you saw only half of the truth because Fett is still alive, at least he was the last time I ran into him."

My jaw dropped open. "Alive? Boba's alive?"

My uncle nodded. "Apparently the sarlacc did not find him all that appetizing; at least this is what Fett told me when I asked about the rumour of his demise."

I sat back against the couch and felt a sense of wonder wash over me. Fett was still alive. He hadn't died as I had thought. It was a tiny piece of good news in what had otherwise been a terrible day. I felt as though I had found a small piece of my family again and the relief made me weep. My tears did not go unnoticed.

"I had not realised you and Fett were close." My uncle spoke gently. "I would have told you sooner, were that the case."

"Not so sure I would call it close, but he was a part of my life, Zte'sa. He helped me a lot when I was working at Jabba's. He said he didn't like seeing Kit'gar's girl working for the Hutt in the way I was. He said it made him worry that papa would not give repairing his ship his full attention."

My uncle smiled ever so slightly. "Lei'lei, you do pick up the most unlikeliest of friends and allies. Rest assured, Fett is very much alive."

There was a moment of silence and then I asked, puzzled. "Zte'sa, if you are so good at what you do then why is Jyrki still alive?"

Uncle Vahlek gave me one of those rare smiles, similar to the smiles that Thrawn would occasionally give when I had solved a particularly intricate piece of palace intrigue all by myself. He sighed as he replied. "Because he is also very good at what he does," he said, "He has had some Anzat stealth training, among others, and he is a Jedi or as near a thing to a Jedi as one might find these days. His skills at evasion are remarkable and while I have come close on several occasions, I have yet to actually make my mark."

"But if you do catch him how could you kill him, he might be your son, you told me that yourself."

Uncle Vahlek gave me a smile which was undecipherable. "Perhaps that is so but I did not watch him grow up from a baby to adulthood. I never shared his world the way I have shared and known yours. If he were to be my biological son that is all it would be, biology. There is no bond there Lei'lei, not in the way I am bound to you. It was I who found you on that transport ship that day, I who held you first and loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you."

I bit my lip but he continued before I could say anything.

"It is not in the way for the Tze'yusha'Jin to marry and have families but by the grace of some greater working I was granted one through my connection to you and the people, my friends, who became your parents." He paused to look out of the window again and then continued, "You were special little Lei'lei, we all felt it, we all knew it from the very first time we saw you and that has never changed. You have faced insurmountable challenges that would have destroyed or killed most people. You survived these terrible events and held on to the light and the laughter in your heart that you had as a child. While your world has shattered around you, you remained the same, full of compassion, trust and love. You are remarkable and after what I watched you do for your friend yesterday I have never been more proud to know you and be a part of your life than I am at this moment. So I ask you, how could I choose Jyrki Andando, a man who has proven himself to be capable of cruelty and malice, a man I barely know

and, to be honest, now dislike over you? Even if he were my son, he is not my family, you are."

It was probably one of the longest speeches my uncle had ever given on this subject and I had no idea how to respond to it. I was struck by the utter honesty in his words and the deep sense of love that surrounded them. It was such a vast thing that I felt tiny against it. I never thought about or even tried to understand my place in other people's lives. I was just me and it never occurred to me that other people might feel differently or that I actually made a difference to them in a way that was good. Kerrjan had tried to tell me this when he had explained why Navaari worried so much but I did not comprehend it fully then or now.

My uncle took my silence as leave to say more. "We thought when we heard the news about Endor, that you were dead. It was a terrible time for the galaxy but for your family it was beyond all imagining. Your father was devastated." He explained. "It was easily two months before we got word that you were alive. Thrawn sent a courier, a man named Behl, with a very detailed letter about what had happened and this news was a gift beyond hope." He drew a deep breath and I watched him struggle with the emotions these memories brought back. "Suddenly the black hole which had swallowed the light in your family vanished and we were whole again. I think that the courier must know you quite well because he spoke about you as though you were friends. He seemed surprised though, at being treated as a hero and one of the family."

I smiled. "I don't know if Jarack and I know each other so well but I hope I can call him a friend, he has been playing postman for Thrawn and me for years now."

My uncle nodded. "This was how I kept in touch with Thrawn while you were finding your way back, through correspondence delivered by his courier." He nodded, "Thrawn has a very elegant way of communicating, his skills with Basic are astonishing and his knowledge of other languages is vast, isn't it?" He added as an afterthought.

I nodded. "He's brilliant." I agreed which made my uncle smile.

"We were kept appraised of your condition which never seemed to change. Then, nearly a year later, Thrawn came, in person, to tell me that you were not only awake and out of that terrible death-sleep but that you were very much alive and recovering on a planet called Hjal and that the Dantassi were looking after you. I have never been ...."

"Wait," I interrupted, "Thrawn came to Tatooine?"

Uncle Vahlek nodded, "He wanted to let your family know in person what had happened to you and what he was doing about it."

I shook my head, "He never said anything about this to me."

My uncle gave a slight shrug, "Your Ta'kasta'cariad is a man full of many layers and many secrets, Lei'lei. Perhaps he felt this piece of information was not important for you to know. I got the distinct impression he wished to see me in person again as well as your father. While he never mentioned how close your relationship had become, he hinted in its direction," he said.

"I don't know why he would do that. We were not speaking to each other at that pointing time." I mumbled.

"He was hurt beyond belief by what had happened to you although he hid it very well," replied my uncle.

"Hurt?" I asked shaking my head, interrupting, "More like he was angry." I countered.

"He almost lost you." My uncle explained. "Grief does odd things to men such as him and as I understand it showing emotion does not come easily to him or his people."

I made a face, nodded and then let it go. No point in rehashing this old discussion. I could no more go back and undo my mistake than I could bring back Cati to life.

My uncle gave me a small smile, "He arranged a meeting with me and your father and came to Mos Espa."

"I am surprised he would risk coming into the Core like that."

"He arrived heavily disguised in Dantassi clothing."

"Then how did you know it was him?"

The corner of my uncle's lip twitched, "The Dantassi wear their histories written on their mask. His mask and yours share several of the same symbols, it was easy to make the connection and the Dantassi are rare, especially these days." It was a half truth and I gave my uncle a look which told him I knew this. He replied. "I knew who it was the moment our eyes met, Lei'lei. We have met before, remember."

"So you took him to the house near Wayfar?"

"It was the safest, most secure place to talk." My uncle nodded. "He had asked for our discretion in the matter because not only was his life at risk but also yours and ours. The fact that he was willing to come at all in person to deliver the news of your recovery told me all I wanted to ever know about this man and his place in your life."

"Is that why you weren't very surprised by my news about him and me still being together and that we had been bound officially, well as official as it gets with him?"

He nodded. "It was not difficult to read his affection for you despite his anger and frustration at the situation you had managed to get yourself into. I don't have to be a genius to know when someone cares deeply for you. I certainly didn't need to be a genius to gauge your reaction when I brought the subject up on Corellia. You do not hide your affections for him well at all." He smiled.

"So what exactly did you and he talk about?" I asked changing the subject and tentatively digging.

My question amused him, "Only the essentials, his time on Tatooine was very limited and he did not stay long. About you he would only give the medical facts and the story behind what had happened to you, as much as he knew. He is not a man to speak openly about his private affairs Lei'lei, and you should know that." I made a face but he continued before I could protest, "He wanted us to know you were safe and that you needed time to recover in a place that was out of harm's way. It was a noble gesture which spoke volumes about his character. He requested that neither of us tell you we had spoken to him; he felt it would only serve to fuel your anger at him at the time. Your father was less understanding about the situation and wanted to come out to be with you but in the end Thrawn's logic was undeniable, especially given that it was not safe for you to come home at all."

"Papa would not have been welcome on Hjal. That would have been difficult for all of us."



"Yes, this is what Thrawn said as well. I was able to get your father to back down but he wasn't happy. It was good that you wrote, hearing from you yourself helped him."

I nodded wondering how this tied in with Jyrki but my uncle was one step ahead of me, as usual.

"Anyway, the point I was trying to make before we got sidetracked was this; I thought you had died. For two months we could get no information what so ever from the Imperial Palace and then when Thrawn's courier came through I knew a relief like nothing else I have ever known. I realised then, that it did not matter if Jyrki was my biological son or not because you were the person who mattered. So I will do what ever it takes and what ever I can to protect you and if that includes dealing with Jyrki Andando in the way the Anzati have requested me to do then so be it."

There was coldness in the last few words my Uncle uttered that made me shiver. I almost felt sorry for Jyrki, but not quite, though I wasn't certain I wanted him to die and I sure as hell wasn't certain that I wanted my Uncle to kill him. There had been enough death in my life and I didn't need more. What I really needed was peace and quiet.

I suppose some of these thoughts were as plain as day on my face and Uncle Vahlek relented some in his manner. "Jyrki Andando is no longer your concern and you should rest Lei'lei, you look exhausted."

I shook my head. "Not really," I said and it was oddly true. I would crash hard later on but in this moment as I sat in Thrawn's living room with my uncle watching the morning's light slowly illuminate the world around us I felt calm, though I half suspected it was more a dull numbness rather than peace of mind.

"Good enough," He said heading for the kitchen, "I suppose you'll have no objections if I make some 'caf then?"

I looked up at him. Uncle Vahlek's fierce love and powerful presence were like the Dantassi blanket I had wrapped about my shoulders, warm and comforting. I never wanted to lose this sensation. He waited for me to answer him so I did, "None at all, if you make enough for me as well."

"I think that can be arranged," he said with a little smile and left me to my own thoughts while he potted around in the kitchen. I watched the dawn's colours paint across the sky and my heart ached with loss but I took some small comfort in the fact that I was not alone and felt lucky that this was the case.

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I stood at the transparasteel doors which led to the balcony and watched as the blood red sunrise flooded the cityscape with colour. I hadn't slept, I couldn't sleep. Plagued by terrifying dreams and even more terrifying memories, the bedroom had now become a place I feared. More often than not I ended up dozing on the couch until the quiet hours just before dawn. My uncle watched this behaviour with silent concern but he knew well enough to leave me alone. What could he do? What could anyone do?

My friend was dead and even though over two weeks had passed since I had watched her die with my own eyes the reality of it all had still not sunk in. I half expected to hear from her telling me about her newest creation or the latest bit of

celebrity gossip but that would never happen again. She, as well as her apartment and shop, were now gone.

After her death decontamination crews had quite literally destroyed everything she may have touched to erase any traces of virus from her home and her shop. Everything else had been taken care of by Shiv and I in accordance with her last wishes. It had been a painful, numbing experience and I know Shiv felt the same way. His normally boyish good looks had been marred by grief and exhaustion and his usual cheerful countenance was gone and in its place was a melancholy that was so unlike him I wondered if he had been replaced by a bad clone.

"Ynyth doesn't sleep well at the moment, nor do I," he told me by way of explanation. "And from the looks of it neither do you."

I did not have an answer for that because he was right. "You should take Ynyth off world, get away from here." I told him as we had sat in Thrawn's flat drinking wine.

"Where would we go?" He asked with a shrug. "This is our home, we were both born and raised here. Everything we know and own is here"

"What about Naboo? What about the Emperor's retreat there?"

He just shook his head. "Ynyth needs the familiar and she needs time. She and Cati became close friends after you vanished at Endor. We thought you had died and mourning your death had brought the two of them closer. When we got word you were still alive you can't imagine the relief and happiness we all felt. You are the glue that holds our group together, Merly. Sending Ynyth away will not help her, spending time with you talking about Cati and what happened will. She needs your strength."

I looked at him in surprise because that I was considered strong was the very last thing I thought of myself as. Shiv smiled at the look of shock on my face.

"After all you have gone through and survived, you are still the same good, sweet Merly I knew when we first met. You could have turned into a bitter, angry person lashing out and hurting everything in sight but you didn't. Instead you stayed hopeful and kind. You cared enough to stay at Cati's side so she would not be alone. No wonder Thrawn loves you so much, you're magical. Aside from Ynyth, you are the best thing to come into my life and considering what I thought about you when we first met, that's pretty cool."

I just stared at him after he finished this speech then reached over and clasped his hand in mine. "I love you too, Shiv." I replied and that made him smile which was nice because there was precious little to smile about on this planet right now.

Beings were dying all across Coruscant from a virus no one understood and for which there was no vaccine. What had begun quietly and unnoticed was now rapidly turning into a nightmare from which there was no waking up. An eerie, surreal quality had settled itself on the everyday life of Coruscant and it felt as though the entire planet were holding its breath waiting for a storm to break. Calls for a cure and more bacta seemed to fall on deaf ears and Isard had vanished. Two days after Cati's death I had gone to see her only to be told she was not available to speak with me. When I pressed about her whereabouts I was told that she had returned to the Lusankya facility to oversee general operations from there.

My fury knew no bounds when I heard this and my first instinct had been to lash out and destroy everything in sight but common sense and the nagging voice sounding an awful lot like that of Qui Gon Jinn in the back of my head had held me back long enough to find my way to my old training room where I had spent several hours destroying combat training remotes until I was almost too exhausted to stand. By the time I had returned home it was more early in the morning than late at night and my uncle, who worried more since he had learned about Jyrki's return, had waited up for me. He was not pleased at me for not letting him know where I was and made no bones about it. We had clashed then, our respective frustrations and fears coming together in one of the worst fights I could ever remember having with him.

Like Thrawn, Uncle Vahlek tended to argue with a cool headed logic which drove me absolutely crazy. I wanted to scream and be screamed at in return. I wanted all the fury and passion and anger to pour around me like a Hjal spring storm because it was how I felt inside, but Uncle Vahlek wasn't like that and his ability to remain level headed infuriated me beyond reason. He understood better than I could have imagined what I was going through but I didn't want to hear it or believe it. He battled my white hot rage with compassion and concern until, over tired and over wrought, I had burst into tears like a little girl and stormed off into Thrawn's library, slamming the door behind me.

This room had always been Thrawn's. Even when he had not been on planet I had rarely ventured into what I had always considered his private sanctuary but now I needed this space because it was as close as I could get to being with him. Tired beyond belief and wracked with a guilt and grief I couldn't come to terms with, I had curled up in Thrawn's favourite chair and wept bitter tears. Uncle Vahlek knocked on the door only once and left when I yelled for him to leave me alone. This room still seemed to hold Thrawn's scent and presence which comforted me somehow. I missed him dreadfully and this only compounded my current misery. I sat for a long time in the darkness nursing my pain until, contrite and exhausted, I emerged to apologise for being such a bitch. My Uncle had simply nodded, enfolded me in his arms, told me he loved me and then poured me a glass of brandy.

We sat in silence for a long time until he finally broke it by asking, "Why do you stay here Lei'lei? Why don't you return to Nirauan to be with your Ta'kasta'cariad? I am quite certain he misses you as much as you miss him."

"Because I am afraid to." I had replied after a long, serious silence.

"Afraid of what?" he had asked genuinely puzzled.

"Taking this virus off world. Humans may not catch it but it is possible we can carry it." I had admitted. "Thrawn is not human, Zte'sa. If he were to catch this and...." I could not even finish my sentence because to voice what I was thinking was simply too awful.

His sigh had told me that he thought I was right to be concerned and his kiss on my forehead told me that he did not take my frustration or my temper tantrums personally.

"Well," he had said after a while, "I guess we are both stuck here until they figure out how this disease works and then we can both go home. In the mean time you should find something to keep you occupied, especially as you've done the job you came here to do."

I had nodded. I had accomplished the task at hand but I had no way to get the information to Thrawn. I had not seen or heard from Jarack in what seemed like forever and the data I had was not the sort of thing I wanted to risk sending as a holo-message not even fully encoded. The rebellion had Bothan spies who were very adept at picking up transmission and they also had slicers who were good at their jobs. Dantassi code or not, I couldn't risk the information that I had falling into the wrong hands. So we waited and it was the waiting that drove me crazy. Luckily I wasn't alone.

When they could, Shiv and Ynyth spent much of their free time with me in Thrawn's apartment. They lived in an area of town that was near to one of the alien districts and was now, as Ynyth had said, scary as all hell to walk through alone. I was grateful for their company, especially as I had precious little to do to keep me occupied especially when my uncle was off on one of his mysterious haunts.

We talked about everything, usually over good takeout food and with more than one bottle of Thrawn's wine. I was grateful he had left most of the wine collection behind though I suspect it had not been on purpose. He had left thinking he would return but fate had other ideas on that.

When we were tired of talking we watched holovids and passed the time together. The days passed one after the other, blending together like some sort of surreal dream and it felt a lot as though I was waiting for something else bad to happen but I couldn't quite put my finger on what.

Jyrki's sudden reappearance had not helped either, knowing he was on Coruscant made me edgy and restless which in turn made me even harder to live with. My uncle's solution for this restlessness was to insist that we go to the Imperial palace and burn up some of that unwanted energy sparring in the training room that Lord Vader had given to me. I had not been unhappy with his suggestion.

The first couple of times we had trailed into the palace I had been worried about getting stopped and arrested for trespassing or something but that never happened. The entrance I always used was in a mainly disused part of the palace, it was quiet and relied more of surveillance than guards. My ID cards were still good and my uncle had arranged for my access to remain despite theoretically wiping me from the system. I was surprised by the fact that no one bothered to challenge me, to challenge us as we came and went. When I had asked about this he had tried to explain it to me but it was so confusing I had just stared at him like an idiot child.

"You are a ghost in the machine." He had finally said, "I left your clearances intact but you, as Lord Vader's assistant, no longer exist at all. I thought it would be useful to maintain your ability to move around this building unimpeded."

"How the hell did you do that?"

He had given me a slight smirk, "I left traces that would suggest to people who actually know what they are looking for that you may have been one of the Emperor's favourite courtesans."

I had glared at him, "What?"

He had sighed, "There was a belief in the inner circle which was allowed to circulate outward and downward that the title *favoured courtesan* was a euphemism for an agent or hand of the Emperor himself."

"How the hell is that supposed to make me invisible?" I had asked crossly, not liking the idea of being thought of as an Emperor's hand.

"Because most people not in the know will think simply think you were a part of the decorative fluff Palpatine littered his court with, the worst they will do to you is spit on you at best they will leave you alone. Those who do understand will leave you alone because they will think you are dangerous and beyond reproach. Palpatine's agents had the highest clearance and the deadliest reputation. It seemed the best way to deal with your dilemma."

"And this is your idea of safe?"

He had nodded. "Yes. There is no actual proof that you were an agent of the Emperor, it is simply playing on assumptions and allegations. Trust me on this. It was the best way to make you invisible yet keep your access viable."

The whole discussion had left me shaking my head feeling very glad I had not gone into the espionage-slicer side of things. Still, we were never bothered when we entered the palace and once in the older part, in my training room no one came near us.

Despite the fact that he was probably old enough to be my grandfather, my uncle was in remarkable shape. He was well versed in many forms of melee along with other styles of hand to hand combat and he kept himself fit. He had once joked, when I had asked about this, that a fat assassin was usually also a very dead assassin. I had just made a face, I could not picture my Uncle fat or old or even dead for that matter.

While Lord Vader and the Emperor had lived I had been trained under the watchful eyes of a Bunduki Master named Taisto Kjestyll. I had long suspected there was much more to my Bunduki master than ever met my eye but now I would never get to ask him because after the Emperor's death, he as well as the rest of the Bunduki teachers had seemingly vanished into thin air. When I had been sent to Tatooine as punishment by Lord Vader and had spent time at my Uncle's house my training in these melee arts had not escaped Uncle Vahlek's notice. He had continued my education by teaching me slight variants of the moves Master Kjestyll had begun, much to my own master's surprise and delight.

I loved the art form of movement in this manner, it was so much like dancing yet at the same time it was deadly and I knew that first hand as well, having been forced to kill once. That had been a lesson I had never forgotten and to this day I could still feel the rising sensation of the force as I had allowed my anger to consume me. In the end I had fought against it and I suppose won, but my opponent had died by my hand so really, in the end, I didn't consider it a win at all, merely a matter of survival. My shoulder, the one that had been dislocated violently and then badly relocated during that fight, still ached when the weather turned. There were some wounds that bacta could never heal.

In the quiet of the training room my uncle and I sparred with each other. He was better than I was but I had learned much and I had been well taught by some of the best melee fighters in the galaxy, Lord Vader included so I gave as good as I got. Occasionally I was able to teach my uncle a new move or two, especially when I used some of the tricks Thrawn's Noghri body guard, Rukh, had taught me.

At first, my uncle had gone lightly on me, taking it easy not wanting to hurt me but after I had decided that the jax footing around was tedious and had planted him on

his ass a couple of times all bets were off. I knew that in the back of his mind he worried about hurting me or perhaps even setting me off on some disastrous downward spiral into the dark side of the force but that was not going to happen.

After one particularly frustrating session where I could feel him holding back and being careful I had stopped the fight and asked him about his concerns. "You were afraid I had turned to the dark side weren't you?" I had asked as we paused for a moment to catch our breaths.

He had looked at me for a moment. "I had wondered if Palpatine had done more than just break your trust," he had said very carefully.

"You have had some bad experience with this dark side before?"

He had drawn a long, deep breath and then let it out slowly. "Yes, this power can be channelled through anger, through hate and passion and when it is done so with malice the results are terrifying and terrible for both the victim and the aggressor."

I had given him a look but hadn't pushed him to explain further. I had not only seen but felt what it had done to Anakin Skywalker. My uncle didn't need to tell me anymore. "Well, you need to trust that I know better than that." I had told him simply, "You would have felt it by now if I was all dark and sithy."

"Sithy?" This had made him laugh.

I had nodded. "Plus," I had added with a contrite look, "I also know you'd have given me what for if I did." That had made him smile then I added quickly, before he could interrupt. "I don't like how it feels. It is like being painted on the inside with something sour, with something rotten." I had shivered.

"You've touched it though, this side of your powers?"

I had nodded as a memory of sweeping anger and then a sense of shame washed over me. My Uncle watched the play of emotions on my face without word or comment for a moment then he had asked me to explain.

I wavered for a moment because despite the time that had passed, these memories were still fresh, still painful and difficult to bring up. He remained quiet, all the while never taking his eyes from my face until slowly, carefully recounting every detail, I had told him what Palpatine had done to me shortly before Lord Vader's death.

He had sat back on his haunches and sighed. "Oh Lei'lei, I am sorry."

I had shrugged. "It was like going mad, Zte'sa and it wasn't a very good sensation. I could see myself lose it but it was like I was somewhere far away watching it happen. No wonder Anakin was so twisted; because that's what letting this power have control does, it twists you up in your soul until you don't know how to find your way back. I could feel that happening and it was exactly what Palpatine wanted."

"What brought you back from it then?"

"I'm not sure," I shrugged, "The voice of the dead Jedi I sometimes see in my dreams maybe, perhaps the thought of being turned into something Like Lord Vader, I can't really say. I do know that I would have killed the Emperor myself right then and there if I could have. I was consumed by anger and hatred and it was terrible. I think that given a choice I would rather take the grief of loss than living with that hatred any day."

"So it is a choice then? A conscious thing, to go from one side to the other?" My uncle had mused.

I had given him a small shrug. "I think it must be. How can there be a light side or a dark side to something that has no sides? It is not a switch. One day you are light the next you are dark, it just doesn't work that way at all. As Master Kjestyll once explained it to me, the force works just like everything else in the galaxy, it's a tool and you decide how to use the tool. A blaster doesn't kill people the person holding it does, making that choice a conscious one. I think that by defining a line of Dark against Light the Jedi were trying to terrify the children they taught into treading the line but they took that control too far. How can you control emotions into nothing? How can you forbid love or even hate? All that does is confuse the issue so instead of being taught to confront these negative emotions and the dangers of using them they were all taught to fear them and this led to the feeling of guilt when ever that line was crossed. It really was a stupid way to teach control no wonder the Jedi eventually failed," I said.

For some reason this had amused my Uncle greatly. "I remember reading theories about this line of thought when I was much younger and the Jedi were still the main peace-makers in the galaxy but the doctrine of the time called this way of thinking heresy."

"All religions cry heresy when people begin to veer from the given line of doctrine." I had snorted. "They get scared when new possibilities of thought come along because they get scared they will lose their power but power doesn't really exist so how can you lose something you don't really have. I never understood that ever."

"You must have some fascinating conversations about these things with your Ta'kasta'cariad." My uncle had commented.

I had nodded, "He also has some very interesting thoughts on these topics," I said quietly then added, "And yes we do have many interesting conversations." Not all of them verbal either.... I had thought with a smile which my uncle had pretended not to notice.

"Well Lei'lei, I, for one, am glad to see that your common sense has managed to keep you from going off the dark end." He had grinned at his own joke and with that we had gotten back to the work-out we had taken a break from. I was relieved to have a way to let go of my energy in a more productive albeit sometimes painful manner.

I looked forward to our training sessions, they had become a pocket of normality in what had become a very abnormal time. I could forget about everything else while I combat-danced around the beautiful training room Lord Vader had given me, trying to avoid my uncle's punishing moves. I think he also enjoyed the physical release of pent up energy and as if it were mirroring our lives, as we sparred on this particular day, Coruscant let go of its energy also in one of the worst, most impressive lightening storms I had ever seen.

It was raining heavily when we left the flat and by the time we made it to the training room what had started as a mild micro storm was beginning to show its teeth. It was dark enough outside that I had to turn on the studio's lights, something I rarely ever did given the amount of ambient light that usually poured through the room's lancet windows.

With a cursory glance at the weather outside my uncle made a let's get on with it noises. Once we had changed and were ready, we warmed up together side by side in a

graceful dance that I had missed without even knowing it. Sparring with my Uncle was not like sparring with Master Kjestyll or Lord Vader. Fighting Uncle Vahlek was a little like fighting smoke and he reminded me a little of Rukh.

It was fun, after a fashion and it kept me on my toes because he varied his methods and his techniques enough I could not usually predict what he would do next. After many such lessons and sessions together I had begun to discern patterns but still he could usually best me and today was no exception.

"Come on Lei'lei, if you are going to fight me then fight me. Quit messing around." My uncle taunted as I circled around him, now wary after several sharp knocks with his combat stave had caught me by surprise. He was trying to teach me some of the more aggressive Anzati moves but it wasn't going terribly well.

"The Anazti have the reputation they do because they are fearless and cunning warriors. This method I am teaching you is called Gh'zjann. It is a one of the five assassination lines. This is the defence line. I have taught you the mechanics of the moves now use them," he said patiently.

I flew at him and the sound of wood on wood reverberated around the room followed closely by the sound of all the air leaving my lungs as I was caught by my uncle's foot in a move which sent me flying across the floor.

"You leave yourself wide open when you attack like that, what have I told you before? This is how Jyrki gets past your defences, now do it again!"

So I did as I was asked and while this time I saw his attack I was still too slow to avoid the blow but I was able to deflect it a little so that it hurt less giving me more time to move away and regroup for the next attack. He fought with an earnest that surprised me, goading me into fighting him back with everything I had to give. He feared that if Jyrki and I were to face off again, I would not be prepared for it. I understood this fear because it was mine also but I'd hoped that Jyrki would just leave me alone, after all he could have attacked when he had found me alone in the med center quiet room but he had not done so. Still I was grateful for the chance to better my skills and regain some of the edge I felt I had lost and my uncle was a good teacher. By the time two hours had passed we were both breathing heavily and soaked in sweat.

"Do you use the force when you fight me?" He asked as we stopped to take a breath.

"Not consciously unless I am pushed." I admitted, "It seemed a little like cheating."

That had made him laugh, "What if I was your mortal enemy and this was a fight to the death?"

"Well..." I hedged, "I would probably be more open to the Force's suggestion that I let it fly and try to kick your ass."

"I want to see you do this. I want to see how much better it makes you."

"I don't want to hurt you Zte'sa," I said cautiously.

He grinned, "You won't."

So with a deep breath I opened up that part of me which touched that unseen world and felt that magic everyone called The Force flow through me. It was like being poured all over with sunlight and it made me smile. Thinking that I was not paying attention my uncle swung and me but I saw his move before he could even complete it



and without having to think I blocked, moved and attacked taking him down to the mat, the end of my staff caressing his throat. He smiled and swept the staff away with the back of his hand.

"It makes you sharper, faster. You should utilise it more. As you have told me it is just a tool, a very useful one at that. Just keep listening to that little voice in the back of your head," he said getting up, reaching over to ruffle the top of my head. "Okay again..."

But before either of us could move a particularly loud clap of thunder shook the palace violently and the lights flicked off plunging us into darkness for a second. Lightening seared through the windows making everything in the room a brilliant blue-white and then somewhere a backup generator kicked in and the lights sputtered back on. We both went to the window to look out over the city at the storm which had started when we had arrived. I could see that in parts of the city were still in black out. As far as I knew, this had never happened before, at least not in my lifetime.

"Wow, this is very bad." I whispered.

My Uncle studied the dark sky carefully. "Yes, most unusual for Coruscant. The weather grid must be malfunctioning." He murmured then something outside caught his eye. "Turn off the lights Lei'lei!" He commanded.

With a flick of my hand I summoned the force and did as he asked. Once again the room was plunged into darkness. I moved to stand close at my Uncle's side, sensing his worry as he watched the storm at that was gathering above us.

"We should leave this place and get home," he said and before I could ask why he had started to put away the combat staves and gather our things together with an urgency that made my heart begin to race. "Hurry, I don't think we have much time."

"Time for what?"

"To get home before all hell breaks loose."

"What?" I looked at him, "How...?"

"This is no ordinary storm. I think that the New Republic is finally making its move," he said. I was struck dumb by what he had said to the point of not moving. My uncle grabbed my arm, "Now, Lei'lei move, before it's too late and we get caught in the middle of it all."

"In the middle of what?" I asked exasperated.

"In the middle of a battle for Coruscant," He replied tartly and still with his hand around my wrist he dragged me out of the palace just as the alarms had started to wail, through the pouring rain to our speeder. It wasn't often I saw genuine worry on my uncle's face but I saw it now and it scared the hell out of me. I glanced upward into the bleak storm and was suddenly blinded by a huge explosion high up in the atmosphere that lit up the sky. "Come on!"

"What the hell was that?" I yelled, stopping dead in my tracks, pulling out of his grip, to follow the huge flashes of light that scarred the night sky.

My uncle grabbed my arm again and dragged me forward, "I think that one of the orbital planetary defence platforms is going down, come on!" He growled all but throwing me into the passenger side of my speeder.

Fear made me obedient and I buckled myself in without further protest. As soon as he could he drove off through the chaos of the panicking traffic, heading for the safety of home.

"What will happen if the Empire fails to drive them back?" I asked as the speeder skidded to a shaky halt at the private docking area.

My uncle glanced upwards at the sky. The terrible storm boiled over the planet, searing the dark with violent flashes of lightening but it was impossible to see anything clearly. "I don't know, Lei'lei. But the last time there was a battle over Coruscant things got messy and a lot of people died." As soon as the words were out of his mouth there were multiple explosions coming from the direction of the Imperial palace. I glanced at my uncle who had stopped to stare at the flashes of light. We were getting soaked.

Hearing his answer was not exactly comforting and as the door to the flat shut behind me I wondered if it had been a wise thing to come here, after all, I rationalized, at least the palace had safe places deep in the under-belly to go. I wasn't too sure how safe Thrawn's flat would be if the New Republic started hurling area bombardments from the upper atmosphere.

As if he read my thoughts my uncle said "They will try to take the planet as peacefully as they can. They want to be seen as the good guys, as liberators not invaders. The palace will be the first place they will wish to overrun. I do not want you anywhere near it when this happens. I know there are places there which might be from damage. I would not want to have to explain what we were doing there to either side involved in this conflict. We are safer here and if things get very bad we can get to a shelter. I assume this building has one?"

I nodded dumbly, clutching my arms around my sodden body, shivering with cold.

"You're soaking wet, go and get changed before you get sick and I will make us some tea. As long as the power holds we might as well use it." Uncle Vahlek said and because there was nothing else I could do I followed his suggestion, welcoming the idea of dry clothes and something hot to drink.

We stood at the window with the lights in the flat off, the HoloNet on, cups of tea in hand, gazing at the light show which unfolded before us in stunned silence as Coruscant fell to the New Republic.

## **Chapter Five**

We knew when the HoloNet came back on line, after going dark for many hours, with the announcement that Coruscant had been liberated by the New Republic and that the populace of the planet should remain calm that it was mostly all over. I had buried my face against my Uncle's chest and wept, terrified of this new change and the events that it might bring. All of my life I had only ever known the Galactic Empire and for the most part peace and prosperity, now all that was gone, swept away in a night's worth of wild weather, savage fighting and lives lost. I had never lived through anything quite like this before and I had no idea what to expect. Uncle Vahlek, on the other hand, had become suddenly and almost eerily calm. This was not the first planetary attack he had ever experienced.

We had sat in the living room glued to the HoloNet watching as holo-cam crews and reporters had raced to the battle fronts and shouting above the noise of the fray giving the denizens of Coruscant the blow by blow of what was happening, at least as far as they were able to see. It was both terrible and fascinating all at the same time and while I felt a sense of horror creep over me I was compelled to watch it all unfold live before my eyes

Of all the fighting reported, it was the battle for the Imperial Palace that was the worst. 'Of course,' my Uncle had said, 'this is the place they need take fully: it is the symbol of power.'

I had simply sat in the darkness of the room, tears streaming down my face as I watched the brave men and women of the Imperial army make their stand against the rebels but it was a slaughter. The Rebels bombarded the Palace and although the Elite Force that was guarding it stood their ground it was of no use against the air strikes.

Holocam crews captured it all and even though I had known it was all happening in real time, the surreal quality never went away. It was like watching a holodrama but the people dying were not actors who would get up after the scene was cut, they were real people and they laid down their lives to try and hold the enemy at bay.

The palace grounds were full of the carnage of war and the news crews captured it all, the broken bodies, the tangled wreckage, and the carnage. There was blood and gore everywhere. When a strike hit the AT-AT that was on the front line, in charge of directing the ground troops I had known a terrible sinking feeling in my gut, that feeling I had come to associate with very bad things.

The reporters who were dodging blaster fire and trying to vie for the best capture shots managed to record the survival of a general I would learn later was called Tal Ashen. He quite literally crawled out of the wreckage of the AT-AT to get back up and command the storm-troopers who were still alive, all the while firing with his hand pistol to keep the rebels at bay. I had watched in absolute horror as he was shot dead. Shortly after that someone from the rebellion side must have decided that the news crews were giving out too much information and all feeds had been abruptly terminated. The scene cut to the studio but was swiftly replaced by the emergency broadcast signal which told everyone to remain calm and stay tuned for further instructions. After ten minutes my uncle had switched it off. I had sat on the couch trembling. My brain was

trying to take in what had just happened but it was too much, too vast, and too unbelievable. Occasionally an orbital strike would hit something close enough to make the apartment building shake but apart from that and the infrequent flash from something exploding there were no more signs that the planet was under siege.

When the city wide alarms had stopped wailing and the distant tremors and rumbling of shelling had ceased my uncle had turned the HoloNet back on. Some time shortly after that a very tired looking woman I had never seen before had come on line and given the message that Coruscant had been liberated from Imperial tyranny and that the populace of the planet were requested to remain safe in their homes and not to panic, all was well. She had looked scared, her eyes kept darting to someplace off camera and her hands trembled. Sadness and exhaustion washed over me.

"What do we do now?" I asked when my crying jag had come to an end.

Uncle Vahlek gave me a tired look. "Now we wait," he replied.

Puzzled, I frowned, "Wait? Wait for what?"

"We wait to see what happens next, to see if there will be more fighting or if the battle we watched was it. We wait to hear what the new government's terms for its people are and how things will be run. We wait to see how this new government will act or if it will even hold. This is a fragile time and there are several other powerful factions out there wishing to carve up a piece of the Imperial pie, Coruscant is a very large and very important piece of that pie. It may be that, while this invasion has been successful now, in a few days we will see another turn around," he said wearily.

"Do you think they will send armies out to round up everyone who is still loyal to the Empire?" I asked. The memory of General Ashen's death was still vivid in my mind.

My uncle's green eyes flicked to my face for a moment. "No," he said with a slight shake of his head. "They have neither the man power nor the inclination. I suspect the biggest hurdle these people have now is creating a viable governing body that can maintain and control this planet along with all the other systems they hold." His shoulders heaved as he sighed. "If my guess is right they will try to be as quiet and as calm about this take over as possible. They do not want to be seen as aggressors but as liberators. The next few days and weeks will tell us more but for now there is nothing much to be done except wait it out and maybe get some rest."

"Was it like this in the Clone Wars?" I asked, getting up to follow him to the kitchen.

For a moment I didn't think he would answer me then he said carefully. "In some small way I suppose so, although my memory of that time is that the fighting was far worse, the armies that clashed were larger, more violent and far better equipped and that neither side wanted to give in. In some ways what you saw tonight was the ending of a battle that has been raging for the better part of two and a half decades." He told me. "With the exception of the troops at the Palace, the Imperial forces did not put up as much of a fight as I thought they might."

I looked at my uncle in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"The fight was over too quickly, and the Empire has better defences, better ships than the rebellion does. This planet's shields and orbital defences far outweigh anything the New Republic has. This battle should have gone on longer, should have been more ferocious but it wasn't."

"You think they just gave up, that Isard surrendered?" I asked in utter disbelief, almost dropping the teapot I had been emptying into the sink.

"I don't know, Lei'lei," he said thoughtfully. "You told me that when you went to speak with her she was not available. I find it unusual that the leader of the Empire and ruler of this world chose not to be here when she was needed most. It is entirely possible that she knew this was going to happen and was not even on the planet because she had already decided the outcome."

I opened my mouth to say something and then closed it again when I could not find the right words. I could not fathom her giving up Coruscant without so much as an honest fight and the very thought of it made me suddenly angry. People, good people had died and for what? She had abandoned it to be taken over by the rebels but given her lust for power and the importance of the Core planet this made little sense to me so that meant there had to be another reason. I tried to logic out her thinking behind these actions the way Thrawn had taught me to, back tracking through everything I had seen and heard. My dreams, the events that had been happening day by day, Cati's death.... I sucked in my breath as though all the air in the room had suddenly vanished.

It was as if a holo-drama unfolded right before my eyes and I wondered for a second how I could have been so blind to miss the subtle and not so subtle hints that had been thrown my way. Horrified, I suddenly understood the pieces of the puzzle that had been laid before me over the last few weeks. I felt as though I could not breathe and I must have gone as white as Hjal snow because my uncle's reaction was swift and full of concern.

"Are you feeling alright?" My uncle asked in alarm, reaching for my arm.

"I was right," I said softly giving him a look that made him stop mid move. "And so was Jyrki."

My uncle's eyebrows went up in question. "In what way?"

"She left the way she did because she knew that even if the rebels took this world it would not be the victory they had hoped for." I whispered.

There was a terrible, long moment of silence while my uncle searched my face for answers. "You think she was the one who had this Krytos virus manufactured." It was a flat statement not a question and I understood that this thought had also occurred to him but he had not wanted to voice it.

I nodded grimly. "Jyrki told me as much and I know he was speaking the truth but I didn't want to hear it, not right then and there. The dreams I had, all the signs led in that direction but I did not want to believe it, then you offered a different angle, that she was looking for a cure but that's not the case, is it?" I stopped as tears filled my eyes. My friend had died horribly because of this virus and all because Isard had decided not to launch a full scale defensive attack. "How *could* she?" I asked my Uncle. "If she really did this, if she was the one who is responsible for this terrible sickness, then she's killed hundreds of beings and will continue to kill even more." I trembled at the sheer scale and horror of this concept. "How could she do such a thing?"

"You do not for certain that she did." Uncle Vahlek said softly, carefully.

I looked into my uncle's pale green eyes, "Yes," I said, "yes I think I do." And I told my uncle everything that I suspected including all of the dreams, the fact that Jyrki had named Derricote who was more than capable of such biological engineering.

There was another very long moment of silence and then my uncle spoke. "Some people are very sore losers, Lei'lei. They would rather destroy everything than let it go to someone else. Isard is such a person and as long as I have known of her, she has never fought fairly or in the interest of others, only her own."

"She is a coward." I spat, angrier than I had felt in a long time. "Using innocent civilians in this way is ...," I searched for a word that fit what I wanted to say but there was nothing in Basic that came even close so I chose a Cheunh word instead, "...*nja'cht'Vagaari'njen*."

My uncle nodded. I knew he understood Cheunh well enough to know what I meant, although I didn't know how he had learned to do so or when. The word *nja'cht'Vagaari'njen* meant *to be as base as the Vagaari* and in Cheunh it was a terrible insult, perhaps even the worst thing you could call someone in the language of the Chiss.

The Vagaari, Thrawn had explained to me, when I had asked about the peculiar meaning and syntax of this somewhat unusual word, were a race of nomadic aliens that mainly lived in the Unknown Regions near the Chiss Ascendancy. For the most part they were a warrior race who thrived off acts of piracy and destruction, with a penchant for cruelty to all the races they enslaved. They were fierce, savage and utterly without any honour what so ever. Thrawn's distaste as he had spoken of them had been a palpable thing.

*"When I first encountered them I was quite horrified to learn that their main method of defence was to use the slaves they captured as living shields for their ships. They locked their prisoners inside small, transparent bubbles on the hulls of their ships so that potential enemies would see that they were killing innocent civilians in order to destroy the Vagaari themselves. It was most effective as well as being disgustingly vile. When the Chiss learned of this despicable, cowardly method of defence the name Vagaari became synonymous with acts so atrocious we could not speak of them without placing them in the same context as these aliens."*

What Isard had done ranked as the worst thing I had ever heard of. I swallowed hard against the rising nausea that threatened to send me running to the 'fresher, my heart pounded and a wave of dizziness swept through me. People dying in wars and battles were one thing, as awful as it was, I understood that at least both sides had a chance and those that entered the fight had usually done so of their own volition but to set a lethal virus amongst a civilian population simply to sabotage the rise of the next government was beyond vile. I did not even realise that I was gripping the handle of the tea pot so tightly that the blood had drained from my fingers until my uncle pried it from my hands gently. He wrapped his arm about my shoulders and tugged me tightly to his body in a protective hug.

"Why Zte'sa? Why is this happening?" was all I could think to ask.

"It has been a long time coming Lei'lei," he said.

"Well explain it to me, because I do not understand."

I felt rather than heard my uncle's deep voice rumble in his chest as he began to speak.

"When the Old Republic came to an end most people welcomed it. They saw in Chancellor Palpatine a man who would save them from the war that had been raging for several years. A war, incidentally that many felt the Jedi had initiated when they had interfered with the Trade Federation's blockade of Naboo. The downward spiral which began with that event and led the galaxy into the civil war which you know as the Clone Wars was the end of the Old Republic although most of its supporters would not see it this way. With the annihilation of the Jedi Order and the Republic senate in a state of chaos, Palpatine formed the Galactic Empire and took on the title as Emperor. I still recall his exact words to this day; *'We stand on the threshold of a new beginning. In order to ensure our security and continuing stability, the Republic will be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire, for a safe and secure society, which I assure you will last for ten thousand years. An Empire that will continue to be ruled by this august body and a sovereign ruler chosen for life.'*"

His speech and this decision were met by such applause that you would have thought the senate building would collapse under the sheer volume of it." He spoke quietly, lost in the memory. "He did what he set out to do, he brought peace and he brought stability but it came at a price and that price was personal freedom and some civil rights. In the beginning many were willing to give up some of these things and, for the most part, in all honesty, many members of the Empire never noticed a massive change in how things ran on a day to day basis but as with all change it had its opponents and this was the start of the rebellion."

"The rebellion has its beginnings in a group of senators who did not like this new change. They had created a petition, the Petition of the Two Thousand it was called, begging him to step back from the powers he had been granted in the Emergency Acts rule but he refused, stating that the issues which had brought about the need for extra powers to take care of the issues at hand still remained. He also maintained that their issues with the newly created Moff system, which they said destroyed the actual power of the senate, were baseless fears. Shortly after this he changed the Republic into an Empire and many of the senators who had signed that petition retracted their signatures for fear of reprisal. I don't tell you this lightly. Those were difficult times and many senators, whose names remained on that petition, vanished without a trace or were killed under somewhat dubious circumstances."

"But the Empire had senate rule as well, at least until the senate was dissolved," I said, trying to recall my history lessons from school.

Uncle Vahlek nodded. "Yes it did, after a fashion, but the newly create Moff office actually did strip much of the senate's power away although at first not many people noticed this right away. In the beginning it all appeared to work out well, but as the rebellion grew in size and strength, gaining sympathies and support and as the honeymoon phase of the new style of imperial government wore off, people suddenly began to realize just exactly what and how much they had given up."

"Palpatine saw the need to switch the style of rule to an outright dictatorship. When he implemented the Tarkin Doctrine I suspect that was the beginning of the end. For many worlds and many people who had, up until that point remained loyal to the ideal of Palpatine's empire, the idea that they were now under the thumb of a single governor or Moff was distasteful at best and terrifying at worst. While some of the

governors were actually good people with good intentions many were mostly power hungry and tyrannical, Tarkin being the supreme example of this." He paused.

"Ruling by fear, while effective for a time, has its down sides and you can only subjugate people to that sort of thing for so long before they will eventually get fed up and fight back. This added much needed fuel to the small fires the Rebellion had been starting from even before Palpatine actually declared himself Emperor. I think it was the creation of the Emperor's Battle Station, that some smart ass dubbed the 'death star' which pushed things over the edge. With a weapon like that Palpatine ensured he could do as he wished and the peoples of the galaxy who opposed him feared not only sanctions but destruction as well. Alderaan was the prime example of this, despite the propaganda about what caused the planet's destruction I happen to know for a fact it was destroyed by that battle station and that Tarkin was directly responsible. Had that incident not occurred who is to say how things would have turned out? And while the Emperor did a bang up job of covering the truth up, it was enough to push the Rebellion's cause from being one most people didn't care about to one they suddenly did."

I sighed. These words sounded so familiar to me and I recalled the many conversations Thrawn and I had had on this topic. It led me to another memory, one which sent a little shiver down the back of my spine. I pulled out of my uncle's embrace and hugged my arms around my body, watching while he poured the water which had boiled into the tea pot. "Thrawn told me once that Palpatine feared a great threat from outside of the galaxy and that this was partly why he chose to create the Empire. He wanted the galaxy to be united so that its defences and military capabilities would be enough to fight off these far outsiders."

That made my uncle's eyebrows rise up in surprise. "Is that so?" He said quietly.

I nodded slightly, "These aliens Thrawn spoke of, they must be terrible because even he was worried about them and it isn't often he gets noticeably concerned about things like that so when he does, I get scared."

"Well, that little piece of information sheds some interesting light on a few of Palpatine's actions, but make no mistake Lei'lei, Palpatine wanted power as well. His motives were not purely selfless."

*That was an understatement*, I thought. "Does it matter? I mean in the end, what if he was right? And what happens if there is such an invasion and this galaxy no longer has the superior military defences it once had?"

"Difficult questions to answer and I guess this new government will find itself in a rather precarious position should that ever happen." Uncle Vahlek said quietly. "But I don't think that it is something you or I have to immediately worry about just yet. If there were such a threat at the edge of the galaxy we would have heard something of it by now."

I looked up at him and nodded but I wasn't so sure he was right. Space was vast and, for the most part, pretty empty. It would be easy enough for an enemy to covertly sneak its way in, if it really wanted to, especially when we were at our most vulnerable, like now. I thought it was utter arrogance to assume that we were safe, tucked away in our own galaxy away from alien threats just because we couldn't see them.



Perhaps my thoughts showed on my face because my Uncle gave me a tight smile and said, "Even if such an invasion force is on its way there is little you or I can do about it right now anyway." He handed me a cup of tea and nodded in the direction of the sitting room. "So for now we will go into the living room, watch what the HoloNet news has to offer, drink this tea and get some rest. Invasion or no, neither you nor I will be of much use without sleep and you, child, are exhausted."

I could not argue with this logic even if I had wanted to and, he was right, I was far too tired to try. We sipped our tea in silence as we watched the HoloNet unfold the edited, politically correct, play by play version of what had occurred. After seeing how the battle for the Imperial palace was portrayed when told by the winning side I wondered if I had stepped into an alternative universe. I was thankful for my uncle's presence of mind to get us out of there when he did and I was never more grateful for Thrawn's gift of this apartment than now. If I had still been residing in the palace I would have lost everything. I shuddered to think of it and marvelled, once again, at Thrawn's uncanny ability to be prepared for any and every eventuality.

At some point in the middle of an interview with an eye witness who definitely had not seen the same things I had seen, I closed my eyes and fell asleep. I didn't dream and when I woke up I discovered that I had been carried to my own bed with the Dantassi blanket I loved so much draped over me. I was a bit shocked to realize that I had slept for nearly fifteen hours straight, even more stunned when the memories of what had just happened came rushing back. In the space of a day everything I had known had changed.

Still groggy, I got up and went in search of my uncle. I wasn't as surprised as I should have been to see him in the living room speaking with Shiv and Ynyth. I gave them a cursory wave and then decided I would not function properly until I had spent at least fifteen minutes under a very hot shower so that was what I did. By the time I reappeared stim'caf had been prepared. I accepted the cup I was offered gratefully and then sitting on my favourite chair, tucking my feet under me in a very jax like fashion, I let Shiv and Ynyth recount their versions of what they had seen and the latest news that had been spread by the HoloNet, then I told them about my suspicions about Isard and the Krytos virus.

There was a long heavy quiet after I had finished speaking and then Shiv asked me. "Do you think that Thrawn knew about any of this?"

I shook my head. "He would have found the idea of a biological weapon used in this manner ...unthinkable," I said softly. "I'd like to think if he had known he would have tried to prevent her from doing it at all."

"What about the rebels taking Coruscant?" Ynyth asked, her normally cheerful eyes marred by dark circles and worry. "Do you think he knew about this?"

"I don't think he would have been too surprised. Retaking the Core was the next logical step for the New Republic." I answered thoughtfully. "When we got word that Borleias had fallen he told me Coruscant would be next."

"Do you think he will come and try to take this planet back?"

I went to speak but it was my uncle who answered. "That is unlikely at this time," he said, "And it would be unwise."

I nodded my agreement with his assessment. "Thrawn doesn't have the man power or the ships needed to launch such a full scale attack and to do so undermanned would invite the risk of letting all the other factions out there who would gladly have Coruscant for their own to come out of the woodwork. It would mean a dirty war that would go on forever between multiple factions. That's not his style. If he were to retake Coruscant he would want to do so swiftly and decisively. If it meant high civilian casualties and an unacceptable loss of men and ships he would not take the risk."

There was a long, heavy silence while everyone digested this. These were uncertain times and none of us, except for my Uncle had even the slightest inkling how to cope with the massive and violent change.

"Do you think we should start hiding or destroying all our holo-captures of the Emperor or Lord Vader?" Ynyth asked timidly.

I looked at Ynyth. "Why?"

"Well... I heard that the rebel army was searching people's homes and looking for evidence of those still loyal to the Empire and... doing things..." she said, managing to look both embarrassed and scared all at the same time.

My uncle looked a little puzzled. "Doing what?"

She swallowed, "I heard that they were arresting people to put in to labour camps or worse...."

The expression on my uncle's face softened a little and his tone of voice was the same with which he used to sooth nervous banthas. "Ynyth, there are nearly one trillion beings on this planet I am certain the New Republic has neither the man power nor the inclination to search every single home nor," he added, "do they have the facilities to intern every single being who has holo captures of the Emperor sitting on a bookshelf somewhere. I don't know who has been filling your head with this nonsense but I can assure you this won't be happening on this planet this time."

"*This time?*" My glance asked, catching his eye but the subtle shake of his head said don't ask.

"I wonder if they even know about Thrawn." Shiv said looking at me. "He is the last of the Grand Admirals."

That made me shrug. "I don't know," I said, "His promotion to the Circle of Twelve wasn't that well advertised and then he all but vanished from the Imperial spotlight. I am not sure that anyone really knows about him outside of the inner High Command circle which is a good thing because if they knew he was still out there or had any idea of just how brilliant he is, they would go after him with everything they have." I sighed. "Honestly, I think that anyone who actually recalls his existence will just assume he is dead."

"Well you should get rid of any holo-captures you have of him in his white uniform." Shiv cautioned.

I shook my head, not voicing that I thought he was being a bit paranoid. "The only capture I have of him is on Nirauan and he's not wearing his uniform in it. Besides in the Imperial computer system almost all traces of him have been purged. I read in a back issue of Coruscant weekly which said he was thought to have been killed at Endor and most people believed it."

Shiv's mouth tightened in a thin line. "It is a sure bet if they connect him to you, it would be a bad thing for you," he said pushing his point.

"That has been taken care of Siavaan." Uncle Vahlek said in a tone of voice that brooked no more discussion on the matter.

Shiv stared at my uncle, lines of annoyance and frustration marring his usually handsome face but when my uncle did not back down, he then glanced at me.

My eyes flicked to my uncle who gave me the tiniest of nods. "We erased most traces of me and my position as Lord Vader's assistant from all of the archives. All anyone will think if they searched for my name was that I, like so many others, was just a courtesan in Palpatine's court." I explained. "I don't exist in the Imperial Records any more as Lord Vader's office girl." It felt weird to say that out loud and it made me sad, as though a valuable part of my life had suddenly vanished.

The relief on Shiv's face was almost comical. He sighed and sat back against the couch. "So now what?" he asked.

"Now we wait and see what happens next," I said echoing my uncle's words.

Shiv snorted, "Well I know one thing for sure...."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I'm damned well not going into work today and if they don't like it they can fire me!" he said and that made us all laugh, breaking the uneasy tension that had wrapped itself around the room.

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If the New Republic had thought that taking Coruscant had been relatively easy, then by comparison, establishing their foot hold on the planet was anything but because Coruscant was a mess. The Krytos virus was causing mass panic and the supplies of bacta had all but run out. Beings of all species were rushing to get off the planet and as far away as possible causing absolute chaos at all the star ports and shuttle terminals. There was no control because the Imperials had more or less stepped aside and the New Republic was utterly clueless about how to deal with the mass panic and wide spread dissension so the tension mounted.

Banks closed because just about everyone had tried to withdraw their money, unsure what would happen with the Imperial currency, food shopping was damned near impossible due to the line ups and the insane hoarding that was going on and the general infrastructure kept going down due to sabotage. I had never in my life experienced this sort of planet wide chaos before and it scared the hell out of me. It was Uncle Vahlek who kept me from going stir crazy. He took the entire situation in stride, remaining calm when everything around us was falling apart.

"Give it time Lei'lei," he said, "Things will calm down once the majority of the planet realises the world is not about to end." And because there was nothing much else I could do I followed his advice.

The first week had been bad and for a great deal of it Shiv and Ynyth stayed with us, sleeping in the guest room while my Uncle slept on the couch, but soon enough, just as my uncle had predicted, things slowly wound down and life began to get back to some semblance of normal.

The HoloNet schedule programmes returned, with a few exceptions, to their normal times and gradually the news of the Emancipation, as it was now being called, gave way to news of the Krytos virus and other, less catastrophic, things. I found it interesting to watch how quickly people settled down, accepting the new government once the essential things like power, food and commerce were all back on line. Thrawn had been right that as long as we were fed, warm and felt safe we were pretty easy going about who actually ran things.

Still, just because the majority of the populace had settled back into their routines did not mean the whole planet had and all over the place small resistance pockets were breaking out, causing havoc with minor acts of terrorism and vandalism. The worsening problem due to the Krytos virus was also not helping to stabilize the planet either. It became apparent very rapidly that the New Republic, despite their attempts to appear so, were not the saviours of all. There was not have enough bacta to serve the growing need and the new government could not afford to buy more at the sky rocketing prices to save everyone who had been struck with the deadly illness. This was causing a great deal of resentment between humans and non humans and the seeds of unrest, which Isard had so cheerfully sowed, were now growing into full scale civil unrest.

It did not help matters much that many planets had banned all inbound travel from Coruscant for fear of the virus's spread which only heightened the growing sense of planetary claustrophobia and panic. The unease which had settled over Coruscant was palpable and this tension was making me stir crazy, which in turn drove my uncle nuts. To counteract the cabin fever that had infected me, he had come up with a solution but I wasn't especially happy with it.

I sighed as I put on my long heavy coat. "Why are we going to this thing again?" I asked.

"Because I think you need to get some fresh air and I wish to take a firsthand look at the heroes who will no doubt be attending this ceremony." He told me as he dressed for going outside. "Now get a move on, I want a decent seat. It's going to be very busy."

I was not happy about getting dragged to the memorial service being held for dead rebel pilot named Corran Horn. His name had been splashed all over the HoloNet as a hero who had given his life for the worthy and noble cause of retaking the Core planet. He had apparently been crushed to death when a building had collapsed on him. I thought that this was a somewhat ironic death for a heroic rebel pilot saving the galaxy from the evil empire. When word began to circulate about this memorial service, interest in attending it grew exponentially. It didn't hurt that his face and his deeds were being touted at every single opportunity so that by the time the day of the memorial rolled around I was thoroughly sick of hearing about him.

My uncle, who had decided it would be a good opportunity to get to see the faces of the New Republic up close and personal, ignored my grumblings telling me that I should take more of an interest in the new government of this world. I had just made a face at him but despite my annoyance, my curiosity had gotten the better of me.

The service was being held at the place where Horn had died. The building which had become his tomb was to also be his memorial. A large stage had been erected and large grandstands had been built up all around the rubble of the collapsed building and then, because of the huge amount of interest and the unusual amount of spectators

expected, extra places to sit had also been added onto the surrounding buildings, walkways and all available areas of space. It was going to be exactly as Uncle Vahlek had said it would be: a spectacle of over blown proportions.

It was good that we had arrived early and managed to get decent enough seats, although I noticed with wry amusement the best seats closest to the podiums had all been taken up by what looked like dignitaries and politicians.

"They want to keep their new friends close." Uncle Vahlek had said by way of answer to my comment.

Despite the amount of beings that were gathering in this place I felt a sliver of unease ripple through me although I couldn't put my finger on why. Jyrki was still a round and I wasn't sure if he really had given up on me or if he was still in stalking mode. I was half afraid that someone would somehow recognise me from my days in the Imperial court and tell the entire planet about my past associations so I had worn and long heavy coat with a hood, my hair tied back in a braid and clothing I could easily move in. My uncle thought I was being a little paranoid and had shaken his head at my attempts of disguise.

"Lei'lei, trust me no one will be looking at or for you," he had said not doing a very good job at hiding his amusement. I had just shot him a glare, but he was, of course, right.

By the time the ceremony was underway it felt as though half the planet was actually in attendance and the rest would be glued to the HoloNet watching live feed casts being sent across the galaxy. It was great publicity and a much needed opportunity for the shaky new government to show its face. They were playing on the equality of all beings and species bit, touting, not so subtly, their ability to work together against the xenophobia of the Empire. For the most part it was a lot of hot air and pretty words about a dead pilot and how he had become the symbol of hope in a world that had previously been blanketed by evil and gloom. I was amazed at how politicians could say little with so many words. My uncle remained silent as we listened to these speeches, ignoring me as I let him know though sighs and looks that I was bored out of my skull.

The last person to speak was Commander Wedge Antilles. As my uncle handed me the tiny pair of micro-binoculars he had brought with him so that I could get a good look at the man who had brought Coruscant down. He was older than his purported years and he looked exhausted although he was making a brave front of it. When he stepped up to the microphone a deep hush had rippled across the crowds as everyone waited for him to speak. His voice was gentler than I had imagined it would be and he sounded like a man who had lost too many friends in one too many battles.

I listened with interest to the speech he gave because it wasn't like any of the others. He did not mince words or try to sooth ruffled feathers by speaking in terms that were metaphysical and almost unreal. To hear how some of the speakers talked about Corran Horn one would have thought the dead pilot was a god not a man. Instead of going this route, Antilles spoke plainly which surprised me. I understood from his tone of voice, from his body language that he had been more than just Horn's superior officer, they had been friends and Horn's death had touched him deeply.

*"...You must do what Corran did: fight anything and everything that would give the Empire comfort or security or a chance to reassert itself. If you trade vigilance for*

*complacency, freedom for security, a future without fear for comfort; you will be responsible for shaping the galaxy once again into a place that demands people like Corran Horn fight, always fight and eventually fall victim to evil. ..."*

I sighed. *The Evil Empire*. I wondered at how easy it was to stick simple descriptions on such a vast and all encompassing thing. I tuned back in to hear the last of Commander Antilles' speech.

*"...He has done everything he could to fight the Empire; now it is up to you to continue hi fight. If he is ever to know peace, it will only be when we all know peace. And that is a goal every one of us knows is well worth fighting for."*

He stepped back from the podium then and all around me the crowd applauded loudly but as I watched the officials and dignitaries who were seated closest to the stage I understood they had not been inspired by the commander's speech, if anything he had pissed them off. That made me smile a little, this new government was already experiencing dissent and unrest. Good, I thought, serves you right.

Contrary to just about everyone else around me, Commander Antilles words had angered me, instead of inspired. This assumption that everything associated with the Empire was evil annoyed me to no end. It was the same old lies each opposing side told its allies and friends. We are right because they are wrong, but who defined right and wrong? The Emperor had often spoken on this very dilemma to me but only now did I begin to understand what he had been trying to get at.

Admittedly, I thought as I watched Commander Antilles speak with a Bothan who did not seem terribly impressed with the commander's words either, there were things done in the name of the Empire which I whole heartedly disagreed with and Isard's latest move had helped to improve that reputation but not everything which had been done during the Emperor's rule had been bad.

Palpatine, for all his megalomania, had brought an entire galaxy more or less together at a time when it was about to rip itself apart. Many, many worlds had prospered under his rule, the might of the military and the navy could have challenged any threat from outsiders, spice dealing and smuggling had been drastically cut and commerce had flourished throughout the trading planets. It amazed me how quickly the good things were forgotten in favour of the negative, even though I knew that the negative was pretty major. Still, it was all about spin and good PR as well as who had the power to weave the glamour to cover up the unwanted truths.

"Who is the Bothan that's speaking to the Commander, Zte'sa?" I asked, switching from basic to minnisiat, a trade language mostly unknown in the Core. Once I had learned that Uncle Vahlek knew this language we had taken to speaking it while in public because so very few people actually spoke or understood it. I had not thought much of it when Thrawn had encouraged me to learn it but as with most things he had given me, it was a gift I silently thanked him for every day. I handed the binoculars back to my uncle so he could take a look.

"If I am not mistaken that would be Borsk Fey'lya," he said carefully, "One of the main politicians in the provisional government although I am unsure of his exact role."

"Well, whoever he is he doesn't like the commander much at all."

Uncle Vahlek turned to give me a glance and a small smile. "No, Lei'lei he doesn't," he said, "I see your ability to observe has greatly increased."

"Navaari taught me well." I told him with a nod.

For a moment he looked as though he wanted to say something about that but then changed his mind. My time with the Dantassi was something he was interested in but he never pushed for information. He nodded slightly. "So what did you think of the speeches?" He asked me, switching tracks.

"Lies and propaganda," I spat, "A crass attempt at trying enlist sympathy for the New Republic and the rebel thugs who murdered the Emperor."

A slight smile pulled at my Uncle's lips. "Perhaps it was at that, but you are now looking at the new government. One, I might add that has been formally recognised by many worlds," he said, "They are no longer rebels, they are now leaders."

His words hit home, like a knife through the heart. I opened my mouth to say more but a sudden, almost overwhelming sensation of panic engulfed me. Cold sweat prickled across my skin and my heart thumped with the surge of adrenaline that was so painful I gasped at it. I grabbed my uncle's sleeve. "We need to go." I hissed urgently.

"Hmm not yet," he said still watching the stage, "I wish to observe the dignitaries as they leave...." My uncle explained.

The terrible sensation that crawled under my skin worsened. Agitated beyond normal I fidgeted and chewed at my pinkie nail. The memorial was over and people around us had gotten up and were leaving. When I could stand it no longer I, too, stood up to go.

"Lei'lei..." My uncle glanced up at me, annoyed. He had mistaken my persistence for impatience, thinking me rude for pushing to get my own way but I wasn't having it. I knew this sensation and while I didn't get it all that often I knew enough to pay attention to it.

I yanked at his arm violently. "Now, right now! We need to get away from this place!" I was still speaking minnisiat but the urgency in my tone and the volume at which I spoke made the people close to us stop and stare.

"Lei'lei, stop it you are drawing attention ...."

I shook my head with impatience and the terrible sense of danger that was crawling all over my skin like maggots on rotting flesh. I grabbed his collar and pulled his head close to mine. "We must get the hell away from here right now," I said slowly and quietly in his ear, "something very bad is going to happen very soon."

It only took a second for him to suddenly understand that I wasn't messing around with him and without further fuss or protest he followed me as I hurried my way across the crowded stands to get away from this place. The Memorial service had come to an end and I could hear the echoing words of the master of the ceremony as he officially closed the event by wishing everyone stay safe and vigilant.

I grew more and more anxious as the people leaving had surrounded us in a slow moving crowd that only went in one direction. Gripping my uncle's hand in mine, I dragged at him as I wove my way through the throng annoying crowds. My persistence and pushiness earning me angry stares but I simply ignored their rude comments about my lack of manners. It was like trying to walk quickly through the snow fields on Hjal

without snow-shoes and the slower we moved the more wound up I got. We were getting nowhere fast.

My uncle was about to comment when quite suddenly from behind us there was an enormous explosion followed by several more. For a split second nothing moved then the docile crowd had become a panicking monster. In the blink of an eye, my uncle had wrapped himself around me like a shield and moved us off to one side where we were safe from being trampled or hit from falling, flying bits of wreckage. I felt the wind from the shockwave of the blast but, with his arm curled around my head, my uncle protected my face from it. When some of the dust had settled I could see the damage that had been done and it made my heart stop cold.

The stands where we had previously been seated were now a mess of twisted durasteel and duraplast. Half the concourse we had been sitting above was gone, swept down into the Coruscant's deep along with the falling stands and all the people who had remained seated to avoid the rush of the crowds. If we had stayed there we would most likely have been caught up in the majority of the explosion and killed. Luckily, whoever it was who had done this had mistimed it. All the important dignitaries and New Republic members had already cleared the area and most people had already begun to leave as the memorial had finished, so casualties were not as high as they could have been but still, as I glanced all around, there had been casualties and it wasn't pretty. I fought the wave of nausea that swept through me, gagging back the bile.

"Are you alright?" asked my uncle, his hands biting into my shoulders as his eyes swept up and down me, checking for any injury. I nodded noticing the cut on the side of his forehead where a piece of flying debris had caught him but it was superficial.

"I *told* you we had to leave!" I spat crossly, angry as well as scared.

Uncle Vahlek looked at me and drew a deep breath. "So you did," he eventually said by way of acknowledgement.

Shaken up, I asked, "Can we *please* go home now?"

He nodded absently, still looking over the area which had been blown to bits.

"Well," he said as he wrapped an arm around my shoulder protectively, "This is going to make things interesting."

"Interesting?" I squeaked, "Your definition of that word definitely isn't the same as mine Zte'sa." I muttered under my breath.

My uncle smiled grimly and hurried up his pace so that I had to trot to keep up with him. "We can discuss semantics over a drink when we get home," he said.

I wasn't about to disagree with that.

We later found out that the Palpatine Counter Insurgency Front had claimed responsibility of the bombings at the memorial service. The Holo-News showed the captured scenes over and over again until I was numb from them despite the fact that I had been there.

"If they had wanted to kill the new government and its hangers on, they missed." I snorted as a young twi'lek reporter wearing too much make up over emphasised the drama of it all.

"I don't think that was the intent, Lei'lei." Uncle Vahlek said as he curled his hands around the hot tea cup.

"Oh?"



"Assassinating the heroes and government officials by such a cowardly act would only serve to swing even more people to sympathise in favour of the New Republic. No, this was a wilful act of terrorism meant to scare people."

"From what?"

"From gathering in public." He answered. "These sort of acts of random violence create an atmosphere of fear which will make it harder for the provisional government to convince everyone that things are all nice and safe now."

I sighed heavily. "Great, we swap one group of terrorists for another."

"Maybe, but as far as I can recall the Rebellion never randomly blew people up as a scare tactic. They picked their fights quite carefully."

"So who would then?"

"People loyal to the Empire, judging by the name of this particular group."

"Great Sarlacc's teeth, no wonder people in this galaxy think the Empire was evil!" I snapped.

"Oh Lei'lei, the Empire itself wasn't evil. But many of its leaders were at the very least, too power hungry to think straight and, at the very worst, megalomaniacs with xenophobic tendencies bordering on psychotic."

"Like Ysanne Isard."

My uncle gave me a small nod. "For example."

I made a face, "I should have stayed on Hjal with Navaari," I grumbled which made my uncle smile.

"I am quite certain, given enough time, this new government will find it has its fair share of problematic politicians out to serve their own purposes rather than the worlds they claim to care about. Power attracts the greedy and the corrupt and it doesn't matter what side you are on in this regard."

"In other words they will end up just like the last Republic." I retorted.

My uncle just raised an eyebrow and took a sip of his tea. "Everything is cyclical, Lei'lei. History repeats itself all the time. You should have paid more attention in school instead of sneaking out to follow Jyrki around like a little love sick bantha."

"Well, contrary to popular belief what I learned from Jyrki has actually saved my life on a few occasions...so far history from dull school lessons hasn't." I told him tartly.

He had no answer for that but the small smirk that tugged at the corners of his lips had not gone unnoticed.

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It was late and although I was tired sleep would not come. Between nearly being blown up and the never ending nightmare over the Krytos virus, it seemed that my waking life was every bit as frightening as my sleeping one. The violence on Coruscant continued and its effects were beginning to take root. People were scared to go out, or gather in groups. The repercussions from the bombing at the memorial service rippled out like rings from a stone tossed into a still pond. The fear did not lessen with time but rather seemed to worsen and it was as stifling as it was unnerving. Never before had I lived for so long with the ever present sense of doom, not even while working for Lord Vader. Unless I had a damned good reason, I did not leave the flat.

Uncle Vahlek, on the other hand, had vanished for a couple of days, *off scouting*, he had said as I had silently watched him ready for this latest excursion into the underbelly of the planet. I had long since given up asking for details and I worried about him despite his great skill and prowess in all things scary and assassin-like. I suspected he was hunting for Jyrki but he had not been forthcoming on any information and I had not wanted to ask. Jyrki was a sore subject between us so I left it alone.

As much as I enjoyed the peace and quiet when Uncle Vahlek wasn't in the flat I missed his presence as well. Without his quiet company Thrawn's flat seem empty as well as lonely and because I could not stand the silence the HoloNet babbled quietly in the back ground. I had gotten used to having it on as company when Uncle Vahlek wasn't around and had gotten hooked on the nightly reports about the trial of Tycho Celchu.

I felt sorry for the poor bastard. He was an Imperial Pilot who had deserted the Empire after the destruction of Alderaan, blaming that event squarely on the shoulders of the Empire. He had turned to the Rebellion seeking retribution for his family's death only to be captured by Ysanne Isard and incarcerated in her Lusankya facility and then to a lower security prison on Akrit'tar where he would eventually escape to return to the service of the New Republic. His service to the New Republic in Rogue Squadron was a matter of public record but the fact that everyone believed he was really an Imperial agent working as a spy and a saboteur behind the scenes had the entire galaxy watching the court drama with baited breath. He was suspected of being the person responsible for the Corellian hero, Corran Horn's death. I was happy not to be in Celchu's shoes. According to the latest poll he was the most reviled man in the galaxy at the moment.

Holocams were not allowed in the courtroom but the late night news did a featured update on the day's events every night and it wasn't looking so good for the hotshot Imperia-turned-rebel pilot. I watched absently as the young reporter wearing far too much lip-shine babbled her way through the latest proceedings, the camera crews trying their best to capture Celchu as he was ushered away from the court room. They had shown stock file images of him and I wondered if I had ever met him at one of the Emperor's shindigs because his face looked vaguely familiar to me but then again I had met hundreds of men like him during my time as Lord Vader's Assistant, and after a while one face tended to blend into another.

He was being accused of treason against the New Republic and I found the whole matter of the trial almost laughable. A traitor of the Empire turned traitor to the Rebellion he had run to. It seemed comical at best and utterly stupid at worst but the New Republic was determined to set an example of him. If Celchu was found guilty he would be put to death and if he was innocent then the New Republic had tried one of its own in the largest publicity stunt ever. It smacked of politics and behind the scenes power mongering to me. *Spin...* no matter what government was in power this was a part of the deal. I wondered what Thrawn would have made of it all and then decided it would disgust him as much as it intrigued me because he had no time to waste on this sort of thing. Regardless of what the truth behind it all was, it did make for good HoloNet drama and I enjoyed the nightly news cast with a drink of some sort and snacks.

I was half way through my second cup of tea when the door chime rang making me jump. It was too late for visitors and Shiv always called first to let me know he was coming. I was wary as I went to the door and pressed the intercom-cam but after a quick indent scan had been performed and I knew who it was, I grinned. A few moments later a very surprised looking Jarack did his best to untangle himself from my hug and before he even had time to speak I had dragged him into the living room.

"It's nice to see you too, Miss Gabriel." He grinned, straightening out his jacket, looking both embarrassed and pleased at the same time. It took me a second to realise he was not wearing his usual Imperial uniform and then another second to notice how tired he was.

"Sit!" I ordered and he did, "What do you want to drink?"

"What do you have?" he asked.

I listed off everything I could think of that was actually in the flat and was more than surprised when he settled for a brandy. I watched as he accepted the glass and sipped the drink slowly as though he were cherishing the very essence of it on his tongue.

"Are you hungry?" I gestured vaguely in the direction of the kitchen, "I could make you something...there are some leftovers...which didn't cook, I promise."

"No, thank you, I ate a little while ago, some Zabradi dinner not too far from here; luckily for me they also serve plain Corellian dishes."

I grinned. I knew that place well. Thrawn and I had often ordered take-out from them. They made excellent food and they were fast.

He sighed and sat back in the chair I had all but shoved him in. "The Admiral will be relieved to hear that you are alive and well," he said after what seemed like forever. "We got word of Coruscant's fall and even I didn't need to be mind-scanner to see his concern."

I looked at him, deciding what to say about that. "We were here in this flat and the rebels kept orbital bombing to a minimum," I said, "But I have to admit, it was a tad scary and I don't want to go through that ever again."

"Understandable. I heard it could have been much worse, and that casualties were kept to a minimum."

I gave him a little one shoulder shrug. "People die in war. This is still a war; it's been going on for so many years that hardly anyone even thinks of it that way anymore. What's worse is this in-between time; no one knows what to do, so it's chaotic and crazy. At least the Emperor kept law and order while he was around, now...." I let my voice trail off. What was there to say that Jarack didn't already know?

"Well, Miss, I am certain that when he is ready the Grand Admiral will make his move to restore that order. It is what he excels at, you know."

I nodded, "So...how is he, really?"

Jarack gave me a one sided wry smile. "As always, Miss. He's well and doing what he does best. The work in the Unknown Regions is keeping him busy and we make advances comparatively swiftly. The Admiral has a way about him that allows for seemingly effortless campaigns and he never ceases to amaze me with his brilliance."

It was my turn to let out the breath I had been holding. "Well thank Da'hajn for that." I murmured. "We could sure use his brilliance here, that's for sure."

Jarack gave me a small smile and then dug out his satchel and from it pulled a package, "I apologise for not getting this to you sooner but I thought I was being followed and the last thing I wanted to do was lead anyone to this location."

"How long have you been on planet then?" I asked motioning him to set the package on the table.

"Over a week doing some Re-Con for the Admiral," He answered, "It has been an interesting time, I will give it that." He shook his head. "Listen, if you have anything you want me to take back to Nirauan then you'd better give it to me now, I am not sure when I can get back again. And to be honest, Miss I think you should come back with me."

I got up and slipped into the bedroom, gathered all the letters I had written and handed them to Jarack. He took them and slid them in to a small plain, single envelope and slid it into his satchel.

"I can't come back just yet." I told him.

"May I ask why?" He gave me one of those looks that people give you when they know what you are going to say but they need to hear it anyway.

"Because I have been exposed to people here who had the Krytos virus. It attacks aliens I don't want to carry it to Nirauan." It wasn't the whole truth but I didn't think that Jarack would accept me saying *because I still have unfinished business here* as an answer. I got the distinct impression that Thrawn had strongly requested Jarack bring me back with him.

"Oh, I see." He sighed. "Well I can see how that would complicate things for you but according to his research so far it only affects non humans and while he is not human he is also more human like than not, if I can use that phrase. He doesn't think it will affect him and if that were to happen he assures me his bacta stores are more than enough to handle an outbreak on the base."

*Typical Thrawn*, I thought, *ready for any and all eventualities*. "Look I know he told you to bring me back to Nirauan but I can take care of myself," I said plainly, "My uncle is here and things are fine... for the moment."

"Oh really?" Jarack replied not bothering to hide his scepticism. "I was under the impression that things here are a bloody mess," he sighed, "And yes he did ask me to escort you home. He doesn't think it is safe for you here."

I ignored his use of the word home, Nirauan wasn't home. I shrugged. "Is any place safe right now?" I asked. "Coruscant is not the only planet that has been experiencing outbreaks of the Krytos illness, or for that matter, riots and dissent. The whole galaxy has gone mad it seems."

Jarack gave me another one sided smile. "Well, Nirauan and the unknown regions will seem fairly docile by comparison then."

"I promise," I said as calmly as I could, "I promise I will come back safe and sound to him when I am finished here."

"If you have information for him, I can bring it to him you know."

"I know, it's just that..."

He held up a hand, "It's just that you don't trust what you have with anyone except yourself." He sighed. "He knew you would feel this way as well."

"It's got nothing to do with you," I said a little defensively.

"I know that and so does the Admiral." Jarack nodded, "He merely indicated that he was concerned about your well being, said he felt you might *wish* to return."

"I doubt very much those were his exact words."

Jarack smirked, "No his exact words were '*I want her off that planet alive and in one piece, and if you have to carry her over your shoulder to get her out of there yourself, you have my permission to do so although, to be honest, I doubt that will do any good. When she makes her mind up about something she can be quite stubborn you know.*'"

I opened my mouth then closed it again, making a face. Jarack's imitation of Thrawn's cultured voice was almost perfect and it certainly did sound like Thrawn in one of his more determined moods. The look on my face must have spoken volumes.

"He just wants you safe." Jarack explained.

*Safe...* I thought...what meaning did that word even have for me anymore? I sighed. I wasn't finished here yet but I didn't exactly know why. It was just a gut feeling. "And I promise that will happen, I just need a little more time." I knew from the expression on Jarack's face that he did not relish the thought of returning to Nirauan without me. I also knew that he had expected my answer because I was betting Thrawn had also expected it. If there had been no reason for me to remain on Coruscant I would have returned to Nirauan ages ago but Thrawn was testing the waters as well as letting me know my time was running out.

"It's late. Do you have a place to stay?" I asked after a lengthy quiet had settled about us.

He shook his head. "I am heading off world tonight; I didn't want to stay after making the drop and if I did have to smuggle you out I wanted to do it quickly. Either way, I have arranged for transport in a couple of hours. It's a bad time to be discovered as an imperial operative and I have no desire to let that happen." He studied his brandy as it swirled around the glass. "It was good to see you alive and well, I am not joking when I tell you he is worried. He wants you back with him and if you don't come on your own soon he will take this matter into his own hands and it won't be me asking you politely it will be that Noghri body guard of his sneaking in here in the middle of the night and snatching you away in your sleep."

I grinned. "He and they can try."

Jarack shook his head. "I would not push him on this point, Miss Gabriel. The Admiral is not a man to make idle threats and, no offence, but you carry vital information about his operations in the Unknown Regions, the exact whereabouts of the base, as well as the knowledge of his very existence. If you were to get caught the implications for him could be drastic."

I nodded soberly. "I am well aware of the risks but I am not coming back until I am done here and I am not done here," I said, "Tell him I am well, the Tze'yusha'Jin does his job and when I am finished with this place, found everything I need I will return to Nirauan, alive and in one piece."

He blew out the breath he had been holding noisily. "This won't make him happy."

"I don't care," I lied. "The letters I wrote explain things as they are and he needs to trust me a little." I didn't like the feeling of pressure even though part me knew Thrawn was right, I was pushing my luck, even with my uncle at my side. "He knew I wouldn't return with you. He would not have given you letters for me if that had been the case."

Jarack shook his head. "If you ask me, the two of you deserve each other," he said as he got to his feet and drained the last of his brandy. "Now I have to go and get back so that I can give him the bad news."

I walked him to the door. "Be careful out there."

"You too." Was all he said as he left quietly.

I sighed as I leaned against the door. Jarack and Thrawn were both right, my being here was a risk, a big risk but only, I reasoned, if I got caught, if the people who caught me even knew who I was and if I actually said anything. I didn't want to consider these options so I poured myself a brandy and settled down to open my mail. He had sent me a slender book of Chiss myths and stories along with two letters. The first letter was short, mostly cheerful banter about his day to day life at the base. Reading between the lines I understood he was busy and that the advancements made into the Unknown regions were great. Thrawn was pleased with the progress so far. The second letter, however, was of quite a different nature and I knew he had been both angry and worried when he had written it.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*What am I to do with you? I allow you to go to Coruscant with the understanding it would be a quick in and out reconnaissance trip and months later you are still there caught in the middle of a war zone.*

*By now you will have no doubt sent Jarack on his way alone and he will ponder the entire journey here how he will explain what I already know. I should never have allowed you to go to Coruscant but what I want and what you do have, more often than not, always been two entirely different things. Now it is I who must wait for news and worry when it doesn't come. Believe me when I tell you that this is a position I do not enjoy much and the sooner it comes to an end the better.*

*I received word of Coruscant's fall about three days after it had occurred. News footage and other information have since been brought to my attention and I can only hope that for the New Republic's sake you were not in the palace when it was attacked. I knew General Tal Ashen fairly well and he was a good, decent man. I watched his death with great sadness and deep regret that I was powerless to do anything about it.*

*I feel much the same way about you still being on Coruscant and I do have to wonder why that is. If it is fear of bringing back this dreadful virus that has been sweeping across that world and subsequently making its way across the galaxy planet by planet then you may rest assured. As it is well known that bacta is the cure I have made certain we do not lack for this invaluable substance despite the apparent rarity given there is only one reliable source. I have also been told that although not being human places me at some risk, I and my kind are 'near enough' so that we are not in any immediate danger, so if this is your worry then you can let it go.*

*My understanding of the virus is limited but Doctor Thracer tells me that due to the speed at which it infects, and its apparent short incubation time in all likelihood it will burn itself quickly rather than slowly by killing the hosts too swiftly to allow enough time for further infection. He also informs me that all the information he has been able to find on it so far suggests that infection methods are limited; suggesting the vectors as being direct bodily fluid contact with an infected person in the end stage or through the water system which means you would not be a carrier. I do not need to ask you if you have discovered the source of this terrible plague, you and I both know who is behind it and it is my hope that at the appropriate time I will be able to deal with her. As I understand it she went to ground shortly before the planet fell and has not been seen or heard from since. These are difficult times for those of us who still maintain loyalty to the ideals the Emperor had. Everything is clouded by uncertainty, even I am unsure at this point on how exactly to proceed.*

*I do not have the man power necessary to win back the Core right now and even with the recruitment we are currently doing in the Unknown Regions, there would never be enough time to find and train all those we would need in order to retake and reorganise all that has so far been lost. To arrange for such a full scale attack of this nature I would require many more ships, skilled pilots and the ground troops to do so. In short I would need the Emperor's clone army, just as he had when he was still senator and needed to defend the Old Republic. I am truly surprised that he did not keep a store of clones on hand, it seems to me that man of his power and nature would have some set aside to be ready for just such an eventuality as invasion, especially as he was aware of such a possibility, a threat from beyond this galaxy's borders. Unfortunately, I have been backwards and forwards through all the data, files and secret documents which I have been able to gather and I can find no clues as to the whereabouts of such a facility, if there ever was one to begin with. In light of this I will not come charging in to the rescue as it were, but instead remain out here a hidden, dark secret, until the time is right for my return and make no mistake I shall return and bring back some order out of this current chaos. In the meantime I continue the work I began out here.*

*I am currently working to build cordial ties with Csilla with regards to an alliance between myself and the Ascendancy. It is an interesting process, long and often tedious especially when a great deal of it is in secret. I sometimes wish you were here for your translation skills alone. I could use another who can speak both basic and Cheunh fluently as well as the myriad of other languages you have been gifted with. Trying to act as both mediator and translator does get wearying at times and, aside from that, I miss your company.*

*I will not dance around this subject, my dear; I want you to leave Coruscant. You do not need to stay on Nirauan with me; you may go where you please although I would prefer that not be the case. Remaining on Coruscant is tempting fate and I think, like the little jaxes you adore so much, you have used up your nine lives. I am worried about you and it is distracting.*

*So what will it take to get you off this single minded and dare I say it, misguided mission you have taken on? Shall I write you love letter to tell you that I miss you? I do. Or try to find the words to let you know that my bed seems too large and far too*

*empty without you in it with me? It does. Should I, perhaps, describe to you the longing I find I have in the quiet hours of the night for softness of your skin under the touch of my fingers, or the seductive power that your own caresses have over me? Would it be wise to mention how the scent of your perfume, which lingers in the air like a ghost, creating a need that can only be satisfied by the heat we generate when we mate, makes me restless and edgy? Perhaps this is not enough....*

*What if I were to say that you offer me insight and a point of view which helps me to see a greater picture? That it is not only your physical presence, or the liveness of your body, naked next to mine, but also your thoughts and your rather unique way of looking at the galaxy that I find myself longing for. These things, these thoughts, so private, so intimate that only you will ever know of them, lie heavy in my heart, a distraction I can ill afford yet would be loath give up. I have to ponder upon the wisdom of getting involved with a wild and unpredictable sprite such as you are and then, having become involved, I wonder about the decision to let you go. Not that I believe for one moment I could keep you safely locked up here if you did not wish it.*

*My people would say you have bewitched me my dear, but the Dantassi have better words for it than that. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii would lecture that this is what it means to be bound and he would also add, somewhat smugly, that it serves me right for tangling with a desert witch whose beauty, powers and passion have quite intoxicated me.*

*These are uncertain times and for reasons I cannot fathom and have long given up trying to understand, you anchor me to something I cannot define but most definitely need. Please, leave whatever it is you think you must accomplish on Coruscant and return to me, nothing you could learn there, even for my campaign, is worth risking your life for.*

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

I sighed, read his letter again and sighed some more. Deep within my soul an ache of need and longing had welled up, threatening to drive me mad because there was no release. How he could elicit such emotion, such sensation from mere words was beyond me and a little part of me hated him for this talent. While I had no doubt he had meant ever single thing he had said, he knew exactly the effect it would have on me; the not so subtle manipulation to drive me back to where he felt I would be safe. Even so, Jarack could have badgered me until he was blue in the face and I wouldn't have budged a centimetre.

Despite the fact that this letter was almost enough to make me pack up my things and leave right now without even saying goodbye to anyone, I wasn't ready yet. Thrawn could be persuasive in this way and I missed him terribly. His letters, an exquisite form of torture, made me remember why I missed him in excruciatingly painful detail. Now, knowing that the virus probably would not be a huge threat to him made staying here seem all the more ridiculous but a part of me whispered to do just that all the same. I had unfinished business here, I just didn't know quite what it was yet.

I had not been lying to Jarack when I had said I wasn't done here and leaving now would be a mistake. Something nagged at me, the way a half remembered name



slithered around the back of one's brain, itching and prickling enough to be annoying, enough to make sitting still impossible. I re-read Thrawn's letter a third time stopping at this passage... *I am truly surprised that he did not keep a store of clones on hand, it seems to me that man of his power and nature would have some set aside to be ready for just such an eventuality as invasion. Unfortunately, I have been backwards and forwards through all the data, files and secret documents I have been able to gather and I can find no clues as to the whereabouts of such a facility, if there ever was one....* I closed my eyes and sat back in the chair. I was missing something but I couldn't find the thread. It niggled at the back of my mind like a half forgotten dream. I should know the answer to this, I thought, I should know, but the more I thought on it, the more I lost the tiny inkling.

I stopped concentrating and let out the breath I had been holding slowly. There was nothing else to do but go to bed and sleep except I knew that was never going to happen. I was edgy, restless and missing Thrawn more than I ever dared to admit. His letters had stirred me up and sleeping was the very last thing on my mind. It was too late to call Shiv and I had no idea where my uncle was or when he'd be back. Sitting around Thrawn's flat on my own was difficult enough but coupled with the incessant and annoying sensation that I was missing something important was driving me insane so I decided to head out to the Imperial palace and see if I could sneak in. Maybe, I rationalised as I shoved a few things in my satchel, what ever it was I was trying to find would reveal its self to me there.

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It was raining hard, something that was unusual for Coruscant but the weather grid had been screwy every since the night the Rebels had taken the planet. I didn't mind. Rain made everything anonymous somehow and it fitted my pensive, gloomy mood. It was difficult to see and, despite the fact it was just past two in the morning, the speeder lanes were still busy with traffic which meant I didn't stand out.

I took a convoluted route to the Imperial Palace and when I arrived close enough to get a good look at it I was stunned to see the damage that had been done. Shiv had warned me that this was the case but I hadn't actually taken his words to heart. I had been too upset with the fact that he had decided to return to his old job and was now working for the enemy to pay much attention to his descriptions of the destruction. He could have gotten a job with anyone and had, in fact, been offered several interesting positions with a variety of hospitality companies and hotel chains but he had turned them all down when he learned he could return to the palace. At first I had been so angry with him for making this decision that I had refused to speak to him for several days even though he had pointed out defensively, it was a job and Coruscant was an expensive place to live. I had been surprised that the New Republic even allowed him to continue working, although his job had changed significantly.

He had shrugged. "What were they supposed to do, instantly replace every single person on the staff? That would have been disastrous, they don't have a clue how a lot of the things work in the palace. After hours of interviews and some background checks,

they decided that mostly it would be okay if many of the civilian staff returned to work, with certain conditions of course."

It was easy to be mad at Shiv because I wasn't in his situation and I didn't have to work. Thrawn's flat was paid for and I was, by current standards, considered wealthy. My salary, which had been paid directly to a bank account, had accumulated over the years and since I had been given an expense account for clothing, a ship with fuel included for my transportation it wasn't as if I had ever actually spent much of the money I had earned. My uncle, having been through galactic upheavals before made some investment suggestions and with his advice and help I soon had most of my earnings and wealth shifted into precious metal commodities. He assured me that while currencies had a tendency to come and go like fashion, the commodities I now owned would only ever increase in value, especially in times of civil unrest. The whole discussion of money had left me somewhat bewildered, it was never something I had worried much about because I had never wanted to be rich and I had never been truly poor. As long as I could pay for ship fuel, buy food and water and clothe myself, money wasn't something I had ever thought about. On Tatooine credits meant nothing compared to the value of water.

Finally I stopped giving him the silent treatment and had asked why he had gone back to his old job and not chosen to do something new.

"It's what I know Rim-girl and I know it very well. This makes me valuable," he had said with a small shrug. This had been a half truth but before I could call him on it he clarified it for me. "Plus, it will allow me to get a handle on what this new government is all about. Maybe it won't be so bad. I need to understand them and their way of doing things. I can't spend the rest of my life hating them because they took a stand against Palpatine's rule and let's face it, Merlyn, Palpatine was evil." I had been more than shocked to hear him say this, even though I agreed with it, but before I could argue with him he had added, "You don't know the half of the stuff that went on in the palace. You didn't work for the Empire that long and Vader kept you sheltered whether you want to believe it or not. You had his protection and you had his favour. When you hooked up with Thrawn that became two very powerful men who made it quite clear to the rest of the scyks in their circles that you were off limits. You, yourself told me that Palpatine had plans for you and that they were not good plans. He would have twisted you and used you until there was nothing left but a shell and now that won't happen. Now you don't need to be scared to use your force powers or explore the different paths and options. If you wanted to you could seek out Vader's son and ask him to teach you in the Jedi arts."

It was a long speech for Shiv and his tone of voice had been both bitter as well as pleading. I didn't need to use any of my witchy ways to know he was torn by what had happened and during his time working at the Imperial palace under Palpatine's rule he had seen many terrible things happen but he had rarely spoken of them, maintaining an appearance of fluff and even simple-minded cheerfulness. I had had no idea he had felt this way up until now and the really frustrating thing was that he was right.

"Merly, you got lucky. Palpatine left you alone for a long time, choosing instead to subtly manipulate you rather than force you down a path that could and probably would have broken you. Vader liked you and you did your job well. As weird as it sounds you

meant something to him and that saved you a world of grief. I could tell you horror stories that would make you vomit about things which were done behind the scenes. And for all the good things the Empire did for this galaxy, there are enough negative aspects that I, for one, am relieved to see some change."

I had just stared at him and then glanced at my uncle who had watched and listened to this exchange with his usual guarded quite. Uncle Vahlek had nodded in agreement but a little part of me had still felt as though Shiv was betraying something I could not define or let go of and that had shown on my face.

"The Empire, as you knew it, doesn't exist anymore Lei'lei," Uncle Vahlek had chided. "Don't you dare judge your friends for wanting to adapt and survive," he had said with an edge to his voice I seldom heard. "You have no idea how lucky you truly are. Thanks to Thrawn's generosity you co-own property on Coruscant outright, and because of him you also have a mate who will provide you with everything you would ever need, should you but ask. You have never known poverty or faced the threat of losing your home in your life. You are both spoiled and lucky and it is only your unusual nature that has kept you from turning into the kind of person you yourself despise."

He had spoken so sharply that tears had sprung to my eyes but he had been right. What did I know of these things? I *was* spoiled and I *was* lucky and above all I had never known the sort of uncertainty Shiv and Ynyth were now facing before in my life. No matter what happened Thrawn had seen to it that I would be provided for and until my uncle had so bluntly pointed this out I had never really given it much thought.

When I had begun to work for the Empire one of the things that had struck me the most was the wealth, the opulence and the arrogance that went along with it. Money and power, the two were inexplicably linked, but I didn't understand why that was. What had amazed me even more was the disparity between the very rich and the very poor especially on Coruscant. Tatooine had its share of wealthy people, most notable were the Hutts, but none of them came even close to the money I saw wasted on Coruscant. What my wardrobe alone had cost could have purchased a docking bay and several houses on my home planet.

I had talked with Thrawn about this at great length because it was a subject that sometimes worried at me. I felt guilty for the amount of credits spent on frivolous things, like the pretty dresses I wore to the Imperial events, especially when I knew that other people struggled to get by. In the end I had donated a portion of my salary to a charity and left it at that because I hadn't known what else to do.

"You cannot change the way the galaxy works, Tekari." Thrawn had told me somewhat exasperated one day. "Greed and commerce will rule it. There will always be those who have and those who have not. Credits, like anything else are just a tool. Damned annoying when you don't have enough, but having too much can also be problematic."

"How do you figure that?" I had asked crossly. I hated it when he lectured, especially when he was right and I knew it.

"What do you do when you have everything you could ever hope for and more? When there is nothing more you hunger for? What happens to your soul?"

I had sighed. "You end up like Prince Xizor."

Thrawn's smile had been sunlight. "Exactly." He had said, "Be happy that you live well and can experience some of the finer things this planet, this galaxy has to offer, give what you can when you can but do not feel guilty for what you earn from a job most people in this galaxy would not do even if it made them billionaires over night. Personally, I do not think you get paid enough to take the abuse you do."

I had made a face then and his reply, a not so gentle kiss, had been a pre-emptive strike against what would have been a tirade on my part about how I liked my job, an argument we had often and one which was usually settled in the bedroom where we would agree to disagree and leave it at that.

Once I had gotten over my prejudice of Shiv's decision to work for the New Republic, I welcomed his tales of the comings and goings in the palace. Mostly he delighted in telling about the reconstruction work that was being done to repair all the damage that had been inflicted upon the building during the battle for the planet. He had also said it was a damned good job none of us had been in the building during that time or shortly after it had fallen because New Republic loyalists had broken in to the palace, looting everything in sight and murdering anyone they suspected of being even remotely connected to the Empire. Once all that nonsense had been stopped and some sort of normalcy had been reinstated, many people had gone back to work as though nothing much had changed.

"They are renovating much of the buildings back to the style it had been before the Emperor took over. I have the connections and the experience to deal with the contractors and the workers. I can broker the best deals. I know how the system here works they don't, so they need me," he had said a little smugly, "They have explored but not touched much of the old part of the palace yet. Security is limited at best, and the internal surveillance system was shot to poodoo when the palace was bombed. Your old apartment was hit as was your office but I am not sure about your balcony or your old training room."

"Maybe I'll have to explore a bit." I had grinned.

"Like bloody hell you will, Lei'lei!" My uncle had interjected with an explosive growl that had made even Shiv raise his eyebrows. "You will stay away from that place or else!"

At the time I had just made a face and rolled my eyes because I really had no intention of going back to the palace. Now, as I manoeuvred my speeder around the enormous complex to survey the actual damage done I felt a strange sense of sadness mixed with apprehension. This had been home once. Not that I had ever really felt at home here but I did have a strange attachment to the place and it was distressing to see parts of it reduced to piles of shattered rubble. I flew as close as I dared to the area where I had once lived, Shiv had been right, it had pretty much been obliterated. Then I steered to look over what had once been my favourite place in the world to go. What I saw made my heart ache.

The balcony where I had first met Thrawn was gone, sheared off leaving only ragged stone and duracrete behind. Despite the damage to the outer wall the doors to the balcony had remained intact so my guess was that part of the palace had managed to

escape major internal damage but through the darkness and the rain it was impossible to say for sure.

That the balcony was gone made me sad. This place had been special. It was here that Thrawn had kissed me for the very first time. I closed my eyes for a second, bringing up that particular memory. He had seemed so dangerous and he had made me so very nervous yet at the same his manner had been beguiling and his seduction had been so very full of promise. "*Working for the Empire may not always agree with you, Miss Gabriel,*" he had said in a voice that reminded me of fine, warm brandy, "*but I get the distinct impression that being with me does.*" Neither of us had reckoned on how much that single kiss would change our lives or just how right he was.

For a moment I was lost in thought and then realised that mourning the past was a waste of time. This building was no longer my home and until Thrawn came up with some bold and daring plan the Empire would never rule from it again which meant I had to find something to help him. I wasn't going to do that sitting in my speeder weeping for an old stone balcony on a building that was never mine to begin with.

I veered away, making it appear as though I were just another nosey passer-by and then doubled back to where I originally wanted to go. When I found the perfect spot, I carefully landed my speeder on one of the lower maintenance landing pads and hoped that Shiv's unwitting intel on the state of palace security had been correct.

At the height of the Empire these areas were mostly used by service personnel and maintenance droids. It was dark, quiet and the surveillance equipment which the Empire had used to maintain security in this area was now no longer working, at least this was what Shiv had told me.

"They had to shut off most of the power to these old maintenance areas because of the damage from the bombing. Apparently the entire internal surveillance and security systems were completely messed up, probably something Isard set into place should the Palace ever be taken. The Republic's slicers still have not figured out how to bypass the old codes so they had to shut the whole system down and use droids or guards as watchmen, but they don't have the manpower to do this job adequately." He had said, "It's sad actually because looters get in all the time and steal anything that isn't permanently fixed in place and aside from trying to patrol the major problem areas there isn't enough people to watch all the entrances all the time, bad for the palace and the New Republic but good for me.

I made sure to park the speeder where it could not easily be seen or found, using the slot furthest away from the building to look as though I was just someone abusing the parking space to avoid paying fees. As I glanced around I saw I was not the only one doing this. Parking was always an issue on Coruscant and in the Imperial center it had, for as long as I knew, been outrageously expensive. There were a number of bars and clubs situated around the area so it would be a plausible explanation for leaving the speeder here without drawing too much attention. I figured the New Republic had enough on its hands without worrying about illegal parking and getting a citation for that violation would be a whole lot easier to deal with than getting caught trying to break into the Palace. Although, I had reasoned to my self, was it actually breaking in when I had a valid key-code and used to actually work here?

The rain was coming down in sheets and I was grateful for the heavy over cloak I wore which was both dark and waterproof. Not only did it keep me dry, as well as hide my body from view making me look like a shapeless shadow, but with the hood pulled up and low over my face all that anyone looking would see was a dark figure trying to escape the gloomy weather. I was anonymous and almost invisible which was just the way I wanted it, especially as I was actually trying to get into the palace not run away from it. The entrance I came to was half hidden by an overhang and had been a small service entrance used mainly by droids and technical personnel with a specific clearance. When my uncle had erased me from the Imperial databank he had managed to do so in a way that had maintained my security clearance and kept my codes intact. To this day I still wasn't sure how he had managed this feat but I wasn't going to complain.

Taking a deep breath and hoping that I wasn't about to set off a billion alarms I punched in one of the few codes I knew which had given me access to the majority of the palace entrances. While working for Lord Vader had been dangerous and often painful, it did have its up sides and one of them was almost unlimited access. The door-lock's light blinked from red to green and with a soft hiss it opened for me. I slipped inside like a shadow and held my breath as the door closed gently behind me, waiting to see if anyone came running to arrest me or worse. When, after what seemed like an hour but was really only a few moments, nothing happened I heaved a sigh of relief and began to make my way into the palace. I had no idea what I was looking for only that something had drawn me back to this place and the nagging sensation had grown more intense now that I was actually inside the building. Of course getting in had been the easy part, the hard part was now to come...actually figuring out what it was I was here for and how to find it.

The small corridor was dimly lit and I could by the dust build up tell that it had not been recently used. I knew that if I kept walking straight I would eventually hit one of the main service areas and the likelihood of bumping into a watchman or guard was much higher so I wanted to find an alternative route towards the core, towards the areas the Emperor would have used. I was certain that what I wanted to learn was hidden deep within his chambers and I had been to a part of his private area once before so I had a vague idea of where I needed to go.

Once I was absolutely certain no one had discovered my break-in and no one was coming to get me I rummaged around my satchel and brought out the data card with the palace blue prints on it and the hand held reader I had brought with me. I had hoped that it would help me orientate myself because the palace, with its over twenty thousand rooms and chambers, was an enormous place and I knew only a very small portion of it by heart and those were well used areas which had been busy and populated by palace staff. Now I wanted to use the service tunnels and perhaps even secret tunnels to stay out of anyone's way. I did not want to have to explain what I was doing in the palace in the early hours of the morning without the appropriate clearance from the current occupying force.

According to the technical readout I was on the south west side of the main building, near a service area primarily used to deal with power routing and back up generators. This would have been an area deemed Cresh-clearance, important but not

vital. Most C-class technicians would have had mid-level access which meant I should not have problems bypassing any security I came across. The big problems with that would come later when I delved deeper into the Emperor's secrets; at least I hoped I would make it that far. I studied the data for a long moment trying to get my bearings and then fairly certain of where I had to go next, I tucked the reader and the data disk back in my satchel, pulled out a small hand torch and set off.

The service corridors ran parallel to the main corridors, sort of narrow passages large enough for droids and humans to walk through without having to interrupt the daily routines or the prettiness of daily palace life. Who among the Palace elite wanted to see technicians at work? These corridors allowed day to day maintenance to be done without anyone knowing it was being done, maintaining the illusion of perfection within the palace confines. I also thought that it was partly to keep the maintenance guys from being hassled by everyone who had a problem but didn't feel like going through the appropriate channels to get it fixed. In some ways these passages were very much like secret tunnels in that most of the palace population never knew about them and the entrances to these service ways were hidden from view to keep from ruining the beauty of the palace interior, only accessible by code key clearance and labyrinth like without some sort of a map, for while they often ran parallel to the main hallways they also deviated when rooms, stairwell and turbo lift shafts got in the way. It would have been very easy to get lost in one of these tunnels and I was grateful I had a map.

Palpatine's main audience chamber was atop the highest point in the palace complex. While I knew that he had spent time in this place I also knew that he had built, for himself, secret chambers elsewhere. When he had taken me to see the small statue that my mother had posed for when she was a child, we had been mid level and on the east side. The room with his treasures, including *The Waiting Dancer*, had been in a part of the palace which had remained untouched since before the fall of the old Republic, old and stunning its architecture and it was to this place I now headed, drawn without even realising it. He had told me it was a part of the palace that few ever visited and at the time I had assumed this had been because he did not allow it but as I slowly navigated my way through the labyrinth of services corridors and turbo lifts, drawn partly by instinct and partly by guess work using the technical plans I had, hoping no one would notice me, I began to wonder if it was because people had been led to believe that part of the palace was no longer usable or somehow had the idea it simply didn't exist.

The Emperor had been strong enough with the force to create such an illusion, after all he had manipulated the entire fleet through the force, and it would have been a hell of a lot easier to assert this sort of will over a small area of the palace he did not want trespassers in than setting up elaborate security which would have called attention to a place he wished to keep secret. Palpatine had been a master at illusion and hiding in plain sight, why should this be any different?

I walked for a long time and even with the use of some of the service shuttles and turbo lifts it took me the better part of an hour to get to where I thought I wanted to be. It wasn't just help from the data I had that led me to this place. I was also following my gut because on some level I was being led to the place I wanted to go. If this had not been something I had experienced before I would have been unnerved by it, now I was

just worried that whatever it was I was being drawn towards would be as awful as the time I had found the Jedi Council room.

After a few wrong turns and some tense moments where I thought I heard someone in the tunnel with me but actually turned out to be a stray hawk bat I came to the exit I needed. For a long moment I stood at the access door with my ear pressed to the cold metal and listened for any sound or sign of life on the other side. I closed my eyes and stretched out with my force powers but there was nothing unusual or dangerous there as far as I could tell. I punched in the same access code I had used before and a quiet snick let me know the lock had released. I touched the panel and it slid sideways opening to a hallway I immediately recognised. I stepped out into the hall and was suddenly overcome by a strange sense of repulsion and fear all at the same time.

My initial instinct was to bolt straight back into the service tunnel and run for home but then a voice in the back of my head cut through my panic and I understood that I had been right about the Emperor and his protection of this place. I swallowed back my rising fear and steadied my breathing, allowing my senses to shift and move around me. There was no one here, but that made sense. There was such an overpowering sense of unwelcomeness, of fear here that most people would simply turn away without even realising they had done so and never question why. I drew a steadying breath and let the force flow around me, through it I could sense the power Palpatine had left here and it was an awe inspiring thing, so simple yet so effective.

I walked towards the ornate doors that hid the room where the little statue I had been allowed to see and touch had lain. A ripple of apprehension slithered across my back. What if the Emperor wasn't actually dead? What if his death had been a ruse and he lived, and was here? What if, what if, what if? The pervasive sense of fear that pressed upon my shoulders was terrifying. It reminded me of some of the nightmares I had been having. The closer I got to the ornate doors, the worse the fear became until I thought it would drive me mad. Logically, a part of me knew that there was nothing here which would harm me but the feelings I had were a whole other story. I had not experienced this when I had been here before but of course, then I had been a guest of the Emperor and had been protected from this rather unusual security system.

I was certain anyone else who had ventured into this part of the palace had also experienced this unnamed dread and unless they had been really well trained to overcome their natural instincts to run or were a super power in the force it was my guess no one had actually managed to step beyond these doors since the Emperor's death. I bent my own will against that of the now dead Emperor and forced myself to ignore the screaming sensation of danger which pounded in my skull and reached for one of the door handles. Without even thinking about it, I shut my eyes, gritted my teeth and I tried the door. To my great surprise it opened, allowing me to slip through unharmed. As soon as the doors had closed behind me, the feeling of utter dread vanished leaving me bathed in a cold sweat and shaking but otherwise unharmed. I exhaled loudly, then opened my eyes and swore in disbelief.

For a long still moment I wondered if I had somehow stepped into the wrong room. I was certain that this was the same place Palpatine had taken me to when he had wanted to show me the small statue by Tarka-Null but the room I now faced was empty.



I just stared around me not knowing what to do next. I had been certain that the answers I sought were here but it seemed that was not the case and I felt a flash of annoyance at the unseen guide who was determined to lead me on some annoying wild bantha chase to find answers I was pretty certain I already knew but just couldn't figure out.

Once the shock and the last vestiges of fear had worn off I walked around to see if there was anything at all which would suggest what had happened to all the art that had once been here. It was entirely possible, I thought that it wasn't the same room at all, but when I shone my torch on the floor I could see where heavy objects had once stood, scratch marks and a slight difference in the colour of the wood, marking the places of the display pedestals and heavy sculptures. It was the right place but everything had been removed and while I should not have been surprised, I was.

Palpatine had coveted the treasures he had hidden here so that only he could view them whenever he wished to. His delight at owning the priceless and rare works of art had been as blatantly obvious as his desire to unravel *The Waiting Dancer's* secrets. So where had all the pieces of art gone. More to the point, when had they been removed and why?

I switched off the small hand torch and stood in the darkness, suddenly realising that this room had no windows. I had not noticed this when I had been here the last time as it had been dark and I had been far too wrapped up in the moment to notice much else. Now it seemed to stand out, no windows meant that either the room was not on any outside wall or it had been deliberately built this way so as to be hidden from outside view. I suspected the former was more likely. Palpatine had loved his treasures and had hoarded them jealously, owning these priceless works of art so that only he could sit and view them had been a source of glee for the man. He had been selfish that way, sharing was not in his vocabulary unless it meant he gained from it.

I sat down on the floor and pulled out the data care reader, switching it on to view the technical readouts again. The eerie green glow seemed to make the empty room more forlorn and all the more deserted. I scanned through the plans searching for this exact room, because I had managed to find the service corridors that led to the hall outside but the room itself did not exist on these plans, according to what I was looking at on the screen I was sitting in a dead end. I sighed and leaned back against the wall.

*Think, think, think...* I chanted softly, I had been drawn here for a reason I was certain of that but the cryptic methods by which I was being led often meant I had to unravel a huge puzzle. Nothing, it seemed, that had to do with the force, ever came easy. So I closed my eyes and let my thoughts drift, trying to sort out the answers in the darkness.

When I had been going through training in what Thrawn had called The Center, one of the exercises I had been put through was how to find one's way in the dark. This training facility which was deep down in the lower levels of the Imperial palace had been set up to train the Emperor's elite agents among others so a lot of the exercises had been created with force users in mind. As I sat on the floor in the dark I remembered some of my experiences in this place, one of which was to find secrets embedded in the walls, floors and just about any other place a person could think of by using the force. They

had been frustrating exercises which had more often than not had me stamping my feet in annoyance and anger.

*"Merlyn,"* Master Kjestyll would say, *"you cannot unravel these mysteries by pounding on the walls with your fists, these are subtle drills designed to train your mind and your unique gifts. Stop fighting against them and allow the answers to flow to you."*

His voice was so clear in my mind that for a second I thought he was with me now and I knew a pang of sorrow that I would probably never see him again. I owed him so much more than I cared to even think about.

With a sigh, I drew a deep breath and began the job of concentrating, just as I had been taught. This ability to find things through the force was not one of my strongest talents and I had neither excelled at it nor particularly enjoyed it. During the time I had been training under the Bunduki master, more often than not it had both frustrated and eluded me but I understood the principle behind it and hoped that now some of this training would finally pay off because I needed it more now than ever.

I could feel the lingering essence Emperor's power as I opened myself up to the force. It was a taint that I didn't anyone would ever be able to rid this part of the palace of and it tasted like sour milk. It made me shudder but I found the thread I was looking for and followed it, surprised that I had not noticed it on my own.

*The best place to hide things is often in plain sight.* My uncle's words echoed in my mind now as I got up from the floor and made my way over to the spot on the wall that appeared to radiate a soft light. I placed the flat of my hand against it and the large panel in the wall slid smoothly and without sound to reveal a passage way. I didn't even consider the consequences; I simply walked into the blackness and hoped that it wouldn't kill me. I just about jumped out of my skin when a light flickered on and for a few seconds I stood there half blind and very confused. This was not another tunnel at all but a turbo lift.

I glanced around the lift and frowned in puzzlement, wondering why there would be a lift only to a room in a part of the palace that no one else could get into except the Emperor, then decided I would learn the answer to this question probably sooner rather than later. There were only two options on the small panel, up or down. When I tried up it asked for a code. I was about to punch in the access code I had been using but a ripple of uncertainty made me change my mind. I lightly touched the down button and felt a small jolt, shivering as the brief flash of an image zapped into my head.

The Emperor had been the last person to use this turbo lift and when he had left it the code was still active. He had not returned to the lift so I figured he had left the room via the doors and the outside hallway. I took a chance and pressed the button, holding my breath as I did so. The turbo list hummed and then in a motion that was both smooth and silent it began to descend. As it zipped downward I felt my ears pop and realised I was headed deep into the under belly of the palace. When the door opened I was not at all prepared for what I saw there and shook my head in disbelief as I stepped out of the lift.

The Imperial palace was an enormous complex and often to get from one side to the other people used small private tunnel shuttles. I had known of and used a few but many were considered off limits and solely for the private use of the Emperor or very

high ranking officials, Moff's and courtiers. People of my station, despite the privileges afforded me by Lord Vader usually walked, took the main turbo lifts or hopped a lift on the small service vehicles that were used to ferry larger items from one place to another.

The small shuttle that stood opened before me was so opulent that I knew it had once been owned by the Emperor. He had spared no expense for his desires and I wondered, a little grimly, that had majority of the galaxy's populace known just how much wealth the Emperor had squandered on luxuries such as this if they would not have tried to overthrow him earlier. I hesitated a moment.

"Go." A subtle voice whispered urgently in my ear.

I glanced around to see if there was someone else there but the space around me was empty. Feeling both ill at ease and curious I stepped into the shuttle-car.

It had been designed as private and worked without a driver or operator and it was, by comparison to some of the ones I had heard about minimal in its space and features. Some shuttles, so I had been told, came complete with fresher stations and sleeping compartments. Those, I had assumed were for tunnels that traversed the Imperial Center and went long distances. This one was not quite so fine so I figured it either stopped along the way or the end destination was not so far that someone would feel the need to take a nap in between.

I glanced about. This place had Palpatine's touch and I felt his presence strongly, like the residue of fine dust left in the wake of a desert storm he was everywhere. I sat on a seat and felt the ghostly memory of his caresses across my face, his beguiling, avuncular kindnesses that had been laced with a subtle malice and his satisfied laughter when he finally had what he wanted from me. His voice, his life force and this vile laughter now seemed to echo around me, and for a moment I wondered if he were somehow right there in this car along side of me.

"He's dead!" I told myself firmly but the presence that lingered here was malevolent and very real. Suppressing a shudder I studied the control panel and tried not to dwell on the fear which threatened to make me turn tail and go back home.

Like most of the tunnel shuttles this one only went two ways, to a destination point and back again with stops along the way, much like some of the monorails on a few planets I had been to. I glanced around and thought that I would gain nothing by sitting here all alone so I hit the red start button and hoped I would not attract any unwanted attention. On the display there were five stops listed, two were actually in the palace, one was Prince Xizor's now destroyed palace and two were not given specific names, just destination numbers. I blew the air that I had been holding in my lungs noisily and decided to let the shuttle go to the final destination point, it seemed logical to start at the very end and work my way back.

It was an odd thing to be sitting in a place that once only the Emperor had used. I was quite certain that not even Lord Vader had known about this shuttle and at first it seemed a little unlikely that the Emperor would go anywhere without his Royal guardsmen but then I realised he had not always been the Emperor, at one time he had been playing a dual role and the need for secrecy had been great. I marvelled at how he could have done that so well, portrayed the kindly, caring benevolent senator as well as the deadly Sith Lord Sidious. No one had figured it out and it was only because Palpatine revealed himself to Anakin at the boy's weakest moment did the Jedi council

finally learn that Palpatine had played them for dupes all along. Not even the great and powerful Master Yoda had seen it coming and to my mind it had served them right for the arrogance and narrow minded viewpoints.

Thinking about this history made me curious and I began to touch the surfaces of everything I could see. I was astounded to realise that no one except Palpatine had ever used this vehicle and that he had done so long before the Empire had even existed. This shuttle dated back to a time when most people had believed him to be a benevolent elderly senator with only the best intentions at heart.

I saw images of him in stately robes as well as a large, hooded cloak. He seemed to meld from one personality to the other with the ease of a shape shifter. I shivered. His powers had been so great and he had been so patient. No one had even suspected him at all and how he had laughed at the Jedi, scattering themselves to the four corners of the galaxy in search for of the Evil Sith Lord when all along he was there right under their noses. I sat, lost in thought and so completely engulfed in the memories and images I was seeing, half dozing in the process, that I lost completely track of time and very nearly yelled with fright when the shuttle suddenly stopped and the door slid open. Well, I thought, whatever it was I was looking for had better be here because I had almost fallen asleep on that stupid shuttle and that would have been a bad thing.

The first thing that hit me once I made my way into the building the shuttle had stopped at was the smell. *The Works District*, I thought. Puzzled, I wondered what the heck the Emperor would have wanted in this area of the city because then as now, it was primarily industrial and not a very desirable place to live. Of course I reasoned he probably had not actually lived here and then I wondered if coming here was such a good thing to do after all. I set the shuttle to hold so that it would wait for me and not automatically return to the Palace leaving me stuck in the worst parts of town alone, without the means to get home then I turned to explore.

In contrast to the Imperial palace, this building was both ugly and dirty. The stench that permeated the air was rife with toxic chemicals and the remnants of decay both bodily and metallic. Long after many of the factories had been abandoned they continued to work, producing fumes and waste. If one listened carefully enough one could hear the strange sounds of machines at work. With the never ending supply of repair droids it was more than likely parts of this area of Coruscant would continue to function long after the end of the galaxy itself. I made a face and walked along the corridor towards a turbo lift door.

I suspected that this building was uninhabited now, except for maybe droids and creatures I didn't even want to think about. My chances of meeting another sentient being here were slim but I was very glad I had brought my lightsaber anyway and getting it out of my satchel then gripping it in my hand was both reassuring and strange at the same time.

I stepped into the turbo lift and without me doing anything the door closed softly then it began to go upwards. The lift door opened after what seemed an eternity and I stepped out into a corridor that was dark and made from polished stone similar to the later additions of the Imperial Palace. I shivered; this place had all of the Emperor's subtle touch.

The first room I came to was an office of sorts, long abandoned and mostly empty aside from a desk, a chair and an old Holo transmitter that looked as though it had seen better days. I stepped inside and touched the desk lightly; it was covered in a thick layer of dust. It did not give up any specific memories except for some vague images of a tall, stately man named Dooku who mean nothing to me. There was nothing else in the room to suggest I would find anything of use here so I stopped touching things, wiped the dust from my fingertips and took a moment to look out of the window. I was a little surprised at how far away the Imperial Palace was and also at how late it now was. I had left the flat just after two in the morning and now I could see the faint stripes of dawn starting to cut the night sky. I turned and left quickly wondering whose office this had been and what exactly this place I had found was, and more importantly why the Emperor had a secret tunnel shuttle to it.

I quickened my pace, walking down the dark corridor to the next door. It was locked but my lightsaber made short work of the lock which sparked and fizzled when I sliced through it. The door opened partially. I slipped through the space into what reminded me of a torture chamber from some of the terrible horror holos that Shiv occasionally liked to watch on closer inspection I realised it had once been some sort of med lab but the equipment in it had long been smashed and mangled. I brushed my hand along some of the counter tops and broken droids but there was nothing of note until I touched what looked like a rather nasty operating table.

Assaulted by a barrage of images so violent and so painful I physically tried to ward them off, I staggered back and fell on the floor landing on my rear with a painful thump. Winded and shocked I tried to sort through what I had just seen, crying without even realizing it. "Anakin...." I whispered out loud. "Oh Anakin what did he do to you? What did you do to yourself?"

I had seen this scene in a dream once. The Emperor's secret medical facility where he had put Anakin Skywalker back together again after his disastrous fight with Obi Wan but I had not really understood it to be true. I had thought my dream metaphorical not real. The medical droids had attached the prosthetic limbs to Anakin's burnt stubs without any anaesthetic or pain killers. He had writhed and screamed throughout the entire procedure and Palpatine had watched with a sickening glee. When the procedure was finally over and the table tilted to raise him to his feet, covered in the new and uncomfortable body armour, his face completely hidden by his mask, and his burned body still wracked with pain, his first question had been about Padmé.

Feigning sympathy, the Emperor had told him she was dead that in his haste and anger, Anakin had killed her. The surge of force fury which Anakin or rather Lord Vader had unleashed had been so violent that it had crushed most of the medical machinery in this room and with that his slide into the dark side was complete. With Padmé dead there was nothing to hold him in the light any more, no one left to believe in the good. I fought to catch my breath and fought down the gorge that rose in my throat.

'You vile old bastard.' I thought bitterly. 'No wonder Lord Vader hated you so very much.' The thing that I had not understood until that very moment was that Palpatine had fed off this hatred. I sat huddled on the floor a fresh wave of loss washed over me. The deep wounds of mourning reopened. I covered my face with my hands and

wept silently for the shattered soul of man who was now long dead. I did not feel the presence of another until a soft voice broke the silence around me.

*"This place holds much evil."*

I glanced up to see the ghostly image of a woman in old fashioned jedi robes shimmering before me. "Akali L'uanna." My voice sounded small in this bleak place.

She gave me a single, slight nod. I could not think of this young woman who had not been much older than I was now when she had died as my mother.

*"Daughter, you will not find what you are looking for sitting on this floor weeping for the soul of the dead."*

I sighed with impatience and frustration at her serene manner. "Well then why not just tell me what I need to know and stop all this game playing?"

*"Because, daughter, you must see for yourself in order to fully understand."*

"To fully understand what?"

*"The perils of giving in to your anger and to your hatred. The dangers of the dark side of the force."* She replied.

"Don't you dare lecture me on the ways of the force!" I spat, "I did not ask for this nasty little gift you've given me and I do the best I can with it under the circumstances!"

*"Do not give in to your base emotions, they will blind you and it is not the Way of the Jedi."*

"Well, it's good that I am not a jedi then isn't it?" I shot back, my ire getting the better of my tongue.

Her expression turned sorrowful and she shook her head. *"Sitting here mourning for Anakin's past will not help you find what you seek."*

I stared at her for a moment. "If you are not going to be helpful then go away and leave me alone." I told the bluish ghost. "I don't have time for these games anymore."

*"Be mindful of your passions, daughter, they blind you to the truth,"* she said and the chiding tone of her disapproval did not go unnoticed. I looked away from her and wiped the remnants of the tears from my eyes. When I didn't answer her ghost image shimmered and she vanished slowly, her last words lingering in the air. *"Use the force, it will guide you always."*

I glared at the space where she had been. "Yeah well so far the force has done a bang up job of guiding me into all sorts of trouble." I muttered.

I shook my head and looked around. She was right despite my reluctance to agree. This was not what I had come here for and there was nothing in this place except for terrifying old memories of anguish and pain. I took on last glance around and left quickly.

There were a couple more rooms on this floor, a rehabilitation or training room and another office like place, neither of which had anything I wanted to see or touch. At the end of the hallway was another turbo lift and I stepped into it quickly because now I was anxious and eager to be done with this endless, wild bantha chase. The door closed and the lift slid downward without me having to push anything. This entire facility had been automated to Palpatine's will it seemed. When the lift reached its destination I stepped out and found myself in another small, dimly lit corridor. There was only one door so I went to it and was not very surprised that it did not open automatically. I looked for the control panel and found it cleverly hidden. It was code activated and my

clearance didn't work so I used my lightsaber again, the universal door opener. The room I stepped into was both a nightmare and a mess.

"What the...?" I whispered quietly as I stepped gingerly around pieces of shattered equipment and transparasteel. The room resembled a war zone. The floor was strewn with the smashed bits of what looked like bacta tanks along with other unfamiliar medical equipment and all the data banks that lined the walls had been seared and burned with an energy weapon I assumed had been a lightsaber or perhaps something even more powerful. Whatever had destroyed them had done a thorough job; no one would ever recover any data from these machines again. I stared around me and wondered why someone would go to so much trouble to destroy such valuable and expensive equipment. It made no sense. I knew what I had to do but I didn't want to do it. Touching the operating table in the med-lab had been bad enough. I was certain that whatever these fragments of the past had to offer would be much, much worse but I also knew this was what I had come to find. I took two very deep breaths and reached out grasp one of the largest shards of what had looked like a bacta tank.

The images that came were terrible beyond belief and of something I could never, in my wildest dreams, have imagined. I was so utterly unprepared for what I saw that once the flood of memories the fragment of shattered transparasteel had slashed their way through me, I dropped to my knees and retched violently, grateful I had not eaten in many, many hours. Once the nausea and the cold sweats passed, I sat on the ground next to but not touching any more of the broken equipment for a long time trying to catch my breath and sort out what I had just seen. It was too astounding to comprehend yet it made sense and confirmed something I had often wondered about after my terrible dream on Hjal after Thrawn had returned for me.

I had my answer and the simplicity of it had stunned me. I should have known all along and it angered me that I had not seen it on my own. All of a sudden I was weary beyond belief. All I wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed and forget everything I had ever seen or learned about Palpatine. I got up, my legs shaking, and backed out of the terrible room that had once been the Emperor's private cloning facility to make my way back. I didn't stop to explore anything else; I just wanted to get out. I felt that now I was pushing my luck and I didn't need to run into a spice or deathstix dealer or worse here. It would be just my luck to end up on the wrong side of a fight and find myself in a med-lab again.

When I finally reached the tunnel shuttle I heaved a sigh of relief and slipped into its quiet safety, unlocking the controls and pushing the return button. I had hoped to rest while the shuttle zipped its way under the city back to the Imperial palace but the machine had other ideas and one stop later it came to a complete halt, refusing to move forward without giving me a reason why no matter how many buttons I pushed.

I swore loudly in Cheunh and kicked at the side of the shuttle as I got out wondering where I was now and just how the hell I was going to get home because if my uncle had come back and found me not there he'd worry and then after a certain amount of time worrying he would simply come after me and that would be a bad thing.

Once I got over my annoyance and began to look at where exactly I was, my curiosity overcame my weariness. This building wasn't like the last one, dirty and abandoned, and it wasn't in The Works either. I had come out into a storage facility of

some sort and as I walked slowly through the stacks I realised it wasn't just a storage facility it was more like a catalogue room. Rows upon rows of tagged, covered objects lay neatly arranged on the shelves. This place had remained untouched in many years judging by the amount of dust that lay over everything. It did not seem like a place where the Emperor would visit but I supposed, as I wandered through the stacks, that he had to store some of his treasures someplace.

I stopped and unwrapped one of the smaller pieces. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before but it wasn't a force artefact it was just an antique work of art. The smattering of memories it gave me had more to do with excited archaeologists than the Emperor's greed. The next piece I unwrapped was the same only this piece I actually recognised; if I recalled my art history correctly it was a hand carved statue from a dig on Iridonia and it was close to nearly four hundred years old. It too held vague memories and none of them had to do with Palpatine. Now more curious than ever, I uncovered several more pieces and realised that they too were famous, I had studied some of them, seen holo images of them in Thrawn's collection as well as from some of my mother's books and had even spoken about one of them at great length with Thrawn. Suddenly I understood, I was in a storage room in the basement of the Galactic Museum. Now I was really intrigued. What did the Emperor do or keep here that he would design a shuttle to stop at this specific location?

I looked around the room and saw two main exits, clearly marked and well lit. It was a safe bet that both of those doors led to populated places or main corridors and the last thing I wanted was to get caught. I swept my eyes around the dimness again and then noticed, off to one side, a small, unobtrusive almost invisible door. It had been designed to be missed and ignored so that was the one I chose to use. The hallway I slipped into was dimly lit by emergency glow-rods and unused. I moved down it carefully and quickly until I came to a narrow stairwell. I sighed. I was getting tired of this endless chase but I had gone too far now to simply give up and go home.

I ended up in what seemed like a dead end but was in fact one in a series of rooms which had not been used in a very long time. I slipped through an open door and wrinkled my nose at the stale smell which permeated the air.

The rooms that I snuck through were filled with crates and shadowy things I wasn't sure I wanted to stop and look at. There was a subtle pressure here, a malevolence that lingered letting me know that this place was the reason the Emperor had come here. Cobwebs and dust covered most everything but some of them had been disturbed recently. I pulled out my lightsaber but didn't ignite it and walked cautiously through the eerie storage room, sensing someone nearby long before I heard him. My heart pounded in my chest. For a brief second I wondered if it was Palpatine himself truly come back from the dead but when I shook off the panic and allowed my senses to reach out I understood it wasn't him at all. Still, whoever it was could be dangerous and I did not need to be caught in this place. I needed a place to wait safely until whoever was in the room beyond this one was gone.

Glancing around I noticed an odd looking ventilation shaft opening on the side of the wall that was adjacent to the next room and with some effort to stay quiet I moved a box to stand on, carefully eased off the grating and hoisted myself up into the opening. It was as I had suspected a ventilation shaft. I could feel the slight push of air as I crossed



the main shaft which ran perpendicular to the one that went from this room to the next like the top of a T, and then carefully crawled along it to the grate opening at the other side. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light but once they had, I looked down into a room that on first glance seemed to be full of people. For a split second a new wave of fear washed through me then I realised none of the figures were moving. Museum mannequins or statues, I thought, shaking my head in annoyance at my own reaction. I was about to try and back out of the shaft when flicker of movement caught my eye.

I held my breath as I watched the tall, somewhat slender man skulk his way through the statues and dust covered display cases. I nearly jumped out of my skin with fright when all of a sudden a small light from one of the statues blinked to life and a small holo recording announced something too muffled for me to hear. I watched with a mixture of puzzlement and nervousness as the intruder slipped about stopping to look at more of the statues and the display cases. He wasn't acting like a curator or a worker from the museum, in fact he seemed more like a criminal of some kind and my suspicions that he was a petty thief were confirmed when he smashed one of the display cases, the sound of glass shards hitting the floor reminding me of icicles shattering on Hjal.

I couldn't see what he had picked up clearly but when a sound that was as familiar to me as my own voice hummed through the stillness I nearly squeaked out loud in surprise. That was a lightsaber, I thought. What would a lightsaber be doing here? In the bottom of the Galactic Museum in a room that had obviously not been entered or touched in a very long time. The weapon was old and it sounded as though it was losing its charge but the silvery white light of its blade was enough for me to see the man who held it clearly. I nearly choked on the dust that I inadvertently sucked in with my shock. I had seen his face plastered all over the HoloNet too many times not to recognize him despite the facial hair and dirt. That was Corran Horn! The dead rebel pilot whose memorial service I had gone to and nearly been killed at. What in the name of all nine Corellian Hells was he doing here alive and stealing stuff from the museum?

I watched as the pallid light from the weapon he had ignited danced about the room making shadows leap and flicker. The scent of burnt dust drifted upward tickling my nose. I tried to fight off the oncoming sneeze to no avail but just as I made a muffled sneeze into my hands a loud popping sound came from someplace behind hiding the noise of my sneeze. A breeze lifted the dust in the room and I heard others enter, the brilliance of the lights on the blasters they carried made the dancing dust sparkle as they moved into the large storage room. Whoever they were they were not friendly. They wore some sort of armour and they were hunting someone, probably they were hunting Horn, I thought.

I made myself as small as I could and watched as Corran Horn startled then hid amongst the mannequins. Standing as still as the statues did while the three figures, dressed in black, made their way non too stealthily into the midst of the silent mannequins and display cases. I eased back a little from the grate of the vent I was hiding in; I did not want to be caught by what looked a lot like professional soldiers or mercenaries.

"Nothing here," said one of the newcomers.

"Then we wait," said another.

There was more conversation and I watched as they idly swept the room then the second man who had spoken commented on how odd it was that one of the mannequins still had a face at which point Corran burst to life and quipped that he would prefer to keep it that way. For a moment there was a stunned silence and then the room burst into action.

I caught only some of the fight, blaster fire and lightsaber blade created dancing shadows in the creepy room. One man died almost instantly as Corran sliced him in half. I had to fight the urge to throw up at the sound the bisected parts of the man's body made when the pieces hit the ground. The other two took off and there was a chase. I heard nothing for a long time and then bursts of blaster fire rang through the stillness followed by the sizzle of a lightsaber's touch. I knew when it was over because there was a cold silence. I reached out with my force senses and found Corran's presence. I could sense his relief and then heard the faint crackle of a comm link giving out the local time. I made a face in the darkness, it was eight hours and forty-five minutes which meant it was well into the morning and I had been away far too long. I waited a bit to see if any more people came tramping through this area and sighed softly when nothing else happened. Whoever the three men had been, they were now dead. I searched for Corran's presence again but couldn't find it and guessed that he had found a way out.

I waited for what seemed an eternity before completely backing out of the ventilation shaft and dropping back down onto the floor of the smaller storage room. Taking a chance I slipped into the large room that Corran had been exploring and began to look around as well.

It was a strange place and I could see why Corran Horn had been so fascinated by what he had found. The faces of all the mannequins had been vandalised in some way and it had been deliberate, hateful destruction. I didn't need to wonder about who could have done such a thing I already knew. His presence was so strong in this room that it was as if he were still alive and standing next to me, his avuncular tone laced with a subtle layer of malice and spite. Palpatine had kept his true feelings for the Jedi well masked behind his benevolent senator face but underneath that façade he had burned with hatred. I shivered, the beam of my small flash light catching the dancing dust, still swirling around the air from the fight that had taken place here earlier.

I stepped around the sliced body parts of the man Corran had killed gingerly. Luckily, I thought, a lightsaber cauterized the wound as it sliced and the floor was not slippery with blood. The air was rife with the stench of burnt flesh and singed dust. It made me gag so I moved away from the body and went to look at the display cases.

This place, aside from recently had not been visited in a long time. For the most part the dust lay thick and undisturbed over everything. The display case that Corran Horn had shattered was empty. I knew he had taken a lightsaber but I wasn't sure about what else. Shards of glass crunched loudly under my feet as I walked about carefully. After a few moments of nervously touching things and setting off more than one of the annoying holograms which told a little about the now long dead jedi the mannequins represented I understood that this had once been part of a jedi Exhibit to show off Jedi heroes, if there were such a thing.

I searched amongst the damaged mannequins and touched as many holo displays as I dared but I did not find any reference to my birth mother at all. Either she had died too late in the Clone Wars to be given any such honour or the Jedi Council did not bestow immortality through statue-ism on Jedi who got themselves knocked up by their Arc Clone Commanders.

I dusted off some of the other display cases but mostly what lay under the glass was some sort of commemorative coin and a lightsaber. I needed neither so I left them alone. As I wandered around, forgetting the time and forgetting where I was, I realised that all of this Jedi memorabilia made me sad. These displays which had probably once been public were of an era long gone. Despite their odd doctrine and often strange ways of doing things for the most part the Jedi had been keepers of the peace. That much I had learned from the holo-diary my birth mother had kept.

The Clone Wars had broken out because Palpatine had neatly arranged for that to happen and I knew that because Lord Vader had once explained it to me in bitter, angry detail. Not for the first time did I wonder what life would have been like to live in that time, of course, I reasoned I would not have lived at all because it was war that had brought my birth parents together in the first place so when I really thought about it, I actually owed Palpatine my life. The thought made me shiver and I could have sworn I felt a subtle laughter echo softly about me.

I was about to whisper out loud that I hated him but then I realised as I stood amidst the silent, mournful mannequins that I did not hate Palpatine anymore. I pitied him. It was one thing to bring down a government single handed and set one's own self up as supreme ruler of a galactic empire but to come down here and then vandalise these statues but a whole other thing. It made me think of the way bullies will destroy the things they cannot have just so that no one else could have them either. Palpatine hated to lose. He had hated the Jedi even more. While bringing about peace to the Empire he would rule may have been a small part of his agenda in the end it was all about revenge, revenge on the Jedi who had shunned him and the Sith ways, who had taught that the Sith were evil and were to be reviled. The thought made me snort. In essence Palpatine had been the outsider who had not been allowed into the cool kid's club and had taken his revenge for being left out to the extreme.

I glanced around, the sense of being watched made the space between my shoulders itch. Time to go, I thought. Even if I could spend more time here going through all the display cases and storage boxes to find something of interest, what would I do with it? I had no desire to become a Jedi, to learn the Jedi ways and follow Luke Skywalker in his quest to restart the whole Jedi order. I had never asked for the strange powers I had been born with and as Thrawn had often pointed out, they didn't bring me much happiness.

As I stood amidst the ruins of what had once been a proud display of the Galaxy's heroes I understood I was at a cross roads making my choice. If Lord Vader's son had taken up the task of rebuilding the Jedi Order then I wished him luck but he'd be doing that without me. I had had enough of both Jedi and Sith doctrine to last me a life time and I was pretty sure that my talents would be better used elsewhere, elsewhere like on Nirauan with Thrawn and thinking about him made my heart ache with longing. I missed him and all I wanted was to be with him again.

I glanced around one more time, Palpatine's evil presence lingered, mixed with the melancholy of an era long gone. I was done here and it was time to go. With a sigh, I left the way I had come in heading back to the Imperial Palace without further stops or hiccups.

By the time I reached home it was almost lunch time and my Uncle was waiting for me, so were Shiv and Ynyth.

"Where the hell have you been? We were just about to go and search for you!" The words that came quietly out of my uncle's mouth were taut and laced with concern as well as anger.

I shook my head, too tired to think straight, "I went to the palace to get some answers."

"And did you find what you were looking for?" Uncle Vahlek asked tartly.

I nodded, suddenly feeling exhausted and filthy. "I know you are mad but I need to shower and eat something so can I do these things first before you yell at me?"

There was a moment of quiet then I saw Shiv's lip twitched in amusement and I could feel my uncle's anger and worry recede.

"Well, seeing as how we no longer have to go on a Merlyn hunt I guess I can fix us some lunch." Uncle Vahlek said, "When you are not wearing half the dirt on this planet you can tell us where you were exactly and what you found."

I nodded, wondering how to even begin to describe the things I had seen in the space of a night and then gratefully went to the 'fresher.

Showered and dressed in clean clothes I joined the others at the dining room table. My uncle had prepared some sort of stew and I had to bite down on a snigger when Ynyth eyed it dubiously. My uncle was a good cook, but his food was never very fancy. I knew it would taste great but it looked a little like something a bantha had yakked up.

Unlike dining with Thrawn, dining with my uncle mean there was no relief from the conversation about where I had been and what I had been doing while we ate, so in between mouthfuls of stew I recounted as best I could my adventures in the underground of Coruscant. I left out some of the more nauseating details of some of the visions I had seen because Ynyth had a tendency to pale visibly and look as though she would lose the lunch she had just eaten if I got too graphic.

Shiv and Ynyth listened in rapt attention but my uncle's face was expressionless which usually meant he was not terribly impressed. When I was done with both eating and telling my story the tension at the table was suddenly far higher than before and Ynyth rapidly began to clear the dishes to escape to the safety of the kitchen. She did not like domestic disputes, Shiv had once told me.

"You really are the most reckless, thoughtless idiot of a girl I have ever had the misfortune to know," Uncle Vahlek began, "If your mate were here now...."

"He'd tie me to a desk under the watchful eye of a stormtrooper battalion, I know," I finished for him, "But I had to go, I had to!" I said.

Shiv watched the back and forth with a bemused smile on his face. "You always did do things the complicated way, Rim-Girl," he said and for some reason this seemed to lighten the mood.

I sighed and shook my head. "It was in my mind all along I just couldn't see it now I have my answer."

"So what will you do?" Uncle Vahlek asked.

"Tell him what he wants is on Wayland, why?"

"I just want to make sure that you don't decide to go charging off to this Mount Tantiss place looking for clues on your own."

I made a face. "I have been there once and that was enough. Thrawn is on his own with *that* place."

That answer seemed to placate my uncle and for a moment there was peace.

"So now what happens next?" Ynyth asked me as she rejoined us with desert and began the process of serving it.

I shrugged. "Not sure about you guys but I will head back out to the Unknown Regions and find Thrawn to give him the information, I guess."

"I don't think that...." My uncle started his sentence but he never got to finish it. Suddenly the whole apartment began to shake and tremble as though there was a sudden, violent ground quake, except Coruscant did not get ground quakes.

"What the hell is going on?" Shiv asked and we all left the dining table to run to the windows and see if we could find out. Along the way my uncle had the fore thought to turn on the HoloNet and what we saw displayed on the screen stopped us all dead in our tracks.

"We interrupt this broadcast to bring you this special news bulletin!" The harried looking news reporter said, "We just received word from an eyewitness that an Imperial Super Star destroyer is breaking its way free from the planet's surface and heading towards space."

I looked at the screen which had suddenly switched to a live feed of the scene the reporter had just described but even though I was watching it unfold before my eyes I simply could not believe what I was seeing.

"How the hell did the Empire manage to hide an SSD on the planet's surface?" I whispered.

"Oh my...." Ynyth whispered in horror.

"As you can see the ship suddenly tore its way out of the ground just a few moments ago. It is destroying everything in its path. The civilian death toll is catastrophic!" The on scene reporter yelled to the recorder as from behind him the unmistakable wedge shaped nose of the SSD shed itself of the cradle that had held it on the ground and smashed everything in its path. People, buildings, vehicles, it did not matter whatever was there in its way was destroyed.

Ice cold fear shivered down my spine. "Isard!" I hissed through clenched teeth. "That has to be the *Lusankya*."

"What? No way!" Shiv countered still staring at the screen.

"How do you know that Lei'lei?" My Uncle asked calmly.

"There was a rumour that Isard's prison was really a ship and I knew they had built two super star destroyers but only one was ever unveiled. How they managed to hide that ship on the planet's surface and then build over it I will never know but I am betting that who and what that is."

No one seemed inclined to disagree with me and we watched the rest of the scene unfold in silence until Ynyth realised exactly what part of the city the ship was ripping apart. She turned to Shiv with tears streaming down her face. "That's where we live." She whispered. "Our apartment is in the middle of that zone."

Shiv nodded, he had already figured that out but had not said anything.

Ynyth turned to look at my uncle. "If you had not called us because Merly had gone missing..." she whispered then looked at me, "If you had not vanished, Shiv and I would have been at home right now...we'd be dead..." Her voice trailed off and Shiv put his arm around her protectively. I glanced at my Uncle. The shaking in the flat was bad enough that I could hear glasses fall on the floor and break but we were far enough away that I didn't think the damage would be bad or permanent.

Huddled in front of the holo screen hoping the rest of the flat would hold together we watched the Lusankya, now officially identified, began to climb through the sky, shooting the planetary shield as it did so. Ships buzzed around her like small flies at a carcass but I was damned sure the tiny fighters would do the SSD no harm at all. When it was all over we sat without speaking in the unnaturally still quiet, the HoloNet still babbling and now showing replays of what had happened.

"I have to go," I said quietly. "I have to go now."

This time there was no argument from my Uncle, just a nod of agreement.

"Our home..." Ynyth whispered, "We have no place to stay..."

I turned to her as if seeing her for the first time since this almost surreal incident began. "Stay here. Thrawn won't need it. He won't be coming back here to live I am almost certain of that and neither will I."

"Merly..." Shiv began but I shut him up with a wave of my hand.

"I have to leave. I have information Thrawn needs and it can't wait any more. That woman..." I shook my head because the words to describe what Isard had done, what she was escaped me, "He needs to know and I need to tell him," I finished, "He made me co owner of this flat so I am telling you as co owner to stay here for as long as you need. I would feel better knowing someone was looking after the place anyway. There's food and some clothes and everything you will need until you can sort yourselves out. I know it's not much and it's not yours but it's better than nothing and you'd do the same for me if the situation were reversed."

Ynyth was about to protest I could see it in her eyes but Shiv stopped her with a subtle gentle touch to her arm. I knew that gesture well, it was a gesture that all couples used to communicate without words and for reasons I could not explain it made me long so desperately for Thrawn that had it not been for my Uncle's presence I probably would have tried to bolt off world in that very second just to be with him again.

"Thanks," he said giving me a look that said *how can I ever repay you?*

"You should pack what you need Lei'lei. As soon as they clear off world traffic we should leave."

I looked at Uncle Vahlek sharply. "We?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I am coming with you. As I recall the last time you went charging off into the Unknown Regions of Space it didn't end very well for you."

I went to protest but then realised his presence would be welcome, so instead I simply nodded.

"Well," Uncle Vahlek said after a very long silence. "I don't know about anyone else but I think I would like a brandy to go with desert, would anyone else care to join me?"

We all glanced at each other and since no one had any better ideas about what to do next, we joined my uncle at the dining room table. As I sat there toying with the cake with my fork I wondered if I would ever return to this planet again or if this would be the last time I would see Shiv and Ynyth. I hoped not but there was an air of finality to this meal, to this moment in time that I could not seem to shake.

Shiv glanced at me as if reading my mind. "Whatever happens we'll find a way to keep in touch even if I have to hand deliver messages to you all the way out in the backwater edges of space," he said gripping my hand tightly in his.

I just nodded and grinned despite the tears in my eyes, "I love you too." I whispered too choked up to speak loudly.

My uncle simply nodded and raised his glass, "To the future," he said and we all touched our glasses to the one he held outstretched, echoing the phrase he had spoken. As we sipped the brandy there was a long moment of silence and I wondered about what the future would bring because, now, especially now everything and anything were possible. Then as with all melancholy moments it passed as Shiv made a joke and Ynyth punched his arm. The silence was broken by laughter and I understood that out of the sorrow came hope and as long as there was hope nothing else mattered.

## **Chapter Six**

The Hand of Thrawn reached up into the night sky, surrounded by the lush world of Nirauan on which the base was situated. The hand was actually a nickname for the five towers that made up the base where Thrawn had set up command for his campaign into the Unknown Regions of Space in order to extend the reach of the Empire. All of this had begun years prior to the Emperor's death and had continued well after as well. The base was extensive and had been built long before Thrawn had ever explored this world by beings unknown and long gone so he had taken it over and adapted it for his use and his people. My first experience with this place had not left me with happy memories but this time around things were different, the situation was different and after almost a year I had come to think of it as a home of sorts.

The strangeness of the planet itself never entirely vanished and the night was full of eerie sounds, animal and avian calls which were still to be identified and catalogued. The air had a slightly sweet scent on it, which I suspected was carried from a certain flowering tree that grew near the compound and occasionally mingled with the smell of lush, wet undergrowth, rich and loamy; utterly foreign to someone who had spent most of their life on a desert planet.

In the solitude of the early evening, after the sun had vanished but before the chill of the night descended leaving everything damp with dew I had made my way up to this place to be alone. While the base was large sometimes it felt as though it were tiny and far too crowded. Like most people who had grown up on desolate worlds filled with vast wastelands which stretched out in never ending vistas, I was unused to being confined and it made me restless, edgy and occasionally melancholy. Today had been a particularly bad day for a myriad of reasons and the sorrow I had felt had put me on the verge of tears for most of it but I had bitten them back in favour of trying to get my jobs done. The Chiss were not fond of messy human emotions and they considered them a sign of weakness. Once my work day had finished I had needed to find a quiet place to remember and mourn.

Leaving the compound had not been forbidden but there were enough known and unknown dangers out beyond the base that it meant if one wanted to go out one took an armed guard with them. It sort of defeated the purpose of getting away from it all to be alone so I had found a compromise everyone could live with. The key people on the base knew enough to leave me be when I disappeared because they knew I had made a promise to Thrawn that I would not endanger my life or those of his people by bugging off and just to get away from it all. There were a few places on the base which were generally considered of little use and those, by default, had become mine.

"I thought I might find you up here," Thrawn's voice broke the quiet silence which made me smile. I wiped the tears on my face away because I didn't really want to let him see that I had been crying even though he would know anyway. When I didn't turn to face him he walked up to stand at my back and wrapped his arms around me. I had not seen him four months so this reunion was sweet.



"Did Park tell you where I was or did you just use deductive reasoning?" I asked leaning into his body, welcoming his warmth. The nights on Nirauan were chilly and the observation deck was open to the outside.

"No, he did not tell me where to find you. He did mention you received mail from Siavaan this morning and that you seemed very sad today but that you would not speak about it."

I sighed and turned around to face him without breaking the circle of his arms and rested my head against his chest. The letters which had arrived from Shiv, despite being full of good and cheerful news, had only served to remind me of everything that had happened in the last year and of how much I missed my friends, how much had been lost.

The terrible things that Ysanne Isard had done in her attempt to break the power of the New Republic had left their mark on my soul but it was the terrible death of my friend Cati which hurt the most. Isard had vanished, and the last I had heard of her she had taken up residence on Thyferra, becoming the leader of that planet and overseeing the production and distribution of Bacta in order to further ruin the New Republic's reputation but that plan had failed. The New Republic had found an alternative to bacta to cure the Krytos virus and for every move Isard made against them they counter moved to win.

At first, after I had arrived on Nirauan I had tried to follow the news of what was going on in the Core but after a few months even I lost interest. It had seemed to me that Isard's plans to destroy the New Republic got more and more convoluted and to my mind stupid. She was grasping at sand and the harder she tried to hold on the more it ran through her fingers. I had talked with Thrawn about it often when he was on the base because he too, was at a loss to try and sort out her thinking. When the news came that she had lost her hold on Thyferra and that she had been defeated I had not taken any care to hide my pleasure but Thrawn had tempered my good mood by warning me Isard was only presumed dead.

"For such an intelligent woman, she did some remarkably stupid things," he had said, "But she has more lives than you do. Do not count her gone yet, not until a body is found." He had warned and while I had not disagreed, I had not been happy either.

Now, as I stood on the darkness on the observation platform, I found it hard to believe that I had been on Nirauan for almost a year and some days it seemed like only yesterday that I had arrived here with my uncle to bring Thrawn the information he sought and the news of Isard's treachery.

"It's the anniversary of Cati's death." I told him simply, explaining my mood and the reason I was up here.

Thrawn stroked idle fingers through my hair gently. "I know," he replied, "Which is why I thought I might find you up here."

I nodded and sighed. For a long moment we stood there in silence until I broke it by asking, "When did you get back? I wasn't expecting you for another week."

"About three hours ago, we finished the set missions early and I saw no reason to remain in space when I did not have to," he said casually then he glanced at me, "Given

what day it is I felt I needed to be here today. I would have sought you out sooner but the debriefing was extensive so it took longer than usual."

I nodded my understanding. While duty came first and even though sometimes I wasn't always happy about it I understood it but in this case, because it was possible to do so, he had returned early for me. He had known today marked the first anniversary of Cati's gruesome death and the effect it would have on me. When it mattered the most, he was there for me. I took one of his hands in mine and brought it to my lips to kiss, letting him know I was grateful. "How long is the turn around this time?"

"I am not sure. I have some things to do here and some details to work out. As much as I can do from the *Chimaera* sometimes I also need to be on the base. Thanks to the information you were able to provide we are a lot further ahead now than we were this time last year but there is still much to plan out before I begin the major campaign which includes obtaining more information about the New Republic's fleet activities and so on."

"Is Delta Source not as useful as you had hoped?" I asked.

I felt his smile. "It is indeed of great use but the information retrieved from that spy network is sporadic and it takes time to disseminate the useful from the nonsense. I owe you and your uncle a great debt for finding it and for keeping it a secret," he said, "But there is more to this campaign than simply using pieces of information gathered from an Imperial listening device in the Palace. Retaking the galaxy will not happen overnight and without proper organisation it will not happen at all." He sounded tired.

"Are there problems?"

"Nothing insurmountable but of course along the way to victory there are always hurdles one must overcome. Currently mine have to do with equipment shortages and lack of fully trained personnel. The Imperial ship yards cannot supply me with the number of vessels I have requested and reunifying the fleet is a tedious process, more so than I had previously imagined. It would appear that not every Imperial out there wishes to return to the fold, especially under my command. Many of the new recruits under my command are too green to take into any sort of conflict and there needs to be extensive training still. This isn't a process that will happen overnight although many seem to think it should. Bad planning, over confidence and greed is what cause this current situation, believe me, I will not make the same mistakes that Palpatine did."

I just sighed and rested the flat of my cheek against the rough fabric of his white uniform jacket. I had heard this speech many times before. "What about Mount Tantiss?" I asked.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly. "It will keep," He replied vaguely. He did not like this question and I asked it often.

"Don't you worry that someone else might discover it?" I pressed.

"No," he replied, stroking my hair absently. "The New Republic has other issues taking up their attention at the moment and I am quite certain that Palpatine left the place very well guarded. A little trust, my dear, I do occasionally know what I am doing."

"I do trust you and you know this!" I said poking him in the chest. "I would not be here if I did not."

"And I am grateful for this fact," he replied, catching my hand in his before I could poke him again. "But you push on this particular matter and I do not know why."

You said so yourself it was one of Palpatine's best kept secrets and that there was no overt evidence of the facility in the Imperial database or palace system. The rebels will not go half cocked on some mad search looking for Palpatine's mythical storehouse of treasures even if they do know about it, which I think is highly unlikely. I am quite certain they find more than enough to keep them occupied on Coruscant as well as the rest of the inner Core and the outer worlds, all of which are jockeying for a position of power within the new government. With each system they bring into the new republic so too do they increase their political problems. They have enough to worry about right now."

I sighed crossly which made him chuckle. "Tekari, I understand that you want to find out exactly what he hid there but you need to learn some patience. I had told you before, when the time is right and that is exactly what I mean. Curb that overly inquisitive nature of yours; it's what gets you into so much trouble. To be honest, I am still astounded that you stayed put here and did not try to go rushing off to Wayland on your own when you and your uncle first arrived and I suppose I have the Tze'yusha'Jin to thank for that."

I made a face but he was right.

When I had arrived on Nirauan with my uncle, Thrawn had not been here. He had been continuing the work he had started out in the Unknown Regions and that work had been impressive. I had seen the star map which showed the areas of this part of space which were now under Thrawn's control. *The Empire of the Hand*, his people had secretly called it behind his back until the name had become so ingrained in every day usage that with a wry smile he had started to use it himself while referring to the vast area of space he and his people controlled which stretched out over nearly two hundred and fifty sectors.

My arrival had been met with a huge sense of relief that I had found almost amusing and Voss Parck had all but hugged me as I had stepped of the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma*. What was even more amusing had been his almost panicky statement that he was under orders to not let me out of his sight until the Grand Admiral had returned from his current mission. No matter how often I had tried to tell him that I had learned that particular lesson and would not be dashing hell bent after Thrawn alone in a ship again, Parck still kept a watchful eye on my whereabouts on the base. Most people would have probably found it annoying but I was touched by the concern and did what I could to try and alleviate it.

My uncle, who had all but threatened me with death should I try to bugger off and explore Wayland on my own, had stayed on the base until a few days after Thrawn's return, stating there were things he needed to discuss with the Grand Admiral. The day after Thrawn's return, nearly two weeks after we had arrived on the base, Thrawn and my uncle had spent almost the entire evening talking alone. Neither of them would tell me what they had spoken about but after Thrawn's ever so slight smirk when I had asked if any of it had to do with me had told me all I needed to know.

Uncle Vahlek had left the day after that with one of the Imperial transport ships headed back into the Core Regions for supplies. I had been sad to see him go but at the

same time a little relieved. We had spent too much time in too close quarters together and as much as I loved him he had driven me crazy.

"Give my love to papa, Bel and Bedi when you see them." I had asked him as we had said our goodbyes.

"Will do. Stay out of trouble Lei'lei! You know how to contact me if you need anything," he had said giving me an avuncular kiss on the forehead before leaving.

Thrawn had returned to the base in the middle of the night and I had been in bed when his shuttle had landed. He had arrived in his quarters sometime in the early morning. He had tried to not disturb me up but after such a long time of sleeping alone his presence rather than his absence was a disruption in my normal routine.

Still half asleep I had yawned and stretched in jax like satisfaction. "What time is it?" I had asked.

"Just after three in the morning. I did not mean to wake you, Tekari." He had murmured. I had watched as he had undressed and before he could get into his night clothes, had stopped him.

"Well now I am awake." I had grasped his hand and had pulled him to me, rolling him so he lay on his back and before he could protest or counter my attack I had moved to straddle his lap. The look on my face had challenged him and for a moment he had considered it then he had smiled as he had surrendered.

"So I see," He had replied arching that eyebrow in that smug, annoying manner of his, "And just what did you have in mind from this position, my dear, because right now you have the advantage?"

My fingers had traced down the centerline of his chest, past his navel and the line of dark hair that led to magical things. "I thought I would see if you had missed me at all."

His unspoken reply had been swiftly obvious and he had smirked at my reaction to his arousal. "I would say that you have your answer, the question is now what do you plan to do about it?"

"I thought I would welcome you back properly." I had breathed in his ear, delighting in feeling him shiver for me.

"Well then, my dear, I am all yours," he had said just before I could shut him up by engaging him in a different sort of combative conversation.

In spite of the length of time apart our passion for each other had not changed, if anything it had only increased. His talent and skill in conversing with me using nothing but his hands, his mouth and his body never ceased to astonish me. It was exquisite torture to once again be on the receiving end of his tactile genius and I know he enjoyed being reminded of just how well I could apply my own gifts and skills. We knew each other so well but time and distance always seemed to make this exploration of territories known a whole new adventure.

I had delighted in hearing the sounds of his pleasure as I plied my own tricks of the bedroom trade. We had rippled together like wind over water, stirring each other up until the storm within, reaching its desired crescendo, crashed down upon us both leaving us stunned and breathless. In the aftermath of the madness of lust and passion, tenderness took over and his gentle touch had said far more than words ever could.

After a lingering, comfortable silence he had spoken first. "When I got word you had returned I cannot tell you how relieved I was. I was even more so to hear you had decided to do as you were asked and stay put."

"Well Uncle Vahlek did threaten me with serious bodily harm if I were to go tearing off so I felt it wise to just hang out here and not risk his ire... or yours. The last time that happened you sent me away so it seemed safer just to wait and be, as my uncle put it, a good girl."

That last remark had made him smile. In spite of the fact that I was a grown woman, my uncle still usually treated me as though I were still a child of six. Most of the time I tried to ignore it but Thrawn, for some strange reason, found this very amusing much to my annoyance. "I would have been up here sooner but I had business to take care of that could not be put off, not even for you, sj'iu Tekari, no matter how much I might have liked to do just that."

I had stroked the smooth skin of his chest with my fingertips. "I know that. It wasn't so bad in the end. I have been kept occupied well enough." This was quite an understatement because in actual fact I had been kept remarkably busy.

His eyebrow had arched. "So I have heard. And just how are the Basic classes going this time around?"

I had smiled. A few days after my return, much to my great surprise, one of his Chiss warriors had approached me somewhat shyly and requested that I continue the language classes for Basic that I had started before I had left for Coruscant. I had not thought anyone had cared about the language learning but the need to communicate had turned out to be greater than the need to remain closed off from the humans. I ended up teaching both Basic to the Chiss and as much as I was able to Cheunh to some of the humans.

"Better now than before. They actually want to learn to speak basic and it seems that now they all know that I speak Cheunh fluently I gained a measure of respect with your people, or did you have something to do with this?" I asked as the thought just occurred to me.

Thrawn had shaken his head slightly. "While I command these men and women I cannot and will not order them to give their respect to anyone. Respect must be earned, my dear, so if they offer you theirs now then it is entirely of your own doing not mine."

"Well my students are doing well, much better than I had expected actually, though I think the extra material you provided them with helped a lot." I had nodded. "The Cheunh classes are quite another matter but at least the humans will be able to understand the Chiss language even if they cannot seem to speak it."

"You have achieved much and I am proud of the work you have done." He had said.

This was high praise from him and I had glowed under it. "I'm not sure what the difference is now, but I feel more at home here and that helps."

He had nodded. "The time you spent on Coruscant has tempered you." He had run his fingers through my hair, untangling the knots we had created with our bedroom antics. "You have experienced some of the most terrible things this galaxy has to offer and yet you have somehow managed to retain that sweetness of nature and delightful optimism that never ceases to amaze me but you have also changed and I sense it." He

had traced a line with the tip of his finger, starting from my lips to the hollow of my throat, then down across to my left breast which he had cupped with his hand, pressing my chest, feeling the beat of my heart beneath the pale skin. "Do you know how very precious you are?" He whispered.

The moment had been so suddenly poignant that tears had welled up in my eyes. I opened my mouth to speak but suddenly I didn't want to break the moment so I simply kissed gently him instead. For a second time hung like a drop poised to fall and then it moved forward as he had broken back from my kiss, stroked my cheek tenderly and then he had rolled onto his back, pulling me onto my side to curl around him, with arms and legs pressing close.

I had rested my head in the hollow where his shoulder met his chest and sighed in contentment. I had opened my mouth to say something else but he had stopped me with two fingers laid gently on my lips. "Sleep, sj'iu Tekari. I am not going anywhere for a little while so we have plenty of time to catch up in the days and nights to come but now I need to rest and so do you."

I had not argued with him because I, too, had been tired. I had just been so grateful to have him back, his warm body next to me, and the familiar scent of his skin filling my lungs. The aftermath of spent desire had made me drowsy and his physical presence was comforting.

*Home*, I had thought, *to be in his arms, wrapped about his body, and satiated by his touch was home*. And in that moment I had known that I never wanted to be parted from him for such a long time, through such a vast distance again even though I knew that, inevitably, this would be the case. Some of these thoughts must have leaked out because he had reiterated his previous statement, brushing sleep into my hair with the tips of his fingers. He had been true to his word and had stayed on Nirauan for nearly four weeks before heading back out into space again.

My debriefing with Thrawn had taken place the day after my uncle had left. In his private office he had listened without much interruption as I spoke. The news of all that had occurred on Coruscant had made his jaw clench and his eyes turn hard. Even though I had mentioned some stuff in the few letters I had been able to send, he had not known the half of what had been really going on. Isard had lied to him about so many things so that when he had finally learned the truth he had been furious, more furious than I had seen him since the day he had shipped me off to Hjal with Navaari. When I had described Cati's death and what the terribly Krytos Virus did he gotten up out of his chair to pace the room, a sure sign that what he was hearing from me upset him and for a long moment after I had finished this part of my story an awful silence had hung in the air.

"Your letter on this matter did not even come close to describing the horror of the situation. I am so very sorry I was not there for you," he had said simply after the silence had gone on for too long.

Brushing the tears from my face I had merely nodded. "I don't think there are any words in the galaxy to describe adequately what that was like." I had replied. "And it is a good thing you were not there because you might have contracted the virus yourself."

He had only nodded in response and I had continued telling him all that I had learned, all that had happened right up until my last minute on Coruscant. The entire story sounded absurd even to my ears and I had been there to witness the things that had happened, including the *Lusankya's* escape from its planetary cradle which had wrecked havoc on the planet. He had not spoken after I was done recounting my time on the Core world and the terrible stillness that had settled around him had been more frightening than any fury the Emperor or Lord Vader could have unleashed when they were alive. I had sat in the chair which faced his desk in nervous silence and had wondered how to read him because I had been unable to gauge his reaction to what he had been told at all.

"What will you do?" I had asked as I watched him toy with the data chip I had given him, the one that held the information my uncle had pulled off the computer in Lord Vader's palace on Coruscant.

For a very long time I had not thought he would answer me, then he had drawn a deep breath. "I need time to consider my next move but first I need to sift through all the information you have given me." He had said, "It is a great deal to digest and much of this information is new to me."

I had sighed then, letting out the breath I had been holding. "I don't understand why she lied to you."

His smile had been cynical. "She feared I would charge in and take over."

"And that would have been a bad thing how?"

"She was reluctant to give up the power of being the Emperor's supreme ruler, Tekari, and it has been my observation that people who have power will go to great lengths to retain this power."

"Billions of beings died just so she could maintain her precious power and even then in the end she lost Coruscant."

He had drawn deep breath as though to steady against the anger he himself also felt. "Indeed. Well, now have something to work towards and I have much to prepare. I must assign a flag ship and get a fleet battle ready."

"Will I get to go with you?" I had asked.

"No." His reply had been decisive and without hesitation. His answer not surprised me but the hurt I had felt did. It had showed on my face so he explained coolly, "I cannot have any distractions that might interfere and you, my dear, are the biggest distraction I know of. I need you here, there will be things I will require you to do, jobs that you are uniquely qualified to carry out and I also want to know you are safe. If this is not a suitable place for you then we can discuss alternatives but you will not accompany me on board my flag ship during this campaign. It would be extremely unprofessional."

I had only nodded, swallowing down my disappointment. As usual he had been absolutely right.

He had looked at me for a moment then had turned away, his hands clasped behind his back in a stance that had reminded me sharply of Lord Vader. He stared out of the window in his office that looked out over the forest. "The Imperial Fleet is spread all over the galaxy. It is in pieces. First I will need to reunify the Navy and then devise the best plan of attack on the core to retake Coruscant, if that is even possible now."

"I thought that you had already been planning for this?" I had asked puzzled by his manner.

He had turned his head to glance at me then had gone back to staring out of the window. "I have but while I could speculate and make educated guesses about what they would do next without concrete information making specific plans has not been possible. I did not wish to tip my hand that I exist by rushing into the Core and allow the New Republic time to consider me a threat which must be dealt with before I was ready. I wish to deal with them on my terms not theirs. So far I and what I am doing have remained a secret, I wish to keep it that way until I attack. The element of surprise is a great advantage, one I hope to use well."

My sigh had seemed to fill the room. I had not known how he was able to remain so patient in light of everything had happened. According to the news nets and numbers being bandied about the New Republic now dominated about fifty percent of the known galaxy. Taking it back from them would not be easy. "The longer you wait, the more systems fall under the New Republic's rule."

He had nodded. "I understand that but this war will not be about numbers it will be about strategy and wits."

This had made me smile. I had yet to meet anyone who could outwit Thrawn. He really was brilliant. "Then they are sure to lose."

"Your confidence in me is touching, but make no mistake this will not be an easy campaign." He had replied. "I have been running through various simulations but now I have more facts to better base these simulations on and a reliable source of information that will be invaluable." He had paused then went on, "The New Republic is no longer a rag tag fleet of lucky rebel misfits. They have proven themselves to be a formidable enemy and I will not make Palpatine's mistake of underestimating them."

"I'm sorry." I had said after a length silence.

This had surprised him. "Why?" He had asked glancing over his shoulder at me.

"I should have come back earlier, brought you this information sooner."

He had shaken his head. "The few months' time difference would have changed nothing, Tekari. You had valid reasons for staying; do not second guess yourself now. If you had returned earlier then perhaps Siavaan and his mate would not be alive. Everything has its place in time and you played your part accordingly."

My sigh had told him that I did not think the same way as he did. For a moment he had stayed silent and still then, after turning back to face me, had said, "I need you here. Believe me, you will have more than enough to do and I do not mean simply teaching language classes either." His expression had softened and then he had filled me in on all that had taken place at the base while I had been away. A lot of things had changed including some new additions to the base that I had not known about until I had arrived, children being among the most surprising of all which had taken some getting used to.

Since receiving my news and information Thrawn had worked swiftly to gather his existing fleet and get them battle ready so more often than not he was on board the *Chimaera*, his new flag ship, running training simulations. There was new blood at the base and I had been very surprised at the increase in the numbers of both humans and Chiss upon my arrival but for what he now planned he would need far more than what



he had here. Isard's treachery had handicapped him but that in no way diminished his capabilities to get things going. If there was one thing Thrawn could do and do well it was to win in games of strategy and if anyone could out-think and outsmart the rebels it was him, but planning for this offensive now took up much of his life, making our time together rare and precious.

Thrawn's touch broke into my thoughts and I looked up into his face. His eyes glowed in the relative darkness of the observation platform on the top of the second highest tower. He smiled at me and it was a smile that reached those strange eyes, making the light in them almost seem to dance. He didn't need to say how he felt because he showed me through his actions. It was a small, sweet moment and I was just happy to have him back for a while, safe and in one piece and that he had come back on this particular day just for me meant even more.

I always knew a strange sense of relief when he returned to Nirauan because in spite of the fact that he was a brilliant tactician and not reckless in the way Lord Vader and the Emperor had been with either his men's' lives or his own, I still worried. It was, I supposed, a natural aspect of caring for someone but sometimes that was hard to deal with, especially on a base mainly full of human men and male Chiss, where showing such emotion was not a good thing.

On Coruscant or when I had been with Lord Vader I had often been too busy to worry or at least had been with friends, like Shiv, who listened and placated my fears but here...in this place was an entirely different matter. I was quite happy that now there was another woman on the base to commiserate with and thinking about her reminded me of news which I had to share.

"Did you hear? Syal is pregnant." I asked, breaking the silence.

He cupped a hand about my cheek and stroked my face with his thumb. "Is she now? Soontir did not mention that to me when I saw him last."

I smiled slightly. "He might not have known, he's been away for a good while. She is just past her first trimester. I only found out yesterday and only then because I caught her almost passing out in the mess hall around midnight last night. When I insisted she go see Doctor Thracer she just laughed and told me there wasn't any cure for what she had except time."

Syal Antilles was Baron Soontir Fel's wife. She, her children and her husband had been relocated to the Unknown Regions of Space when under mysterious circumstances Fel who had defected to the rebels suddenly came back to work for the Imperials, particularly to work with Thrawn. Fel had not been on Nirauan when I had woken from my death sleep, he had been someplace deep in Unknown Space and his presence and whereabouts kept a secret but once he had settled on the base, he and Thrawn had arranged that his family should join them. By the time that this had taken place I was already on Hjal. The rest of the Galaxy assumed that Fel had been killed in battle and that his wife, Wynssa Starflare, Syal's stage name, was dead as well.

Thrawn chuckled. "Well, this will make life interesting around here and they will need larger quarters if they keep this up. Their two boys already create enough mischief to cause great consternation to everyone stationed here. How human children survive their first ten years of life is beyond me."

"Well, good that you missed last week's drama which had them trying to climb the pwazch trees outside. Chak was almost two thirds of the way up the tallest one when he got stuck, part of his clothing snagged on a branch and when he realised he couldn't get down well you should have heard the racket. I've never seen anything funnier in my life than your men trying to figure out how to get a small boy from a tree without them going up it to unhitch his clothes first. When they began to suggest shooting at him I thought Syal was going to have kittens. All the brilliant minds that reside in this place and not one of them could come up with a better plan than trying to aim a blaster at the branch which had snagged Chak's clothes."

"So how did they manage to get him down?" Thrawn asked.

"They didn't, "I said smugly, "I did. I climbed up, unhitched him and then helped him get back down." I smiled. That had been an adventure well worth the effort. Both Syal's boys thought I was very cool and had taken, at Syal's insistence, to calling me Aunt Merly which I found to be very weird and Thrawn found very funny.

Thrawn kissed the top of my head gently. "Fearless," he said with a mixture of pride and bemusement.

"More like idiotic." I answered. "But the tree's branches wouldn't support the weight of a full grown man and Syal wasn't going to climb after the boy so the only way he was going to come down was if someone went up to unhook his tangled clothes."

"So tell me, when did you learn to climb trees, Tekari?" Thrawn asked with a smirk. "I have yet to see trees on Tatooine."

I just smiled at him. "You'll find I am just full of surprises."

His answer had been to nibble on my neck. "Yes, indeed, you are."

I shivered and grinned. "If you keep that up it will be desert before dinner and you won't have time for a shower first."

That remark earned me the trademark raised eyebrow, "Always in a hurry to get to the main event. How many times must I remind you, my dear, it is the journey that counts not the destination."

I smiled sweetly and closed my eyes for a moment allowing my powers to build up and sweep over him. I heard his sharp intake of breath and raised my eyes to meet his without moving my head.

"Temptress," he whispered, tucking a curled finger under my chin to raise my head. The brush of lips across mine was subtle and seductive. "But we both know that my self-control far outweighs yours, so if you want this little skirmish to escalate, forcing me to show you just how well I can out manoeuvre you and leave you in a state of ...need, then please continue your current plan of attack," he whispered in my ear.

I shivered as the warmth of his breath tickled the sensitive skin of my neck, considered his threat for a moment and then backed off a little. He won at this game for the same reasons he always beat me at Dejarik, almost infinite patience.

"I see you have learned when to retreat," he smiled all the while his fingers danced across the line of my clavicle, leaving me breathless. He wasn't playing fair and when I had nothing to add or say he continued the earlier conversation, "So once again the Fel boys managed to keep you busy. I am indebted to them; they keep you from charging off and doing silly things."

"So the truth comes out and you really wanted me back to help baby-sit," I finally found my voice.

"Not true, I wanted you back so that I might have my wicked way with you in the small hours of the night. If I thought I could get away with it I might consider chaining you to the bed for safe keeping" He punctuated that statement with a small kiss but then added, thoughtfully, before I could retort to his comment. "You are good around those children, though. I am quite certain that Syal is grateful for your assistance with them, especially while Soontir is away," he countered.

I had just given him a small shrug and the sudden, subtle shift in my mood had not gone unnoticed.

"Some day you will make an excellent mother for our children, Tekari. And some day we will have children, if that is your wish. It is not an impossibility, simply a challenge." His words were meant to sooth but they made me a little melancholy.

The topic of children was a little touchy, mostly because I knew that the chances of us ever producing offspring to be nearly impossible and it seemed that there would never even come a right time to try for a family. I had never been more aware of this than when I was with Syal and her two boys. I had never really given having a family much thought before but now, here in this place so far away from the Empire that we had once served, it was something that could be within reach. It was a nice dream but the reality was something utterly different. Even Doctor Thracer had not been very optimistic when I had asked him about it one day. Although Chiss and human physiology were similar we were also vastly different, different enough to make a child a virtual impossibility. Mostly I didn't think about it but because we now had kids on the base it was a topic that came up every now and then and it made me a little sad.

I shook off the moment and smiled. "So, now you are home and we have some time, what did you have planned for this evening or do you still have work to do?"

He smiled, "I always have work to do but I set aside time for us tonight. I thought we would have dinner together and then perhaps... converse."

"So we're not eating with the officers tonight then?" I asked a little surprised.

Thrawn shook his head. "Voss strongly suggested I give him and the officers a night off from our standard dining ritual in favour of allowing them some down time. Then he mentioned something about me spending some time with my...how did he put it... incredibly patient and long suffering mate."

I laughed. "Was he talking about me or you?"

The raised eyebrow was my only answer and then Thrawn changed the subject. "So how are Siavaan and Ynyth doing?"

"Surprisingly well," I said, "Shiv changed jobs though, about three months ago. So he's not working at the palace anymore."

"Oh? What prompted that change?"

"He said the level of bureaucracy was too insane. He said that at least working under the Emperor's rules one knew more or less where one stood but the New Republic was like working in a mad house. I also think that people couldn't get past the fact that he used to work for the Empire, while he didn't say anything directly I picked up a few images and some harassment in the work place was among them. Now he is assistant manager of the Coruscant Grand Hotel. He makes twice what he did at the palace with

half the work. He loves it apparently and says that any time we wish to visit he has a quiet suite set aside for us."

Thrawn's smile was sunlight warm. "That would be a good thing considering we no longer have a place to live there."

"Do you regret that now?" I asked.

"Not at all, Tekari, do you?"

I shook my head.

After I had come back and Thrawn had returned I had told him what had happened to Shiv and Ynyth's home because of the *Lusankya*. He had been suitably horrified at what Isard had done and pleased at my reaction in letting Shiv and Ynyth use of our flat. After a short discussion we both decided to give it to them and be done with it because we both knew that no matter what happened in the future we most likely would not live on Coruscant again and if so we could always buy another place. So three months after leaving Coruscant I had gone back with all the paperwork needed to sign the flat over to Shiv and have the furniture and belongings which Thrawn and I wanted to keep moved out to the base or placed in storage.

The situation on Coruscant after the *Lusankya's* disastrous exit had left a planet wide housing shortage and the rebuilding wasn't happening quickly enough. The gaping maw in the Coruscanti landscape was still ugly and fresh as we had flown over the area. Millions of beings had died that day, most of their bodies had never been recovered. Through Shiv's correspondence I had learned that reconstruction was slower than usual because of the number of people lobbying to have at least one section of the decimated area turned into a memorial. The New Republic had taken this request to heart and it was being discussed to death in the senate. In the meantime people were still homeless either living in shelters or government sponsored hotels. It wasn't a good situation for anyone and the longer it continued this way the more unhappy people became, that coupled with the bacta crisis and the lingering effects from the Krytos Virus left many people wondering if the Empire had really been so bad after all. At least under Palpatine's rule crazy stuff like this never happened, unless you counted Alderaan and most people, it seemed, did not.

Shiv and Ynyth had been furiously trying to find a place they could afford but due to so many people all looking for housing at the same time there was nothing decent to be had at the price they were willing and able to spend. Since neither of them would accept the flat as an outright gift Thrawn sold it to them for a token amount and the matter was resolved.

My trip out and back had been quiet and uneventful. I had taken one of the older cargo ships which had been disguised as a civilian ship along with a small crew of Thrawn's finest, including Jarack, who had been made to travel in civilian clothes. We had managed to do all that needed to be done quickly without fuss. It seemed that the New Republic had other concerns than the comings and goings of the Coruscanti elite, which was what I was disguised as, much to my amusement.

Running around the galaxy pretending to be someone else was usually Thrawn's game not mine but I had enjoyed the role of spoiled rich girl despite my misgivings that it wouldn't work. Customs and immigration had not blinked twice at my forged papers

and the moving company had been paid handsomely so they had dealt with the off world permissions paperwork without blinking an eye.

It had been so great to see Shiv and Ynyth again but at the same time Coruscant held too many bad memories for me to ever want to come back and live here. I was mostly glad when I said my goodbyes and left the planet behind. The government might have changed but the planet itself had not and it remained a glittering, single sun, ball of light filled with beings who felt superior by virtue of living on the Jewel of the Core. As I had headed back with Jarack and the crew of the small transport ship to the Unknown Regions I had realised that my upbringing on Tatooine had never prepared me for the savagery that I had found on Coruscant. The endless one-up-man-ship and the constant need for wealth and power wore me down. Coruscant never stopped moving but it was all artificial, even the weather was pretty much always controlled. It had occurred to me that what I had loved about the Core was pretty much all gone and I had been happy to leave it all behind.

I turned around again, leaning with my back against Thrawn's chest and stared up into the sky. The constellations in this part of space were unfamiliar to me but that did not diminish their beauty, especially on a night such as this, crystal clear and cold enough that I could see my breath. These intimate moments were so rare outside the confines of our quarters that I tried to make them last as long as possible, treasuring them when they occurred.

The night wind picked up and rustled through the forests that surrounded the base. If I closed my eyes it almost sounded a little like the hiss of sands shifting in the desert but the smells the breeze carried with it reminded me constantly I was very far away from my home world. I shivered a little as the temperature dropped slightly and Thrawn picked up on that quickly.

"Are you chilled enough to want to come inside with me? I would like to shower and change clothes before we have dinner." Thrawn asked, brushing the side of my neck with the backs of his fingers.

"So what's on the menu tonight?"

"I thought I would surprise you."

"Desert?"

"That would also be a surprise." He murmured in my ear sending chills down my spine and warmth flooding up through me from within. This was an old game we played but I enjoyed each variation of it never the less.

"And after desert?"

"Oh I am quite certain there will some very interesting conversation going on. You and I have a great deal to catch up on."

I smiled to myself and then allowed him to lead me to the stairs which led back inside of the tower out of the cold, away from the dark of the night and into the warmth he provided.

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Living on Nirauan was quite unlike anything else I had experienced. It was quite unlike life with Lord Vader on board his various ships or living on Coruscant with all that Imperial court life had to offer. While the base itself was run like any Imperial military operation it wasn't quite the same because at least one third of the population were not human and the Chiss had vastly different ideas on how things should be done, as well as, how people should behave than humans did and the two styles of military operations sometimes did not work well together. Thrawn along with Voss Parck found themselves mediators in some rather interesting disagreements on how things should work. Yet, in spite of the differences, most of the time things ran smoothly.

At first I had been a little worried that my relationship with Thrawn would get in the way of having some sort of normal life at Nirauan but it was, for the most part, politely ignored. Neither Thrawn nor I were fond of public displays of affection and our years of keeping the fact that we were seeing each other a secret from the Imperial Court on Coruscant seemed to carry over into the way we conducted ourselves here as well. Our private lives were very private and in public we remained distanced and professional. It had always been the way our relationship had worked and now I was so used to it now that anything else between us would have been unusual.

My place had been established when I had begun to teach language classes to both the Chiss and the humans. It was an odd job and never one I would have thought of doing when I was younger but I enjoyed it. However, teaching language classes only took up some of my time so when I was not teaching, I was working in the docking bay. Word had gotten around that I was a qualified mechanic and there had been no resistance when I had asked if I could help out. Once the chief engineer had figured out that I was actually pretty good at this job he welcomed my presence in the pit, especially since I could not only fix ships but act as translator between Chiss and human at the same time.

These two things filled up each day making my life fairly busy and when I wasn't working or sleeping I was usually being badgered to death by Syal and Soontir Fel's two little boys who had decided that I was a lot of fun to be with, though I could not for the life of me figure out why.

I enjoyed the boy's company, their bright and mischievous countenance made a stark contrast to the often serious military feel to the base. They were at an age where they made their own fun and still young enough not to realise how far away and isolated they were from the rest of the galaxy. I would have thought that they were lonely for company their own age but they seemed to relish the company of adults and rather enjoyed having the run of most of the base to themselves. There were many places that were off limits to them, though sometimes that did not stop them from going there anyway and after a few months people mostly got used to seeing them run around when they were not in lessons or with their mother.

Syal was also wonderful company for me, another female who was not a member of the military and who had lived the court life, albeit from a slightly different perspective. We had a surprising amount in common despite our vastly different upbringings and lives. I greatly enjoyed the time I got to spend with her, talking with her about pretty much everything much to Thrawn's consternation. I was unused to having a close female friend and apart from Cati and the girls on Hjal I had mainly spent my time

in the company of men. It was a whole other experience to sit with Syal in her living quarters, with the two boys racing around, sipping stim'caf discussing men, fashions and pretty much everything else in between. Often we discussed our time on Coruscant during the time of the Empire, while the Emperor still lived and the life at court was at its height. It seemed that while we had never actually met before we had crossed paths many times and attended many of the same events.

"I remember that!" Syal had exclaimed as I had told her about my first ever Grand Ball, the one where then Captain Thrawn had swept me off my feet onto the dance floor. "He astonished many people with his grace on the dance floor and of course everyone wanted to know who you were." She had said with a smile. "People whispered about that dance for a long time afterwards. He perfected it with that back bend he forced you in to."

I had grinned. "He was showing off." I had told her.

That had made her smile. "I find it hard to believe that the Grand Admiral would stoop to showing off, he seems so...." She had searched for the right word and couldn't find it.

"So Chiss?" I had offered.

She had just nodded and smiled.

I had shrugged. "He was a captain then and he was trying to impress me I think. It seems like such a long time ago."

"And did he manage to impress you?" She had asked with a smirk.

"He scared me to death, if you want to know the truth, and yes, he impressed me with his prowess on the dance floor." She had glanced at me for a second, the question she longed to ask burned in her eyes but never made it to her lips but I had answered it anyway, "And yes he shows the same prowess with *everything* else he does as well."

That had made her laugh which had made the boys curious and they had decided enough girl talk it was time for boy-talk and we had spent the rest of that afternoon amusing them.

As hard as the adjustment of leaving home, living on Coruscant and now living on Nirauan had been for me it was even harder for Syal. She had given up everything to be with Tir including her family which included the famous Wedge Antilles, her younger brother.

"They think Tir and I are dead." She had explained to me. The sorrow in her voice was unmistakable. "What else could I do, it was either their world or his and I wanted to be in his. He is the love of my life, the father of my children. Perhaps one day things will change enough that we could all be reunited but right now this is impossible. I would not do anything to compromise the safety of my husband, our children or this base. If Tir thinks that Thrawn is worth serving then the Grand Admiral must be a remarkable man. Tir doesn't give his loyalties lightly no matter what anyone thinks."

It had been a sobering conversation and I had lain awake that night thinking about it until Thrawn, tuned to my restlessness, had asked what was on my mind. When I had recounted the conversation he too had stayed silent for a long time afterwards, thinking about how to answer.

"You are lucky in many respects but that your family has managed to remain more or less neutral throughout the entire galactic civil war conflict is a great advantage

to both you and me." He had finally said thoughtfully. "Our relationship was tricky enough under Palpatine's ever so watchful eye without familial complications adding to it. Had your family been in any way connected to the Rebellion at the time I have no doubt that things in your life would have been quite different."

That had made me smile a little. "Well according to Palpatine my father was and probably still is a smuggler, Bel is a hopelessly romantic Rodian accountant, Bedi is a crazy pilot, my uncle is some sort of mad assassin spy and sarlace knows what I am anymore. I don't think there was any room for rebels in the family because honestly we have enough issues as it is. I don't think the word dysfunctional even fits and if you count the Dantassi side of things then life begins to get really interesting."

Thrawn had nodded. "You are lucky."

"Zte'sa Vahlek calls me spoiled."

That had made Thrawn chuckle. "Well you are that as well but I try not to let it worry me too much. If you get out of hand I can always ship you back off to stay with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii."

I had pinched him painfully. "No, you cannot. You promised me you'd never do that again."

His chuckle had been soft. "Why so I did, foolish me." Then he had replied after a moment's quiet, "You told me once that you make your own family, Tekari, and that is what Syal has done. Soontir and the two boys are her family now; she understands that in order to live in his world she had to leave hers behind. That happens sometimes and usually it is the woman who must make that choice although not always."

"I can't imagine doing that. I can't imagine life without my home, my family on Tatooine."

"And you do not have to, but you still made a choice when you came out here to be with me and this life cannot be easy for either you or Syal, so far away from civilization."

That had made me laugh. "You're calling Tatooine civilized? That's funny."

He had made a face. "In spite of all the complaining you did, you enjoyed your time on Coruscant far more than you ever let on. Like a mynock to a power cable you were drawn to glitter and the glamour even though it drove you mad. Now you are here all the way out at the edge of the galaxy on a planet with nothing. I often wonder what holds you here."

I had rolled over on to my side to look at him then. "That's not true," I said calling him on what I knew. "You know exactly what holds me here and a tiny part of you relishes this, you just don't understand why I am so happy."

He had reached over and stroked my face. "I keep forgetting you are impossible to lie to and yes you are right. I suppose I don't understand why you seem to love it here so much."

"Well for one, no one is trying to kill me and two it reminds me of home."

He had just raised an eyebrow and waited for me to explain.

"It's quiet and isolated and I seem to spend a great deal of time working in a mechanic's pit." I had told him. "I have a place here, you're here...well..." I amended, "some of the time, and I have friends here. I don't need bright lights and a big city, nor do I need glittering parties and lots of money. It was sort of fun to play dress up and be a



part of court life but that life came with a price, it always comes with a price. I am perfectly happy doing what I am doing now, being where I am." That had earned me one of his rare smiles, he had wrapped his arms possessively around me and sleep had come swiftly without dreams or nightmares in its wake.

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Time passed easily for me on Nirauan. Compared to the constant stress of even being near Lord Vader and under the ever present threat of being swallowed whole by the Emperor, my days at the base seemed almost blissful. The only disturbances in my otherwise almost dull routine were the Fel boys, Davin and Chak. I grinned to myself as soon as I heard the pounding of small feet on the stone floor. The Fel boys had found me.

"Aunty Merry, Aunty Merry!" Dav's small voice echoed loudly through the corridor as he ran as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"You always say her name wrong it's Aunty Merly!" Chak, who had stopped to let his little brother catch up, chided.

Dav had trouble with saying the letter r and he had mangled my name and pretty much any other words that had an r in them making that letter sound more like a w than anything else. This amused Thrawn greatly who thought that Mewwy was a fairly accurate nickname for me. I had retorted that his being dubbed Gwand Admiwal Thwawn was equally amusing and no more had been said about it.

I stopped and let them catch up with me. Dav flung his arms around my legs effectively rooting me to the spot whereas Chak, who considered himself almost a grown up carried himself with a lot more dignity, copying his father's style of standing in military at ease. I hooked Dav under the arms and swung him up to my hip and carried him as I continued my way down the corridor. He was still small enough to be able to do this and still young enough that he didn't mind being held or cuddled. Chak on the other had took great affront at any female sort of affection but he didn't mind if I ruffled his hair because that's what his father sometimes did as well.

"And what are you two up to this afternoon?" I asked Chak who was now walking at my side, still trotting to keep up with me even though I had slowed my pace down by half.

"Well, we were playing hide and hunt." Chak said.

"And why did you stop?"

"Well we were told to go play somewhere else," He replied a little sheepishly.

"Where were you playing?" I asked hefting Dav from one hip over to the other, he was heavy.

Chak shrugged slightly, "In the hanger bay but we got into trouble with Commander Rossler."

"Ahh, well, the hanger bay isn't exactly the safest place to play hide and hunt, you know." I told him.

He made a face and nodded. "I know that but it's the *best* place to play."

I grinned. "I won't argue with that, I love the docking bay, though I've never played hide and hunt in one."

"But you can fix ships can't you?" Chak asked. "My daddy says you're a damned good mechanic for a sand-rat!" His imitation of his father would have been almost perfect save for the boyish tone of his young voice.

"Did he now?" I smiled at the nick name, "That's high praise from Commander Fel. So what are you doing here if you were playing?"

"We came to find you, will you play with us?" Dav asked. "It's boring with just us two!"

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Hutts and smugglers?" Chak suggested.

I laughed. Hutts and smugglers was an odd variation of hunt and hide where the smuggler hid an object some place and the Hutts had to find it, who ever found it first became the next smuggler. "Sure, but first I have to talk with The Grand Admiral." I told them both. "He asked to see me, that's where I'm going now."

Dav's face darkened. "Are you in trouble?" he whispered.

"I don't think so, why?"

"Grand Admiral Thrawn is scary," Dav whispered and buried his face in my hair. This was all show, while Thrawn intimidated the boys somewhat they both adored him because he never spoke down to them or treated them as though they were in the way.

"He just thinks that any time a grownup says they want to see you it means you're in trouble." Chak explained.

"Well as far as I know I am not in trouble though I might be if I don't hurry."

"Are you going to come to dinner with us tonight?" Dav asked.

"I hadn't planned on it, why?"

"Because I heard mommy telling daddy that you and the Admiral and a guest were coming to eat with us and that we had to behave and that we would have to go to bed early." Chak explained without stopping to take a breath.

I gave him a raised eyebrow look. "Oh? I have not heard anything about that."

"Will you come? If you come we might get to stay up a bit longer, mommy says when you come to visit the house is finally quiet." Chak asked, looking at me with big hopeful eyes. He mostly resembled his father and I could see that Fel earnestness in him.

I just smiled and shook my head. "I see, so you only want me there so you can stay up past your bedtimes?"

Dav nodded, his blond curls bobbing about his cute little face, "yes!"

"No!" Chak countered at exactly the same time. "I want you to teach me how to read Cheunh and tell me stories about the Dantassi again."

That made me smile. I had been telling the Fel boys about the Dantassi ever since they had seen my mask one day in my office and wanted to know what it was. Now the Dantassi were a great source of fascination for the two boys and they loved to hear stories about them. I enjoyed telling them stories and I found it almost strange how much I enjoyed my time with the two little boys. Thrawn had also been right in his summation that my spending time with them gave Syal a break, the two kids ran her ragged and now that she was pregnant with their third she was finding it hard to deal with their never ending, boundless energy.

"So you aren't bored of hearing about the Bone Traders yet?" I asked.

Both boys shook their heads and I had to stifle the urge to laugh because their expressions were priceless.

"Will you teach me how to be Jhal'kai like the great Navaari?" Chak asked.

I raised my eyebrows then stopped walking because we had come to the entrance to Thrawn's office and looked at him.

"Well you know that takes years of practice and you have to be very patient, very quiet and stay very still for long periods of time."

"I can do that! I can be still!" He said, "Watch, look see, I am being still!" and indeed he was standing stick still as well as holding his breath.

I was trying to set Dav who was struggling to stay in my arms, down while at the same time pointing out to Chak that breathing was an essential part of being Jhal'kai. Thrawn opened the door to see what the ruckus outside his office was. Dav stopped struggling and clung to me nervously, giving Thrawn a wary look. Chak, still holding his breath, side stepped to move slightly behind me.

Thrawn opened his mouth then closed it again, giving me that arched eyebrow look which said, *care to explain this?* The little smirk at the corner of his lips did not escape my notice.

"Voss said you wanted to see me?" I asked simply, still trying to untangle myself from Dav. It was a little like trying to hold water.

"Yes, I did but you seem to be a little busy at the moment," He replied glancing down at Chak whose face was starting to turn red.

"He's decided to be still like a Jhal'kai." I explained.

"And Davin?" Thrawn asked.

"I'm protecting Auntie Merry!" Dav spurted out.

"Against what?"

"You!" Dav said proudly.

Thrawn glanced at me, I just shrugged, "You sent for me, they think you are mad at me and I am in trouble."

The twitch of his lips increased into a smile, "Ah I see. Well, Davin Fel in this instance you would be incorrect in your assessment of the situation."

"Huh?"

I grinned and translated, "He means he's not mad at me and I am not in trouble so you don't need to defend me."

"So, if you could perhaps free Miss Gabriel from your protective clutches I have need of her for a short while," Thrawn told Dav.

There was a moment of silence while the boy considered it and then he let go of his death grip on me and allowed me to place him back on the floor beside his brother whose face was now a very bright shade of red.

"Jhal'kai do not hold their breaths when they hunt, Chak Fel, so you may wish to reconsider your current action before you give your mother even more cause to worry about you than she already does."

Chak suddenly exhaled loudly then gasped for air behind me and Thrawn had to turn away so as the two boys would not see him try to stifle a laugh.

"Will you play with us when you are done?" Dav asked, holding onto my hand with his.

I glanced at Thrawn because I actually had no idea what he really wanted to see me about or how long it would take. He was about to say something when Syal suddenly appeared down the corridor.

"There you two are!" She said sounding more worried than angry.

"But Mommy we told you we were going to look for Aunty Merly." Chak protested. "We were going to play Hutts and Smugglers!"

"I am quite sure that Merlyn has more important things to do than play with you two and besides you both have chores to do before your father comes home from work."

The boys' expressions were priceless, looking as though they had been condemned to a fate worse than death.

"Awww mom!" Chak protested but it was falling on deaf ears.

"Now, young man!" Syal said sternly, offering her hand to her youngest son who let go of mine happily.

"I'm sorry Grand Admiral, I try to keep an eye on them but they will slip away."

"Indeed," Thrawn said failing to hide his amusement.

"I also wanted to ask if you and Merlyn would care to join us for dinner this evening? Fel suggested it might make a nice break from the usual routine, especially with the visiting Admiral."

"We shall be there." Thrawn said, in an unusual move speaking for both of us.

"Very well, at eight o'clock." She answered looking at me with a smile. Then, with a sigh and two little boys in tow, she headed back to her quarters.

I followed Thrawn into his office and sat when he waved his hand at the chair in front of his desk. "Those two keep you well in hand, I see," he said with a slight smile before I could speak.

"They're little boys. They produce enough energy between them to power this entire complex twice over. It's a pity we can't harness it somehow." I replied. "What did you want to see me about?"

There was a lengthy pause and I immediately knew something was up. "This was in the courier package that arrived in the supply drop this morning," he said holding up a data card.

"What is that?" I asked, not taking it from his fingers.

"I do not know. The message is encrypted in a way I have not seen before but it has your name on it."

"Who sent it?" Now I was puzzled.

"No one knows. It seems it mysteriously made its way in with the rest of the dispatches and no one I asked has any recollection of it being handed to them."

I glanced at the little data card still in his fingers. "You're concerned."

"Someone managed to bypass all security and slip this in with intel dispatches. Yes, that concerns me," he said, "The number of people, not a part of this base, who actually know you are here and exactly where here is, is limited. The courier drops are kept highly confidential but someone managed to intercept them and add this data card along the way."

"How is that possible?"

A momentary flash of disdain passed across Thrawn's face. "Anything is possible if one tries hard enough," he said with a touch of annoyance.

I took the data card from his hands. He watched me carefully for any change in expression but I had learned to mask my reactions to the memories some objects gave me a long time ago. I turned the small card over in my fingers.

"I don't want you to use it in the central system; it may carry a slicer code," he said pushing a hand-held reader across the desk to me.

I slipped the card into the reader slot and watched the screen. The message was encoded but I recognised it immediately.

"I think this might be from Uncle Vahlek," I said carefully. "But it will take me some time to decipher it. He's used an encryption that he taught me as child and it's one that uses a system of layers."

Thrawn stared at me and the silence in the room was heavy. "I want to know what that says, Tekari. No secrets. If the Tze'yusha'Jin is sending you encoded messages without revealing himself then I want to know why. He has direct methods of getting in touch with you." This was Thrawn's round-about way of saying he felt something was very wrong with this whole thing and he didn't like it. Neither did I.

"When I get it decoded I will let you know." I told him.

He sat back in his chair and nodded, his eyes never leaving my face. He knew me well enough to sense when I was hiding something but he also knew when to step back and give me some room. "You'd best go find something decent to wear this evening. We have a dinner engagement to keep. The Baron is actually trying to make the new Admiral feel more at home," he said then added as an afterthought, "Best not to mention this at dinner until we know more."

"New Admiral?"

"Ged Larsen is here for a short reconnaissance trip. We have been discussing how best to consolidate our forces as he also has ships at his disposal but does not wish to leave his current base undefended."

I nodded. "I remember him; you introduced us at your induction into the canted circle."

"He arrived on base late last night and Fel thought a small dinner which included the company of females would not hurt in courting the Admiral's cooperation."

"He's balking at helping you?"

Thrawn smiled. "Not at all but Larsen plays his sabacc cards very close to his chest and that makes Fel uneasy, since the two will be working closely together I am not adverse to this small get together."

"Oh, well this really will be interesting as I recall the Admiral was quite a charmer," I said with a slight smile which never quite made it to my eyes. I was tired, this message had made me tired and I didn't want to deal with it but I was going to have to. I got up out of the seat, cupping the data disk in my hand.

Thrawn studied my face carefully then, after a few seconds had passed he asked, "Is there something about that disk you have not told me, Tekari?"

The corner of my mouth twitched as I shook my head. Then, staring him straight in the eyes, I lied. "No. You know as much as I do right now." And with that I walked out of his office, the sensation of spiders crawling down my back worse than ever.

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The small dinner party that Syal had arranged went well. Admiral Ged Larsen, just as I had remembered, was a real charmer and the conversation had flowed with an ease that had surprised even me.

The meal had been traditional Corellian food and how Syal, pregnant with her two boys underfoot, had managed to pull it off I would never know but it had been amazing. We sat eating the lovely meal, drinking a very fine wine that Soontir had magically produced, while discussing topics that normally Thrawn would have disdained from holding while dining. Only when the conversation turned to Ysanne Isard and what she had managed to do with the Empire did the tone of the evening turn serious in spite of Thrawn's subtle attempts to guide it in a less negative tone.

"She was always ruthless. She arranged for her father to be executed so that she could take his place," I said as I answered Syal's question about Isard. "But after the Emperor's death she turned mean and things got worse which is why Coruscant fell."

"I don't understand why, though." Syal said, "She had the backing of the Imperial troops and the navy so she could have held Coruscant easily."

"It was her obsession with your brother that did her in." Ged told Syal as he studied his wine glass carefully.

Syal smiled but there was a touch of bittersweet in it. "Wedge always did have a knack of getting under people's skin."

"Wedge Antilles is a man who, in spite of his alliances, should be admired for the very fact that after all these years fighting a war that was deemed by many to be unwinnable is still alive. Your brother is an admiral man, Syal," Thrawn said carefully.

Syal nodded her head gracefully, accepting the compliment that was given and Tir placed his hand gently over hers, a small gesture of comfort. "I still don't understand why she did what she did." She murmured.

Ged sat back in his chair, "She lost sight of the original goal of the Emperor, to bring peace and order to the galaxy and took on the mantle of Goddess, ruling the galaxy with her judgement. Goodness knows how many had to die needlessly because she poisoned Coruscant with that virus simply so that it would be rotten fruit for the New Republic to have to deal with."

My expression had darkened and Thrawn had not missed it. "That virus was an abomination. Thankfully Derricote's design was flawed due to her impatience." I growled.

Ged cocked his head to one side, studying me the way Thrawn sometimes studied his art. "I heard you lost a good friend because of it."

I opened my mouth to spit vitriol but Thrawn, who knew me far too well, held up his hand. "We do not need to hear the details at the table, my dear." He chided ever so slightly, reminding me this was supposed to be a friendly evening not a battle ground to bring up old wounds and reopen them.

I bit back the words that burned in my mouth and took a less than polite sip of my wine. Ged watched the exchange between Thrawn and me carefully, still trying to decipher the relationship between the Grand Admiral and myself then he gave me a small nod. "Forgive me, Miss Gabriel, I had not realised how painful mentioning this topic would be for you. I am sorry for your loss."

I accepted his apology gracefully. "We've all lost people we love, Admiral. While the methods of warfare might change, the outcome never does." I paused. "This disease she had created was terrible beyond all imagination. No one deserved to die that way, no matter what they had done and most of the beings that died were innocent civilians. That was not the act of a leader that was an act of a coward. No wonder the galaxy shudders at the word Imperial." I locked eyes with Thrawn for a moment then glanced away.

There was a murmur of agreement from everyone at the table and silence descended between us until Ged said, "Well, let us hope that this new campaign we are planning will change some of that."

I toyed with my napkin for a moment. "Do you think," I asked, "do you really think that people who are now enjoying life under the benevolent rule of the new Republic, with its senate and democracy, will welcome Imperial rule again?"

It was Thrawn who answered me. "I think that people crave law and order. If the system of government is fair and able to maintain the infrastructure as well as provide security and strong leadership it is my belief that the majority of the people in this galaxy will not care one way or the other who is actually in charge. If we can avoid the rampant xenophobia of the Emperor and curtail the propensity for corruption then, yes, I think that people would welcome Imperial rule."

Ged nodded his agreement. "Part of the issue has been the tendency toward megalomania, if that can be avoided then I don't see why re-establishing an empirical style rule would fail."

"And who would get to be Emperor?" Syal asked.

"If an emperor as leader would be the chosen way to go then that remains unknown," Thrawn said archly. "But clearly it would have to be a person of great character, able to get past the power of the position and do the job."

"An emperor without an ego." I snorted. "That would be a first."

"Perhaps some sort of democratic process that allows the people to have a say in the leadership?" Soontir suggested.

"As I recall it is was democracy that actually gave us Emperor Palpatine in the first place." Ged reminded. "The people applauded his move to take over and form an Empire, if the holo-archives of that event are to be believed."

"My uncle was there. He said it was a momentous occasion, people celebrated. He said that the Palpatine's move to eliminate the Jedi was one that was widely approved by most of the galaxy. Most people felt the Jedi were over powered and far too arrogant. They were happy to have someone step in to end the Clone Wars and bring back peace to the galaxy, and for all the complaining about how he did this it is exactly what Palpatine accomplished until the rebellion began a civil war," I said.

"So what changed?" Syal asked.

"The Empire did." Soontir replied. "Somewhere along the line it ceased to be about protecting the galaxy and it became about self aggrandisement and power mongering."

I glanced at Soontir. "It was always about power, but most people never knew it," I said quietly, "The cruelty, the greed and the in-fighting came later."

There was a moment's silence at the table while everyone considered my statement.

"You don't have much love for our late Emperor, do you?" Ged asked carefully.

"I have my reasons," I said softly before Thrawn could interject hoping to avoid a tired from me about Palpatine.

"Perhaps one day you would tell them to me. My own experiences with his Excellency have left me with fond memories." Ged countered.

"Then I doubt you would wish to hear what I have to say, Admiral," I said coolly. For a moment Ged and I locked eyes and stared at each other, there was a strange flash of sensation between us and I looked away. Thrawn watched the exchange carefully, deciding whether or not to intervene but before he could say anything Tir spoke.

"What about Lord Vader? He was every bit as cruel and you did not seem to mind working for him." He asked, more curious than accusing.

My eyes flicked to Thrawn to see if he would divert me from answering this question as well but he merely inclined his head ever so slightly. "Lord Vader was made cruel and, by definition, evil, but Palpatine was born that way. He manipulated people to his benefit whereas Lord Vader just vented his anger." I shrugged, "If you knew how to circumnavigate his temper, you stayed alive, the Emperor on the other hand would kill you without blinking for no reason other than he felt like it."

"So you justify Vader's behaviour then?" Ged asked.

I shook my head. "Far from it, he chose every time he did something cruel and he knew it was wrong but his anger won over every time. In the end, he was still made that way, twisted by Palpatine who used Lord Vader's love for his wife and his fear of losing her to his own advantage. Palpatine encouraged Vader's cruelty because every step made in that direction condemned his soul to the dark side further."

"Yet it was Vader, so I have heard who killed the Emperor in the end." Soontir added.

I nodded. "So I have been told and given what Palpatine did to Anakin to turn him into Vader that would make sense. I don't know too many parents who would choose the master they loathed above the child born from the woman they loved. In the end Padmé's love for Anakin won not Palpatine's manipulations of Vader."

Ged gave me a smile. "Why Miss Gabriel, you're quite the romantic."

I shrugged nonchalantly to hide the sudden and unexpected blush that burned my cheeks. "It has been my experience, Admiral, that romance and the Empire don't tend to mix all that well." This earned me a sharply arched eyebrow from Thrawn and a smothered giggle from Syal.

"Ah well," Ged said leaning back in his chair, "I am not sure that romance and anything mixes all that well but life would be awfully dull without it, would you not agree?"

Again our eyes locked for a brief moment. I knew in that second that he was baiting me and that he had not been told of my relationship with Thrawn but he suspected. "Yes Admiral, on that point I can agree, life without romance would be very dull indeed."

And seeing an opportunity to divert the conversation in a less allow- Merlyn- to-vent- about- Palpatine- direction Thrawn lifted his glass and toasted to romance,



breaking the combative mood which had managed to settle over the table but I had not missed the look that Ged had given me nor his smile which was predatory and neither had Thrawn.

The conversation turned to different, inconsequential things allowing Syal to suggest we move to the more comfortable surroundings of the living area. Our chatter steered away from the sombre topics of Isard and the Empire and laughter eased its way back into the evening as Syal, prompted by Ged, told some stories of her time as an actress. The two Fel boys had behaved and stayed in bed but sometime shortly after we had all retired to the living area for brandy and cake, Chak poked his nose out and it had not gone unnoticed. When Soontir caught him for a moment I thought the boy would dive back into his room but instead he waited until his father motioned for him to come and join us.

"You should be asleep, young man." His father admonished.

"I was waiting for Aunt Merly to tell us a story about the great Dantassi. She promised," he said with a sly glance at me because this wasn't exactly true, I had not actually promised anything but I held my peace.

Soontir smiled and explained to Ged that somehow I had become the champion teller of Dantassi stories.

"I thought the Bone Traders were a myth." Ged replied, looking at Chak.

"Oh no Aunt Merly's seen them!" Chak protested, "She even lived with them for a while."

Ged looked at me. "Oh really? You become more and more of an intriguing mystery with each passing moment, Miss Gabriel."

I arched an eyebrow and sipped my drink. "It's a long story, Admiral, perhaps if there is time some day you will hear it."

"I certainly hope so." He flashed his charming smile at me. "So they are not the wild savages the rumours make them out to be?" He pressed.

I got up, smoothing my dress as I did so, "No indeed, sometimes they make us look like the savages."

"Merlyn you really don't have to, the boys are spoiled enough as it is." Soontir began, giving his son a look which said he wasn't impressed but Syal placed her hand gently over her husband's and gave him a look which said *let them be children for a little while longer before you start turning them into soldiers to fight your wars.*

Tir relented and I vanished, grateful for the excuse to escape, from the circle of grownups to the bedroom Chak and Dav shared, settled in my familiar spot on the floor beside the bunk beds and wove them a tale about a young Dantassi hunter who had gotten lost while tracking and found something quite remarkable along the way.

This tradition of telling Dantassi stories had started one day when the boys, bored and fractious had driven me mad with requests to play Hutts and Smugglers. I had bargained a story for peace and quiet and had told them one of the traditional Dantassi mythical tales. This had naturally led to many questions eventually ending in my telling them a little about my time with the Bone Traders. I never gave them all the details of Dantassi life and they never knew that Thrawn had anything to do with it at all but they did know that I had stayed in an enclave and that some of the stories I told them were

about real things that happened. It didn't really matter to the boys if the tales were real or not, a story was a story as long as it was told.

By the time I had finished my tale, Dav was sound asleep and Chak was that on the edge, drowsy but fighting it. I planted a little kiss on both of their foreheads but before I could leave Chak caught my hand in his.

"Are you going away on a dangerous mission?" He asked softly.

"Now what would give you that idea, Chak Fel?"

"You have that same look in your eyes that daddy gets when he goes away on a dangerous mission. You are all worried but you are trying not to show it." He murmured as sleep began to steal him away.

I stroked hair from his forehead. "Well, if I am it's only for a little while."

"Promise?" He mumbled.

"No, no promises this time." I told him but he didn't hear, he had already fallen asleep. I had stared at him for a long moment, amazed at how perceptive children could be then with a sigh, I rejoined the conversation with the adults in the living area.

Shortly after one in the morning we had called it a night. Thrawn and Ged retired to Thrawn's private office to continue a conversation which had started shortly before we had left the Fel quarters, having to do with ship numbers and strategic placements. I thought they would be at that for hours so instead of heading to bed, I went to my own office and set about decoding the data chip Thrawn had handed me earlier.

Once I unravelled the message I sat staring at the data pad, its blue light was the only illumination in the dark room. I was no longer even seeing the words on the screen, let alone reading them. The encryption had been easy for me to break as it was based on an old code that my uncle had taught me as a child's game. Like every riddle it was fairly easy to decipher once you knew how although whoever had written this had twisted the encryption slightly making me work at it, making me sorry once I had unravelled it.

A cool breeze shifted through the room from the open window and the sounds of the night animals broke into my silence reminding me that I was still on Nirauan and still safe. I could smell the odd, tangy scent of the trees which were currently blooming and for reasons I could never explain, it reminded me sharply of Tatooine. Homesickness washed through me so violently that I had to blink back the tears which had sprung to my eyes unwanted. A knock at the door made me jump.

Thrawn, who always knocked instead of using the chime, entered before I could answer. He did not turn on the light because he could see well enough in the dark. I glanced up and met his glowing red stare; we held each other's gaze for a second then he moved to the window, standing with his back to me, arms clasped behind him, to stare out into the night. In that second I thought he knew I had not told him the truth and he had come to find out why not. I should have guessed that after all this time there was not much I could hide from him. Unravelling the lies and the tangles other people made was something he excelled at, why should I be exempt from this? But he surprised me.

"Tekari, what could possibly be so important that it keeps you from joining me in bed this late?"

"Lesson plan for tomorrow," I said as I shut the data pad off and the room was plunged into darkness. "I thought you and Admiral Larsen would be up all night plotting

your overthrow of the New Republic," I said getting up from my chair to perch on the desk edge closest to him.

I sensed his smile. "He's quite brilliant, you know," he said, "But he's human and the journey here was taxing. He was quite exhausted, although I think that had more to do with Syal's lovely meal, Soontir's fine wines and your ability to charm the twinkle off a star."

"I am quite sure my charm had nothing to do with it." I shrugged. "Though I did get the impression he enjoyed baiting me."

"Yes, that did not go unnoticed. You intrigue him."

I shrugged and made a face, "Perhaps I should tell him what I did to Zaarin. I intrigued him too."

Thrawn chuckled, "I do not think that Ged Larsen would try to force himself on you and I would ask you not to damage him, I am in need of his assistance."

"Well seeing as how you asked so nicely," I quipped. "How long is he staying on Nirauan?"

"We will leave tomorrow morning."

"We?" Both my eyebrows went up.

"He has invited me to view his base of operations in the Ryloth System and after some consideration I have accepted the invitation. I feel it would be advantageous to see how he runs things."

"How long will you be away?"

"A few days, perhaps a week," Thrawn shrugged. "This is more about being seen, about rallying the troops, as it were. He has ships and men; I am in need of both."

"And having him on board would not be detrimental either, would it?"

"Larsen is quite brilliant in his own way." Thrawn agreed, "Having him help in this campaign would be very beneficial."

"I heard that he was clever." I nodded. "The Emperor favoured him greatly."

"Tell me," Thrawn asked thoughtfully after a moment, "is he like you?"

"Like me?" I frowned.

"Does he have this same force power you have?"

"That was the rumour but if he's a force user he keeps it well hidden," I said, "What I did get from tonight's show was that he admires you greatly."

"Yes and that will be advantageous."

"So does Tir," I said, "I told you if you led, people would follow. We would not need an emperor when we have you. You draw people's devotion with such ease and you don't even seem to know it."

Thrawn smiled as he turned to look at me. "As do you with Fel's children. Which story did you tell them tonight?" He side-stepped the topic more neatly than he dressed but I didn't mind so terribly much. There had been enough politic talk for the evening as it was.

"Ekash'kah's tale, you remember the one about the lost hunter finding the wind's voice."

"Ah yes, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii used to tell his daughter that one often, I believe it was one of her favourites."

"It's a lovely story, full of hope and magic," I said, remember how I had felt upon hearing it for the very first time.

I stifled a yawn and got up from my desk. Relieved that he did not ask anything about the strange data card he had given me earlier. I went to him gratefully and wrapped my arms around his waist. He returned the embrace, stroking my hair and kissing the top of my head. "It's late. Shall we finish this conversation in bed, my dear?"

"Sounds like a good idea." I grinned and followed him out into the empty corridor to the quarters we shared. "And I can't wait to get out of these shoes, they are killing my feet."

"So, remove them. As I recall you used to wander around the *Executor* barefoot more often than not." He answered and then waited for me to slip the delicate, high heeled shoes off. "By the way, Larsen mentioned he was looking for some office personnel and asked if you might be interested in working for him as his personal assistant. He said you came highly recommended."

"Now why would I be interested in doing that?" I asked carefully, "Or is this your way of trying to get rid of me?"

He let me enter through the door to the quarters we shared first and waited until it had closed to continue. "After that fine display of charm this evening I was not certain if it was perhaps you that had decided to switch allegiances." He purred.

"Jealous?" I asked turning around so that he could undo the fasteners on the back of the dress I wore.

He brushed the slender straps of my dress off my shoulders as though he were brushing dust of a priceless sculpture and the silk I had been wearing slithered to the floor. "No, merely curious," he said as his fingertips grazed up and down the bare skin of my back. I let him finish the undressing job and sighed under his touch.

I turned around to face him, helping him with the removal of his own clothes, "Curious?"

"If you wished to work for him? It could be an interesting job, he is an interesting man." The casual tone of his voice belied a sliver of concern. He had noticed the Admiral's interest in me over dinner and he was letting me know this in his usual subtle manner.

"Not really, I have had my fill of being someone's personal assistant." I shrugged, "I am quite content where I am actually." Even as I spoke those words I tasted the bitterness of them. Every time I found a measure of happiness something came along to change it. He caught the edge in my tone of voice and looked at me sharply. "It was simply a question and I doubt his offer was in earnest. Is something else wrong?" he asked.

I paused for a second then said "Yes."

His eyebrow arched.

"You are talking to me about a job I do not want offered by a man I do not know while I'm standing here naked. I'm cold." The lie was told well enough and he accepted it.

"Well this is easily enough changed, my dear," he said, scooping me up. "Is there anything else I can oblige you with?" he asked as he lay me down on the bed and then lay over me.

"Yes," I reached up to pull him to me, "remind me why staying with you is a good choice."

"As you wish, my dear."

I was grateful that our passion countered my sorrow and hoped he would not notice the one hidden beneath the other. I let him sweep me up in his world, this world only the two of us knew about and I tried to forget about everything else. In the morning he would be gone and then shortly afterwards, I thought ruefully, so would I.

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I ran through my pre flight check and tried to ignore the tiny flutter of sand jiggers that danced in the pit of my belly. I had done this many times before and today was not going to be any different except this time I wasn't coming back when I was supposed to, but it would take them a while to figure that out and by then it would be too late to track me.

"*Ahnkeli Su'udelma*, you are cleared for go." The voice of the young man on duty said.

"Roger that Flight." I smiled as I answered. Taking my ship out for a burn had become a common enough thing that no one raised any eyebrows about it anymore. I liked to keep my ship in perfect running order and everyone knew that but the first time I had requested flight clearance there had been a discussion over it. In fact there had been a rather loud argument on the flight deck about it until finally Thrawn, who had been on the base at the time had been called in to intervene. The silence in the hanger had been almost eerie as he had stood between the deck officer, whose very stance said he was not budging an inch and me, who had been about to bring some violence into the fight.

While being Thrawn's bond mate and bed partner had some advantages he was not about to show me any favouritism when it came to the rules and the safety of the base and I had to not only ask nicely to get what I wanted but explain why I wanted it in a clear and concise manner.

"The ship's engines need to be run and that won't happen in the hanger. I need to keep her calibrated and for that I need to be in space, and sometimes I need to open a hyperspace window and jump in a lane. It takes time but in the end it will save time." I had said trying to keep my temper in check.

"I can have one of my more qualified pilots do that for you Miss Gabriel." The deck officer had said.

The air must have sparked because before I could hurl any insult or answer back Thrawn had held up his white gloved hand. "Mister Rhastlen, I assure you that Miss Gabriel is a very qualified pilot. Both the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* and the *Sigiri* are her ships and she may take them out whenever she sees fit...", he had glanced sharply at me stopping my smirk of victory, "However there are some rules and restrictions." He had continued, his words directed at me, "You will be allowed to leave the base when we are on stand down with no alerts, you will produce a flight plan prior to leaving the base, and you will give a time of return, if you do not comply you will be grounded. If you fail to return by the time stated and have not radioed in a good reason for this failure to

return and I have to send someone out to find you, the consequences will not be pleasant, do I make myself clear?"

I had felt as though I was in my teens again asking my father for the codes to the family shuttle but I had backed down and nodded because in the end Thrawn's demands were reasonable. The deck officer, Jonas Rhashtlen had been a new addition to Nirauan and he wasn't finding it easy to settle in. He did not like the Chiss all that much and he especially disliked having females around. Women, according to him, belonged in the home with the kids not up in space. I could see in his face that he did not agree with Thrawn at all but he would not argue with the Grand Admiral in front of everyone in the hanger bay. He had done that later, in private and it had been the reason he was transferred to one of Thrawn's ISDs. Even though I had asked, Thrawn would never tell me what Rhashtlen had said to him, but I knew it had not been good because whenever the man's name had been mentioned Thrawn's mouth tightened just a little. However, since that particular day there had not been any further incidents about me not being allowed to leave the base and I had followed Thrawn's conditions to the letter. The replacement deck officer knew his stuff and had no issues with woman at the helm, especially since his wife was an exceptional TIE pilot.

I throttled the engines up as the hanger bay doors opened and styled my ship upwards towards the blue of the sky, which was crystal clear.

"*Ahnkeli Su'udelma* what is your ETR?"

I smiled at the voice coming over the comm. Just because they were used to me coming and going did not mean they stopped following the rules. "I thought I would head out over to Iridonia. I want to test the hyperdrive upgrade. I submitted my flight plan this morning and it was approved. My estimated time of return will be this time tomorrow, approximately, over."

"Roger that *Ahnkeli Su'udelma*, watch your tail and keep in touch."

"Copy that Flight, *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* out." I let the sensation of riding through waves on an ocean wash through me as the ship kicked its way free of the planet's gravity, the silence that followed the noise let me know when we were in space and flew in the direction of Iridonia. Flight would track me until I opened a hyperspace window and jumped, just as they did all departing ships. I had picked the Zabraki home world as my destination for registering a flight plan because it was on my way.

I set the coordinates into the nav computer and let it sort out the details while I looked at the route map. I was going to cut clear across the known galaxy which meant some rather inventive route planning to avoid some of the more heavily populated areas and New Republic held territory which would require papers and travel documents to be shown. Even though I had valid documents which stated I was a cargo pilot out of Mos Eisley, I didn't want to run the risk anyway. As had been pointed out to me many times, I knew enough about Thrawn's operations to be a real problem should the New Republic or worse, one of the War lords currently vying for galactic domination catch me and figure this out. Luckily, where I was headed, Nar Shadda, did not require such things, it was owned by the Hutts and I knew my way around it well enough.

I would have to plan a series of hyperspace jumps because I was not using a standard trade route and that meant avoiding gravity wells formed by some of the major planetary system in my way but by skirting the edge of the Mid Rim territories I could

do it in four days, if all went well. I certainly had enough fuel and supplies for that amount of time with enough to cover a few days more. It was funny what one could sneak aboard one's ship without anyone actually noticing.

Once the hyperdrive engaged I unstrapped and went back aft to the galley to make some tea. The first jump would take me near Agamar, from there I would turn towards the Roche Asteroid belt which lay on the Perlemian Trade Route but because I was crossing it and not travelling along it I wasn't worried about patrols. From the Roche Asteroid belt to Nar Shadda would be a straight jump, hopefully without any complications. If all went well I would be on The Vertical City with enough time to scout out the area.

It had been a long time since I had visited Nar Shadda, a planet that was often dubbed Little Coruscant because of its vast infrastructure and city sprawl which covered most of the surface. It glittered just as Coruscant did from a distance but travellers who knew better never let that deceptive twinkle fool them. Nar Shadda was probably one of the worst places to be in the entire galaxy and that was saying something. The entire planet made Coruscant's under belly look tame by comparison. It was a great place to hide and an even better place to set up an ambush.

I sighed as I sat at the small galley table, one hand curled around the hot cup of tea the other hand holding the data reader. I had known instantly who it had come from the moment Thrawn had handed it to me. The memory it had given up had been violent and full of fury. Unravelling the encryption had simply given me more information.

*"Come or they die, Mouse."* The message had said. The single line, which spoke volumes, had been hidden under layers of an encryption which Uncle Vahlek had taught me as child to amuse me. As well as the threat, there had also been set of coordinates, a meeting place and a date. That was it and it was enough. Jyrki had not needed to sign his note because he was the only person who had ever called me Mouse. I sat and stared at the words bewildered by their significance. He had broken that last taboo between us and gone after my family, what I didn't understand was why?

Thrawn had once called Jyrki mad and while at the time I had not wholly believed him, I did now. My uncle's theory was that Jyrki loved me to the point of obsession and I wasn't sure what to make of that. I didn't have a theory, I just had questions.

It had been over a year since my path and Jyrki's had crossed on Coruscant at the medical facility where Cati had died. He could have killed me then, the opportunity had been there but instead he had chosen to leave quietly, although not without a warning but that had been directed at Uncle Vahlek, not me.

I stared at the small screen on the data card reader without really seeing it any more. Something had made Jyrki cross that line because he had wanted to draw me out, wanted to see me again or wanted something from me. By going after my family he was making certain that I not only come to the rendezvous point but that I come alone.

I closed my eyes, bringing up the memory I had gotten off the data card. Jyrki backhanding my father across his face while yelling "Where is she?" The closed fist which has struck my father violently had held the data card at the time; it had been a deliberate move on Jyrki's part and my stomach churned at the thought of it. No matter

how hard I tried to make it do so, the data card would not give up any more of its secrets or divulge any more information leaving me angry and frustrated.

He had given me two weeks to meet him at a cantina on Nar Shadda called *The Burning Deck*, in the Corellian sector. It was a favoured hang for bounty hunters and other members of the underworld. Jyrki liked it because it was dimly lit, easy to get an over-view of and most people rarely wanted to start any trouble in it because trouble makers were dealt with swiftly and usually permanently. He had chosen it because it a place we both knew.

When I had been learning the pilot and mechanic trade, Jyrki had once taken me to Nar Shadda on a run. It had been a huge thing for me and my father had not been easy to convince, I wasn't much more than fifteen at the time but Jyrki had reassured papa nothing would go wrong. It was a routine drag and drop run, delivering a small shipment of parts for one of the suppliers my father sometimes worked with. The deciding factor in the reasons for letting me go was me learning to fly different ships to different places with different pilots. Jyrki didn't pilot runs often, he was the head mech not the Bay's pilot but everyone else was out on a run and this was an emergency with good money being paid out. I had been delighted and the trip, to my young eyes, flying under the tutelage of the man I had fallen madly in love with was an utter wonder.

Jyrki had been a good, patient teacher who had never once spoken down to me or made me feel as though I were wasting his time. I had learned a lot on that particular run about things my father would never have taught me because they were underworld skills. I had not known then that my father had been and probably still was a smuggler and Jyrki never gave that particular tidbit of information away, instead he had gone about teaching me some rather interesting ship manoeuvres as part of the *let's do something fun because this run is dull as hell* excuse. When we reached Nar Shadda I was a lot more confident at the helm of a larger transport ship than I had been before leaving Tatooine.

Once the cargo had been delivered and payment sent, Jyrki had taken me out for a drink at *The Burning Deck* and while it had not been the first time I had ever been in a cantina it was certainly an eye opener to be in one that was not the Mos Eisley Cantina. I had never felt quite so grown up as when we sat at the bar and he ordered two ales so we could to the trip.

"Yer'll make a good pilot, Mouse." He had said, "Yer got skills and instincts that most of the pilots in here would kill for."

I had beamed under his praise and blushed so hard I thought that the whole bar could see my skin glow from the heat of it. Jyrki had pretended not to notice. He had thought I was a cute kid with some talent, to me the entire galaxy revolved around him. The moment had been made all the more sweet when one of the locals had come up to us.

"Hey, Andando robbing the cradle now are we?"

Jyrki had simply smiled. "Boss's daughter, Keiggs, learning the ropes."

The man who was scruffy around the edges but whose eyes told me he had more sense and brains than was apparent looked me up and down. "You want to be a pilot, missy?"



I had nodded, glancing cautiously from one man to the other.

"Well, I dunno, a woman in the cockpit is usually a bad combination in my books." Keiggs had said, half teasing half serious. "And you look a bit young to be tossing around in a runner."

Jyrki had shaken his head, "Yer too old fashioned, Keiggs, little Mouse here just did a Reynolds' manoeuvre without even batting an eyelash. I'd sooner have her as my co' than yer any day of the year."

"No kidding? A Reynolds?"

Jyrki had shaken his head, his long, black hair rippling like obsidian water around his pale face. "No kidding, and it was nicely done. The girl has a gift, yer'd do well to learn a thing or two from her. Last I heard yer'd smashed up the *Kayty II* trying to dodgeimps."

Keiggs had managed to look sheepish and annoyed all at the same time. "Yeah well," he shrugged, "You know how it goes sometimes. Managed to deliver the cargo tho, not like some chumps who dump and run at the first sign of trouble. Like I said, you know how it goes."

Jyrki had smirked, his pale blue eyes twinkling in the cantina's lights. "Yeah, I do which is why I'd take my Mouse here as co pilot any day."

Keiggs had grunted something about Jyrki having all the luck and then sauntered off to bother a bored looking female pilot who was sitting at the other end of the cantina bar. I had just been beside myself with joy and aside from not being able to finish the ale which I secretly thought was awful, it had been a perfect day. The run home was more of the same and even after we had landed back on Tatooine my feet had not quite touched the ground.

As I sat now in the galley of the ship I owned I wondered what either of us would have done if we could have seen what the future held in store for us. After all the terrible, terrible things Jyrki had done to me some small part of me still loved him, still felt as though I owed him something and I couldn't seem to let any of that go. For the very first time since leaving Nirauan I wished for Thrawn's guidance in this matter because in my heart I knew the outcome would not be a good one.

It made me unbelievably sad to think about how things had ended up with Jyrki. I did not understand obsession and I certainly didn't understand his. It also surprised me that he had not joined Luke Skywalker's crusade to rebuild the Jedi order. Jyrki had been trained as a child in the Jedi Temple, I was certain that Luke would have welcomed him with open arms because force users were far and few between. Then again, maybe that was exactly the reason Jyrki had not joined Luke. The night Anakin Skywalker had come through the Jedi Temple and annihilated the children was about the worst moment in time I could ever imagine and for Jyrki as a small boy during that time the nightmares must still have haunted him. I wondered if Jyrki would ever trust another Jedi ever again, especially the son of the man who had hunted him down like an animal. The visions I had seen of that time still haunted me. There were still nights when I woke from reliving that nightmare, a scream on my lips, bathed in a cold sweat calling Anakin's name, begging him to stop. Thrawn who had shared this memory with me understood and on nights such as these he would simply hold me while I wept for the

lives of small children I had never met and the soul of a man I wondered if I had ever truly known. I could understand if Jyrki was hesitant to serve with and learn under the son of Anakin Skywalker, in his shoes I would be as well.

I had searched often through the holocron diary my mother had made, looking for answers to questions I didn't even know I had. Being a Jedi was part of my heritage but it was a thing I did not understand. This strange power had not brought me much in the way of happiness and, had he lived, Palpatine would have found a way to twist my gifts to his advantage, turning me into a creature of his design or killing me in the process. This was the thing Jyrki had feared, the reason he had come charging back into my life to save me but I had not believed him. In the end he had been right but I could not forgive him for how he had tried to enforce his point of view. I still had bad nightmares from my time as his captive. He had accomplished nothing with his brutal methods of trying to get me out of the Empire's clutches except to make me hate and fear him almost as much as I had feared Palpatine.

It was a strange galaxy sometimes, I thought.

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Flying into the Corellian Sector on Nar Shadda was a little like flying into the past. It brought back many memories and I smiled as the ship broke through the outer atmosphere into the dirty air that covered the moon like a thick blanket. I knew this place well enough to know how the system worked, and unlike the galactic government, this had not changed since the last time I had been here. As I navigated my ship down through the dirty looking buildings which towered high up into the moon's atmosphere I wondered how the hell anyone in their right minds could actually live here. It was every bit as rank, dirty and depressing as I remembered, in spite of the bright flashing neon lights and myriad of gaudy advertising that half blinded any pilots skimming their way dockside.

The bored sounding flight controller at the second largest space port directed me to my assigned docking berth as though he were doing it in his sleep, which might very well have been the case. I waited while he processed my papers and hoped that Thrawn's people had been as good as he had promised they would be. Although the ship's name had stayed the same, I had docked under the name of Amyshka Pavjäska, a human trader based out of Corellia. It was a false identity we had come up with before I had gone to Coruscant, just in case I had been stopped by a New Republic control but I hadn't needed to use it. Having multiple identities for both me and my ship was not terribly legal under the Imperial system of rule but it would have looked odd for a freelance smuggler not to have some backups, even if I didn't use them it was still something I needed. Now I was grateful and Amyshka was a name I would actually answer to so using it wasn't difficult. I was pretty certain that Jyrki didn't know I had a ship of my own and if he did he most likely did not know her name. If he went looking for me in the Starport registry he wouldn't find me.

I styled the ship into the holding area and then winced as the automated docking clamps seized her roughly, hauling her into the resting cradle. It was a good job I didn't

mind some scratches and dents because I was pretty sure after this there would be some more. I listened and waited while the dock side umbilical attached and began feeding the ship power, air and water as well as extracting the waste. I plugged my cred-chip into the onboard and paid for two week's worth of dock fees up front. Payment up front meant I and my ship would be left alone. I would slip the dock master in charge of my sector a bribe later on, just to make sure I was not harassed and my ship was not touched. As I undid my harness straps I sighed, this was a homecoming of sorts but it didn't bring much joy.

Two hours later, after arranging for fuel and supplies, doing a thorough run through of my ship and adding some additional security in case the bribes I had given the dock master were not quite enough, I sat at the galley table with a cup of tea in hand and a holo map of the area I was in.

The Corellian Sector was one of the largest and most populated on Nar Shadda. It was my hope that even if Jyrki was watching star ports the sheer volume of traffic would make it difficult to spot me. I was pretty sure that Jyrki did not know what my ship actually looked like and even if he did, in the large star port docking bay it would be fairly hard to find.

I had debated whether or not to disguise myself with my Dantassi clothing but while wearing the mask would make me anonymous it would not make me invisible. The Bone Traders were a curiosity even here and dressed as one I would be noticed. It was easier to dress in non-descript clothing as the trader I was pretending to be and blend in with the rest of the crowds rather than stand out and be remembered. When I left my ship to go exploring it was the stench and heat of the air that hit me first. I had forgotten that as well, after the clean air on both Hjal and Nirauan, the air here tasted thick and foul. Nar Shadda was a filthy place in more ways than one.

The crush of beings walking along the concourses was almost overwhelming. I had forgotten what it felt like to be in such crowded places full of alien beings, bounty hunters, smugglers and criminals of all sorts. Moving through the crowds was a little like dancing and once I had found the rhythm of it I made my way to The Burning Deck to scope it out. I had plenty of time before the meet with Jyrki and I wanted to be ready for anything he had to throw at me even though I knew that would not be the case. He had my family, at least he had my father and that already made it personal and difficult. My gut boiled with anger just thinking about it.

The Burning Deck was surprisingly busy and as I made my way through the dimly lit main room I was glad I had not worn my Dantassi gear. It would have been insanely warm in the stuffy cantina and people would have stared, as it was I attracted little to no attention, or so I thought, as I pushed my way to the bar. As I was about to order a drink a gruff male voice interrupted.

"Not seen you in here before."

I didn't look at the owner of the voice, "That's because I haven't been here in a while," I said with just enough intonation to let the man standing behind me know I wasn't interested. He didn't get the message.

"So, what'll you have, little lady?"

I looked up to see the rough face of a man I didn't recognise and the undisguised leer in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. "I'm fine, thanks" I said politely, flagging the bar-droid over.

"Didn't ask you how you were, asked you what you wanted to drink."

I sighed and turned around to face him again, "Right, my mistake. I was planning on having a stim'caf, not that it is any of your business."

His expression turned dark, "That's not very polite. I was just offering to buy you a drink."

"Again, kind of you but unnecessary I have enough creds to purchase my own." I shifted slightly to move away from his presence which had somehow managed to become annoyingly close to my body. He needed a shower in the worst way.

"You know, a slip of a girl like you could get hurt in a place like this," his voice was a low growl.

I nodded with an expression of feigned boredom. "So I've been told," I said and went to move to a different spot altogether but instead of allowing me to leave he grabbed my arm.

"Let go," I spoke quietly. If he had been smart he would have picked from my voice as well as the look in my eyes just how close he was to dying. Over the years I had been grabbed and man-handled more times than I cared to mention and I wasn't about to take it with a smile any more.

"I think you'll have that drink with me and then maybe I'll show you my ship," he said firmly as though I didn't have any choice in the matter, "You look like a girl who enjoys seeing the inside of ships lying down."

It took me two simple moves to put him on the ground, with the third one I hurt him. I crouched by his side as he doubled up in agony and whispered in his ear. "Do I still look like a girl who could get hurt in this place or do I look like a girl who could hurt you in this place? Do yourself a favour, flyboy and leave us strange girls alone. You don't know where we've been or what we've been taught to do to desperate, pathetic men like you."

He nodded his head, rendered speechless by pain and I moved away to a different spot at the bar to order my drink. A few of the patrons close enough to see what had happened shook their heads and whispered to themselves but in a place like this, that had been a mild discussion and the fact that no blasters had been drawn was disappointing. Everyone loved a good fight, even if it had them diving for cover under the tables. I had not wanted to draw attention to myself so I had dealt with my new friend as quickly and as quietly as I knew how. There were a couple of bounty hunters in the shadows who had watched the scene with marked interest and one of them had given me the *nice job* nod. I paid for my stim'caf and made my way to the upper gallery, found a shaded table with a good view of the whole floor and sat down to think and observe.

Even as a child I had loved to watch people and growing up in a place like Mos Eisley had been perfect for that, even better was working at a docking bay. I had long understood that I was different and that I sometimes saw things about people and beings other did not but I had never really known why and simply accepted the fact. Now, after my years of working for the Empire and being trained in some of the ways of

the force, the Bunduki arts and Jhal'kai I saw just how much I had leaned. It was eerie in some ways, like watching a strange dance whose choreography was constantly being changed and reconfigured all the while the dance was ongoing.

Most people assume that everything is random but that is never really the case. There are patterns all over the place, even in crowds full of strangers there are patterns. As I observed the cantina I began to notice some of these reoccurring patterns, I could tell who was a stranger in town, and maybe first time to the cantina itself, I could point out the regulars who had their niche carved out and their piece of cantina territory claimed. It was easy to spot the smugglers and the legitimate traders, just as it was easy to pick out the bounty hunters look for their mark or waiting on a deal. Little things gave people away, my father had taught me. Gamblers called it a tell he had said. At the time, as a child listening to my father speak of these things I had just thought him clever but now I understood that as a smuggler himself he needed to be able to read people, read crowds and situations in order to save his own hide from being caught.

I saw him before he noticed that he had been made. Subtle and sly he was good at his job but the strange tingle that rippled down the back of my neck said that his feigned indifference was a ruse and that he was on guard, as it were and waiting, watching for me. I was not here for playing games and tired of the messing around. This was one of Jyrki's men, I was sure of it but I wanted to be one hundred percent sure and it was time to get the show on the road. When our eyes met, for split second he understood and made no pretence about why he was there, instead he got up from his chair in a lazy, beguiling manner and made his way through the crowd, up the side wall stairs to join me at my table. I didn't know who he was but I didn't have to.

"You're on Nar Shadda early, Miss Gabriel," he said conversationally, signally one of the floating droids for a refill on both our drinks.

"And you have me at a disadvantage; while you seem to know who I am I have no idea who you are."

His smile was thin, "You may call me Lorano Dek."

"And you're keeping tabs on me because...?" I asked.

"Because I was paid to do so," he replied.

I nodded. It had crossed my mind that maybe Jyrki would pull something like this but I had hoped for a day or two without a watchdog. "Well now you see me," I said, "I was in the neighbourhood and didn't feel like hanging around in space waiting for the due date. So get to the point. "

"We have a mutual acquaintance, Miss Gabriel, he is anxious to meet with you." He toyed with his drink, I didn't touch mine.

"Mr. Andando is the one who set the meeting date, Mr. Dek, why should he be anxious?"

"He was not sure you would come."

I gave the thick set man a small nod. "Well, he has something of mine I would appreciate being returned...unharmd."

"He would be willing to see you now to discuss the terms of reimbursement," he said letting me know that he had contacted Jyrki the moment I had been seen entering the cantina. At least I thought, this meant they had not found my ship or figured out

which port I had entered in from. I had not felt as though I had been followed prior to entering the cantina.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. I'm tired from my trip and I need to find a hotel to stay in." Implying that I had not come in a ship of my own.

That caught the mercenary's attention. "As you pointed out he has something belonging to you," he said pointedly. He had not expected me to refuse him flatly and I wondered what Jyrki had told this man about me.

I nodded and shrugged. "So he does but I would not be here if I did not also have something he wants. So we will meet on my terms. If he is disagreeable to this then tell him the deal is off." What ever it was that Jyrki wanted from me he had wanted it badly enough to go after my family which had meant risking a lot, if not everything. I wasn't sure where Uncle Vahlek fit into all of this but I was damned sure it wasn't good. I was, as Thrawn would say, stalling for time, though I wasn't exactly sure why. It was a gamble and I was hoping that whatever it was Jyrki wanted or needed from me it would be enough to make sure the cards were stacked in my favour, which would be a first.

Lorano Dek nodded slowly, "Would you be amenable to meeting Mr. Andando here tomorrow at the same time?"

I nodded. "I can agree to that" I said then added, "Only next time keep your friends out of my face," I said, nodding to the man who had offered to buy me a drink earlier.

Dek laughed. "Him? He's not one of mine. Herden is exactly what he appears to be, Miss Gabriel, a down and out spacer. I didn't bring any friends with me. I was told that would be unnecessary with you although after that lovely little performance I can see that Mr. Andando did not over estimate your ability to bite."

I regarded the square jawed man who sat opposite me and inclined my head slightly at his compliment. "Then it's a date Mr. Dek. Please tell your employer not to try anything funny."

"I'll be sure to pass along the message." He got up from the table with all the languid grace of a gurreck and I understood that this was his way of letting me know he would not be so easy to put down as the spacer named Herden. I stayed seated and watching him leave, waiting until I could not see him any more before I took my leave of the bar.

The main concourse was crowded but even so I knew I was being followed. I wasn't sure who it was and I wasn't about to take any chances or let them know I was aware of their presence so I led them on a merry dance all over the sector until I came to small but fairly decent looking hotel. I did not want to lead whoever was dogging me to my ship especially if it was one of Jyrki's people. While I had learned a few things since Jyrki's tutelage he was still the man who had pretty much taught me everything I knew about ships and ship security. I did not want him playing with mine.

Once I had checked in and paid for a room, I went back out to do a little shopping again I had the sensation of being watched and hoped that whoever it was that was tailing me was enjoying the show because I was shopping for some clothes, some snacks and general hygiene products like a new toothbrush and shampoo. Once I was done with shopping, I returned to the hotel, dumped all my stuff and went down to the reception to ask about local food delivery services. I was in the mood for something hot and spicy.

The petite Rodian at the reception desk gave me her recommendations and I went back up to my room to order food and pass the time watching the HoloNet.

As I lay in bed much later I tried to run through every possible scenario that could happen. I would have been lying if I had said that the prospect of meeting with Jyrki didn't scare me because it did. My fingers grazed my neck looking for the necklace that Thrawn had given me but it wasn't there. I had taken it off before I had left Nirauan and left it on my bedside table. I knew Thrawn would see it and I hoped that he would understand that I planned on coming back to claim it. That I planned on coming back to him and not ending up in a bacta tank, losing the precious pendant due to someone taking it off and not giving it back to me. He had kept it safe for me before and I hoped that would be the case now.

It was a strange bed in a strange place and sleep did not come quickly. I lay half awake for a long time with images of the past, present and possible future running through my mind. When I finally did drift off to sleep it was full of vivid nightmares which lingered long after I had awoken early in the cold dawn reaching for a man who was thousands of light years away, weeping without fully knowing why.

For a long time I simply lay in the bed, staring up at the ceiling wondering what the hell I had done in coming all the way out here alone to confront someone I no longer really knew or understood. When I could lie there no longer I heaved myself out of the bed, showered and went to get some breakfast. There was no point in meeting with Jyrki on an empty stomach; it only made me grouchy which made negotiating difficult. As I sat in the hotel's dingy breakfast room cradling a cup of the worst stim'caf I had tasted in ages I wondered what the meeting would bring. Things were slowly building to a head and it was like watching a very bad speeder accident happening in slow motion. I could not more stop it than I could turn away from watching it.

I had hoped to begin a new life on Nirauan, to put my past behind me but Jyrki seemed determined not to allow me that. Like a bad dream he kept coming back to haunt me. Unfinished business a friend had once said, it comes back when you least expect it. This, I thought morosely as I sat staring into space, was one strange little love story that while it might have begun sweetly enough, was going to have a very bad ending.

## **Chapter Seven**

Jyrki's eyes, even more blue than I remembered, bored into mine as though by doing so he could see past my face and into my soul. I did not back down or look away. I had learned in the last few years a thing or two about myself and he no longer intimidated me instead he made me angry and anger was easy to use. I had loved this man once, the very sight of him had made my teen aged heart race and my knees weak but over time things had changed and it never ceased to astound me how quickly love could turn to hate.

He had aged and the last couple years had not been kind to him. His once handsome face was now etched with the lines of battle and stress, worry and something else I could not define, something I had not picked up on when I had seen him at the med-lab after Cati had died. A fresh scar ran down the side of his right cheek and there were fresh bruises on his knuckles. He had been in a fight recently and it had been a hard one. His long hair, which had once been blacker than a Hutt's heart was now peppered with strands of white. It had not escaped my notice that he still had a slight limp as he had walked into the cantina to make our meeting. That limp had been my doing from our fight on Rothana, although at the time he had not known who I was. I wondered absently if his limp reminded him of me, then decided I didn't really want to know the answer to that one.

"Yer look well Mouse." Jyrki finally said, breaking the strangled silence between us.

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Where are they?" I asked pointedly. I did not have time for niceties and I wasn't about to sit and make small talk with the man who was holding my family against their will for reasons I still did not know.

"Safe," he replied after a terse minute of quiet. "Mouse, yer need to understand..."

I waved a hand abruptly at him, cutting him off mid sentence. "I don't have to understand anything!" I hissed through clenched teeth, leaning into the table to get closer to him. "You kidnapped my family to get to me. Now I am here so get to the point, what do you want?"

He sat back in his chair and toyed with his glass. "I need yer help." He finally said.

I could not have been more surprised than if he had told me he wanted to marry me. "What?"

"I need yer help." He repeated.

There was a lengthy pause and then I replied carefully, "And for that you took my family hostage?"

"Would yer have come if I hadn't?"

I glared at him and shook my head. "I'm done with you," I told him. "You chose your side and you made your position clear. You hurt me, damn it, you very nearly killed me and not just once and for what?" I pressed, "Because you cannot let go of the past." I bit back the words that threatened to spill out of my mouth angry and vicious. Ranting at him would be pointless, my words would fall on deaf ears so I drew a deep breath,



swallowed my fury at him down to answer the original question. "No, I would not have come, not for you alone," I said, "Now...my family...."

He nodded and again we stared at each other, "They're safe, if that's what yer need to know."

"What do you want in exchange?" I asked. He had not lied but something was not quite right in his words. I might have been able to sort it out had I opened up to the force but I did not want him to see my strengths in this area. My force talents, since he had first met me, had become far stronger than I wanted him to know. My talents had been honed and sharpened by both Lord Vader and the Emperor and while I had not become what either man had wanted I had still learned. I was certain that even Jyrki would be concerned by what I could do were I to let the full extent of my training both in the force and the combat arts fly. It was a hidden weapon and I wanted it to stay that way until I absolutely needed it.

"I told yer, I need yer help." He was being deliberately evasive.

I waited him out instead of pushing, giving him a *get to the point* look.

He leaned into the table, his body language letting me know he did not want anyone else to hear what he had to say. "I need yer to help me kill Luke Skywalker," he said.

For a moment all I could do was stare at him, unsure if I had actually heard him correctly. Then with a shake of my head I simply said, "You're mad."

He leaned back in his chair again, anger flashing in his beautiful eyes. "Perhaps," he said carefully, "but hear me out."

I folded my arms across my chest, sitting back against my chair back and waited.

"He is the son of Anakin Skywalker...." He began, trying to find the right words to explain his plans.

"I know that!" I interrupted.

"Anakin turned to the dark side...."

"I know that as well," I said bluntly, annoying him.

He drew a deep breath, "Mouse...yer must see it, the connection?"

"You think the son of Anakin Skywalker will turn to the dark side." It was not a question.

Jyrki nodded. "I know he will."

I cocked my head to one side. "Know? How?"

"I've seen it," he said quietly. "I've had force visions of the future. He takes on the mantle of Emperor; he turns to the Dark side to rule the galaxy."

I shook my head slightly. I, too, had seen this vision but I wasn't about to tell Jyrki this. "How can you see the future?" I asked putting as much disbelief into my words as possible.

His shoulders heaved with the sigh he made. "It's a force talent. Sometimes some people who are force sensitive receive visions of the past or the future." He explained, slumped over with the burden of it all. "I was trained from the time I was a baby to trust in the force and all its ways. I have had visions all my life Mouse."

I shook my head, "But how can you see the future if it hasn't even happened yet? And if you can how do you know that is exactly what will happen? The future can change."

He nodded, "Master Yoda used to say that the future was fluid and always in motion but even so there is still truth in the visions. A few weeks before Anakin Skywalker came to the temple with the five-oh-first I had a dream about him. I saw him dressed all in black and where his face had been was emptiness, like a black hole, swallowing all the good all the light in the galaxy. In my dream he was destroying the jedi temple stone by stone."

"It was just a dream." I countered playing devil's advocate. I knew enough about these sorts of dreams to fill a book but I wasn't sure I wanted to share that with this crazy man.

Jyrki snorted. "I had spoken about my dream with one of the masters and he had looked worried as I did so. Anakin Skywalker was controversial at best amongst the council members of the Jedi Temple and even we children knew that. I grew up knowing him, admiring him but also being a little scared of him. He was the Chosen One. He was so strong in the force that it was almost as if he shimmered in it, but there was a terrible darkness to him as well. Whispers of his temper, his impatience and his attachment to his mother as well as other people, all the things we are taught from the very beginning to avoid were in him. Even Master Windu did not trust him."

"I thought it was all harmony and love at the Jedi temple." The sarcasm in my voice made me sound petulant but I didn't care.

Jyrki made a face and shrugged. "They were troubled times, Mouse. The galaxy was at war. The jedi were supposed to be keepers of the peace not warriors but Anakin was the best there was. He and his master Obi-Wan were heroes to us, they almost always won and they always came back alive but I heard the whispers when the adults thought us children were not paying attention. They thought Anakin was unpredictable and dangerous, that he relished the fights he lunged into too much and he killed too easily. There were also the rumours that he was having an affair with Senator Amidala. Towards the end, just before all nine Corellian hells broke loose; there were even rumours that she was pregnant. I didn't understand then, I was just a small boy at the time, but now I do, she carried Anakin's child, well...children."

"How does this make Luke evil?" I asked, trying to unravel his insane logic.

Jyrki gritted his teeth and glanced away. "I've seen him turn, just like his father. He will find the spirit of Palpatine and take it into himself, turning to the Dark Side to rule over the galaxy. I've had the same dream over and over again. History repeating itself all over again and I cannot let it happen. I cannot let anyone else suffer the way I suffered, the way all the children and people in the Jedi temple suffered or the way the galaxy suffered under the rule of a sith master."

"Okay, so you've seen him in a vision, that doesn't mean you have to kill him." I countered, frowning. "I thought he was the hero of the rebellion, how can someone who has done so much for your side of this conflict suddenly be so bad?"

"He is a hero. Without his skills as a pilot we would never have won, without his help at Endor Vader and Palpatine would still be alive but that doesn't change the fact of what will happen if I don't stop it," he said flatly, "Which is why I need yer help."

"What the hell can I do?" I asked. "I don't even know him."

Jyrki smiled and I didn't like it much, "Yer are force sensitive, Mouse."

I snorted, "My powers are nominal at best." I lied.

Jyrki raised both eyebrows. "Yer underestimate yerself. Even as a child yer powers were strong. If ye'd had been trained properly yer'd have been a powerful jedi, I am sure of that."

"Well I am grateful that never happened. I hate the idea that I would have been brainwashed into a weapon for the Jedi masters to use." I shot out before I could censor myself.

Jyrki shrugged. "Yer had so much potential, Mouse. I wish I could have done more to save yer."

I sighed and shook my head. "I still don't see how you need my help in your quest. You are quite capable of killing Luke Skywalker yourself, hell you've shown me how violent and vicious you can be." I snapped. "I will not kill him for you."

"I am not asking yer to kill him for me, I need yer to distract him for me." He tried to explain.

I shook my head. "You're asking me to be the bait and that makes me an accomplice. You're asking me to swap my family's life for Skywalker's. I can't do that Jyrki. If I do that I am no better than Anakin or for that matter, you."

Jyrki clenched his jaw. "I will get what I want. I need yer help, I have yer family in a place yer will never find and they will die if yer don't help me."

He wasn't lying and fear rippled through my heart. I didn't know what to do and I was certain he meant every single word he had just said. He was nuts and hell bent on doing this terrible deed.

"I need time to consider this," I said after a long pause.

His smile was nasty. "Yer mean yer need time to wait to see if yer can get help. Well if that's the case, forget it, he won't help yer."

"He?"

"The Tze'yusha'Jin," he replied .

"Uncle Vahlek?" I asked as my heart skipped a beat. I hadn't actually been thinking about him but something in Jyrki's smirk scared me.

"Yer uncle..." Jyrki snorted. "He's not related to yer at all!"

"I know that but he's family all the same." I bit back, "What about him?"

"He won't be coming to help yer out this time because he's dead."

I suppose my face must have blanched because Jyrki automatically reached forward to touch my hand, some measure of comfort for the bad news he has just dumped on me. I snatched my hand away from him as though he would burn me and he scowled. I tasted his words and knew that he was not lying to me. He really believed Uncle Vahlek had died. My heart seemed to stop and I held my breath as though in doing so I could make his words go away.

"How do you know this?" I eventually whispered.

"I watched him die," he said simply.

I shook my head in disbelief. Uncle Vahlek was Tze'yusha'Jin, one of the best in the galaxy if all I had ever been told was correct. He was a well trained assassin and hunter, killing him would not have been an easy task. "How?"

Jyrki sneered. "I told yer to warn him that I'd deal with him if he did not back off. I knew he was following me I knew what he was after. Did he think I was stupid? He's not the only one who has received training at the hands of the Anzati. He came after me

here, would have succeeded except he's not a force user and I am. We fought not too far from here on one of the gantry-ways. He lost his concentration just long enough for me to kick him over the side and he fell. No one could have survived that fall and I have not felt his presence since."

I could not stop the tears that welled up in my eyes. Jyrki had not lied and as he had spoken I could almost see what he was describing in my head, as though he were force projecting the images to me much the way Lord Vader used to do. "You bastard," I whispered, anger welling up from deep inside my gut. I had to fight from reaching across the table to grab him and smash his head with my fist. "You have no idea...no idea at all," I half babbled, wanting to tell him that he had just murdered the man who might very well be his father. I clapped a hand over my mouth to keep the secrets from spilling out. Hot tears ran over them and I was trembling.

"He came after me," Jyrki said sounding sulky.

"You tried to kill me with an Anzati blade," I spat, "He's my sworn guardian. What did you expect him to do?"

Jyrki stared at me, "That was an accident, Mouse. I didn't know the blade still held poison."

I shook my head, "You're as stupid as you are vengeful." I was too angry now to watch my words or care if what I said triggered his temper. "You want me to help you kill Luke Skywalker because you're afraid he'll turn to the dark side and use his powers in anger but you are just as bad."

"I never used my force abilities in rage, Mouse," he spoke so softly it caught me off guard. "I have never once done that but you have, haven't you?"

I was about to retort but realised he was telling me the truth and as I thought back to every encounter we had ever had including the time he had saved me from being raped I understood it was the truth. He had never used rage to fuel or strengthen his powers, although I was certain that sometimes anger had tainted his motives. He had perhaps seen what he could gain from that but he had never used it. He had watched what turning to the Dark side had done to Anakin Skywalker and it had stuck with him forever, this terrible memory which had become Jyrki's greatest fear. He was also right about me. I had tasted that surge of power driven by anger and hatred. The Emperor had seen to this personally. I knew that taint of blackness and how easy it would have been to open up and allow the anger to rule but it was a choice that was made consciously and I chose not to use it. However, it seemed that, unlike Jyrki, I wasn't scared stupid by it either.

"That's why you want me to do this for you isn't it," I asked quietly.

"Yer've touched that darkness, I feel it Mouse. I sense yer anger and I can feel yer desire. Yer ruled by yer passions, even now I sense it in yer." He shrugged almost arrogantly, as though he were somehow better than I was because he had never succumbed to that dark side of human nature and I wanted to slap him, proving him right which infuriated me even more.

"That may be so but at least it doesn't make me act like a frightened durni, kidnapping people and using blackmail to get what I want!"

He avoided that topic by saying, "It's a simple thing. I need yer help to get to Luke Skywalker."

"Why don't you just go to him yourself? If you tell him you're force sensitive he will take you on as a student and then you will be as close as possible to him. I heard he was trying to rebuild the Jedi Order, isn't that what you want?"

"Only a Master could rebuild the Jedi Order and Skywalker doesn't have the training. He's the son of a Sith Lord and he will walk his father's path, I have seen that much. I will not allow him to know that I have this power because he will try to corrupt me if he learns of it."

There would be no arguing with him about this. How could one argue with insanity? "How do you expect me to help you then?" I asked switching to a less confrontational tack.

"I know where he will be in seven days from now. Yer will find a way to meet with him in private and I will deal with him when yer do," he said.

"By deal with him you mean kill."

"It is the will of the Force, Mouse, I have seen it. Why else would I have been sent these visions if it were not?"

I didn't think he wanted to hear my answer so instead I stayed quiet thinking about how I could possibly circumnavigate this mess. "Where will he be?"

Jyrki smiled and it sent a shudder down my spine. "Yer must think me stupid to give up that information," he said.

"You're asking me to be an accomplice to murder. Stupid is not the first word that comes to mind."

"Yer haven't agreed yet."

"I want assurances my family are safe and well. You could be lying for all I know." I spat.

Jyrki smiled slightly, "Still have not honed that particular skill yet? I would have thought that Palpatine would have taught you better."

"A lot of what you thought was wrong," I said through gritted teeth. At least he had no idea of just how much better my Force powers were which would be a small point in my favour.

He sighed and dug out from his pocket a small holo recorder. He set it on the table and pushed it to me. "There is a message from yer father on it but I suggest yer open that up in private. Yer've got two days to decide his fate and that of the rest of yer family. I will be here at the same time two days from now and if yer answer is yes then I give the word to set them free if yer not here I will have them killed and a bounty placed on yer head as a traitor to the Rebellion. Yer may have erased all records of who yer worked for but I know and I have ways of getting information. It would be a shame if yer face were to be plastered all over the HoloNet as Vader's protégé."

"I was never his protégé!" I yelled. People turned to stare at us and I felt a hot flush creep into my cheeks.

Jyrki smiled nastily knowing he'd found a sore spot to dig at, "I beg to differ on that point, Vader liked yer, he trained with yer, and he taught yer things. I know because Antygra told me all about yer relationship with that man as well as how Palpatine favoured yer. I have data stored away that wasn't erased, enough to condemn yer and yer family forever. I even know about yer alien lover, what was he called... ah yes the Grand Admiral Thrawn, also dead, by all accounts. There is no one from the Imperials

left on yer side Mouse. I'm all yer've got. Do yer really want to lose the last people who care for yer for the sake of the Sith? Yer will help me destroy the Skywalker legacy and end this reign of terror forever. It is that simple and yer have no choice."

I managed to look away, feigning sorrow at his words when really I was angrier than I had been in a long time. My shoulders shook with the weight of it and it took all my strength to shove it down as deeply as I could. By the time I looked back at him I had my emotions under control. "Alright," I said, "I'll do as you ask but my family goes free and after this you will leave them alone forever or I will make sure you regret it for the rest of your life."

He smiled, "Smart girl. I knew yer would see reason sooner or later." He ignored my threat, he did not think of me as all that dangerous.

"Reason has nothing what so ever to do with this," I spat.

"Everything I have ever done was for yer Mouse, don't yer understand that? Yer have no idea how terrible the Dark Side can be and yer have no idea how much I want to protect yer from that evil path."

I shook my head. "You are completely insane."

"Perhaps, but if that's what it takes to end the reign of the Sith then so be it."

"Luke Skywalker is not a Sith Lord," I said, surprised at the words coming out of my mouth.

"Neither was his father until he was turned. It only takes one thing to do the job." Jyrki countered.

"It was the brutal torture and death of his mother by Tusksens that twisted Anakin Skywalker. Would you do the same to me?"

That surprised Jyrki, I read it in his eyes. He had not known this but in the end it changed nothing. He blamed Anakin for destroying his life and now he was going to get even. No matter what he told me his reason underneath it all it was still revenge. I glared at him as I stood up to leave, reaching to grasp the holo recorder from the table but as I did so he grabbed my wrist. "Don't try anything stupid Mouse, yer not that good. I should know, I taught yer."

I just stared at him until he let go of me, picked up the recorder and left the cantina without looking back. My hand was shaking as I slid the recorder into my satchel and for a moment I thought I would be ill as a wave of dizziness washed over me. I had agreed to help assassinate one of the Galaxy's most beloved members to save my own family. Never mind what I thought of him, Skywalker was a hero and by helping to murder him I would go down in history as reviled as Palpatine and Lord Vader were or die in the process of trying. Neither outcome was something I wished for.

I stumbled back to my hotel room, unaware of my surroundings. The sensation of being followed was there but I had felt someone watching my every move ever since the first time I had left the Cantina now I did not care anymore. It was most likely one of Jyrki's people. I know they had followed me before and had even searched through my hotel room when I wasn't there but anything of value I had I kept on my person. If he had hoped to find out anything more about me he was mistaken.

I got back to my room and all but flung myself down on the bed too wound up to think, cry or sleep. I had two days to come up with a way out of this situation as well as how to rescue my family and I wasn't sure I could do this, especially not alone. When I

suddenly remembered what Jyrki had said about Uncle Vahlek the tears came. I could not believe he was dead; I didn't want to trust the news Jyrki had given me but I knew he had told me the truth. The ache of loss hit me hard and sudden. I curled into a little ball on the bed and wept.

I woke up in darkness with a gasp momentarily uncertain of where I was. The nightmare that had gripped me fled and all that remained were remnants, fleeting images of the Emperor and Luke Skywalker melding into one. I did not need to remember all the details to know what it had been about. With a sigh I heaved myself out of bed, sleep still numbing my brain, and stumbled my way to the 'fresher.

For what seemed an age I stood in front of the mirror, ice cold water still dripping off my face and stared at my reflection. I looked like a speeder wreck. My eyes were still puffy from sleep and crying and the dark circles that were etched into my skin scared me. In my heart I felt sick. My deal with Jyrki did not sit well on my soul but I did not know what else to do to help my family. I did not know how to circumnavigate what Jyrki had done, what he wanted to do. I shook my head at myself, dried off my face, switched off the light and made my way back to the darkened bedroom. I didn't want to even consider all the possible, terrible outcomes of Jyrki's insane plans.

On the bedside table sat the little holo recorder Jyrki had given me. It contained a message from my father, a sign of life, but I had not opened the file to watch it. I was terrified of what I would see. The flash of memory the recorder had given me as I had picked it up in the cantina had been bad enough. Jyrki or his partners had beaten my father, that much I had seen, and I had no desire to see any more but somewhere in the message would be a clue to his whereabouts, I was sure of that. However until my mind was a little more focused, all looking at the message would do was anger me further and anger, while useful also clouded my thinking.

I went over to the window and pushed the slotted blinds apart with my finger to stare out into the city. Lights shone and signs blinked, traffic moved in a never ending stream and for a small moment I felt as though I were back on Coruscant. A pang of homesickness for something that had never even existed ripped sharply through my chest and I found myself crying again, silently.

Somewhere out there my Uncle lay broken and dead. Somewhere out there the people I loved were being held against their will by a man they had once considered part of the family. I did not know how to move forward and for one of the few times in my life I felt a terribly sense of helplessness and hopelessness. I drew a deep steadying breath and shook my head to myself. I should have talked to Thrawn before rushing off, I should have asked for his advice and maybe gotten some back up. He would have had a plan or even several plans because he always knew what to do and just how to do it. My hand went to place at my throat where my necklace would have lain, its comforting weight gone because it was on Nirauan where I had left it.

For a moment I rested my forehead against the frame of the window. The sickly sensation of utter inevitability crawled across my skin, the hair on the back of my neck stood up and I slowly realised that these sensations were not due to my feelings of helplessness but rather because I was not alone in the room but before I could move, turn around or grab anything that could be used as a weapon, one strong arm had

wrapped itself around my upper body pinning my arms to my sides while the other hand cupped, with surprising gentleness, over my mouth.

The moment stretched and fear, along with anger, shot through me. I had been so wrapped up in my own little world I had neither sensed nor heard the intruder. I forced myself to calm down and to breathe slowly. As I did so I realised that I knew the scent of the man that was holding me and the voice that whispered in my ear was as familiar to me as my own.

"Screaming would be a very bad idea," he said softly, sensing the moment I recognised him because I went from rigid to relaxed as his words tickled the skin on my neck. He released his grip, allowing me to spin around and fling my arms around his body.

"Navaari." I whispered, so astonished, so relieved to see him here instead of some stranger hell bent on doing me some sort of bodily harm that I did not even think to question his unnoticed presence in my hotel room at all.

He stroked my hair as he had done so often on Hjal, letting me cry, letting me pull myself back together. When I drew a deep breath he pushed me back from his chest, a hand upon each of my shoulders so that he could study me with his fierce red, glowing eyes. He shook his head and frowned. "You are an idiot child. You are knowing this, yes?" He said but there was no anger in his voice, only sadness and frustration.

"Impetuous and headstrong, you do not think, you simply act. How many times will you be racing headlong into danger without planning first?"

I shook my head pulling away from him to turn back to the window, peeking out through the small crack in the blinds once again. "How did you find me?" I asked after what felt like forever, careful to avoid his question.

Navaari snorted and moved away from me to sit on the edge of the bed. "I am Jhal'kai, you forget. You are not so difficult to track."

I nodded, absently remembering that the tracer chip in my Dantassi mask, still on my ship, would have led him straight to me. I had forgotten about that. "How long have you been hiding in my room?"

"Long enough to be knowing you are troubled," He replied cryptically. "I have been watching you for some time, waiting until you were awake and this seemed the best moment to make my presence known to you without alerting the others who also keep their eyes on you." He nodded towards the door. "That lock was easy enough to undo."

I gave him a look. "That's a little creepy you know."

He simply shrugged, half amused at my annoyance.

"What are you doing here, Navaari?" I asked quietly.

"Your Ta'kasta'cariad was feeling it would be beneficial if someone backed you up in what ever snow crazed plan you had rushed headlong into."

"I didn't tell Thraw.... Za'ar where I was going, so how the hell did he know?" I asked, surprised at the anger lacing my words.

Navaari snorted. "You were thinking that message you received was known only to you?"

I drew in a deep breath and let it out with a noisy sigh. "He made a copy and decoded it himself."



"He was telling me the look on your face was as if your world had collapsed, he knew it had to do with the Andando boy. Before you had even left the base he had word sent to me to come here. He is knowing you even better than you know yourself sometimes. You seem to think you must face all these terrible things by yourself but that is not the case and one of these days you will be learning to ask for help instead of help having to seek you out. It would be saving much time and difficulties, you know." Navaari chided.

I sighed. "Jyrki is hardly a boy, Navaari, he's years older than I am." I snapped trying to hide the fact that no matter what I thought I was unable to hide anything from Thrawn. I couldn't decide if that made me angry or relieved.

Navaari shrugged. "In his head Jyrki Andando is still the wounded, terrified child who has never forgiven the galaxy for its wrongs to him or his kind. He cannot let go of the past which is haunting him. Unlike you Kycsi'i, he has never had the chance to go through sju'ru'arwy'kha. He still walks with all of his ghosts and they have had a long time to whisper their poison in his ears."

I could only glance at him in agreement, unable to speak as emotion choked me. I had seen what Anakin had done, felt it as though I had been there. If anyone in the galaxy understood Jyrki's pain it was me but that did not mean I could forgive him for what he had done, for what he was now doing, no matter what his reasons were.

"Is Za'ar very angry with me?" I asked after a while.

Navaari's shrug was nonchalant. "No more so than usual," He replied honestly, "He understands that sometimes certain things have to happen no matter what and that the past must be faced before the future can be met. This boy is bound to you, I have said this before. You will not be free of this until you sever this bond. It is a terrible destiny that ties the two of you together."

I nodded miserably and sat at his side burying my face in my hands trying not to let the terrible wave of sorrow I felt engulf me.

Navaari, who had nursed me through hell and back and knew me better than probably anyone else with the exception of Thrawn, frowned, "Kycsi'i what is it you are trying to tell me without saying the words?"

"He killed my Uncle Vahlek." I whispered, not wanting to say the words out loud, not wanting them to be true.

Navaari was surprised. "Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh is dead?"

I nodded again, the lump in my throat making it difficult for me to speak.

"How?"

My shoulders heaved as I drew in a deep breath and then recounted to Navaari everything that Jyrki had told me, leaving out nothing. When I was done he was silent, lost in thought, considering what to do next, what to say next.

"Did he see where the body landed?"

I frowned at the question and shook my head not even wanting to consider the images that flashed through my mind.

Navaari gave me a little nod and let the matter drop.

"I don't know how to help Jyrki anymore. I don't know how to make him see that what he wants to do is beyond insane," I said trying to fill the sudden gulf the quiet had created. My voice trembled, making Navaari look at me.

"A'myshk'a," He began patiently, "you must be understanding, Jyrki Andando is so haunted by his past he will never be free of it. That is his madness, being trapped in this terrible thing that happened to him with no way to escape." He finally said, breaking the awful silence. "You loved him, you gave him your heart freely and for that he is tied to you. He doesn't understand it but he cannot let go of it either."

"He refused me, when I told him how I felt; he pushed me away, shut himself off and vanished." The words, as I spoke, were surprisingly acidic on my tongue, the hurt as fresh as ever. Jyrki was not the only one who had unhealed wounds. I wondered then, did we ever really get over these things, these terrible rites of passage?

"This is because your love frightened him; it was pure, innocent and unabashed. This is the one thing he could not understand because it is the one thing he has never truly known or learned. It was easier to turn away from you than face his greatest fear."

"But why? What is so frightening about love? About being loved?" I asked.

"Nothing unless you feel you are unlovable. To accept that this was untrue would have meant letting go of the past." Navaari explained.

I sighed and frowned. "How can he think he is unlovable?" I whispered.

Navaari shrugged, "Only he can answer that and it is something of this man you will never understand because it is something you have never known. You have always been loved and cared for no matter what you have done, no matter what befalls you. This has shaped the woman you are today and he does not understand how someone such as yourself could ever have loved someone such as him. He does not think he is worthy."

Suddenly I understood, "He blames himself for what happened at the Jedi Temple, he feels responsible somehow, even though he was just a small boy, even though there was nothing he could do, he blames himself." I whispered. "He feels guilty because he survived."

"What a terrible thing for a child to have experienced," Navaari said quietly.

I looked up at Navaari in surprise. "You sound as though you feel sorry for him."

"That is because I do," He replied without explanation and before I could say anything more, or tell him that he was not exactly alone in this emotion, he abruptly changed the topic. "Now, what are your plans?"

"Plans?" I shrugged, "I have no plans. I have no clues, no ideas, no nothing! He has my family, he wants me to help him murder someone for something they have not even done yet and his bargaining chip is my family's life. How can I plan around that?"

Navaari shook his head, his long silver hair rippling across his shoulders with the motion, catching in the sliver of light that made its way through crack in the blinds. "Silly pup, have I not taught you better than this? Do you give up so easily to this pash'kja'anta." He stood up, slipped off the satchel that had been slung over his shoulder and shrugged off his long, full coat. "Do you have nothing to guide you or is your head so clouded by fear that you have forgotten how to track?"

His rebuke stung but he was right. I leaned back to grasp the holo recorder off the night table and winced at the images which flashed through my head as I did so. While Jyrki might not have turned to the Dark Side with his powers he had become cruel and hurtful. I described what I saw to Navaari as the visions unfolded in my head and he listened without interruption. When I was done he made me go back into the memories

and pick out tiny details in the room I had seen, the sounds I had heard and every little thing no matter how small it might seem that I could pick apart. When he was satisfied he allowed me to play the recording. The small blue hologram shimmered as it displayed from the small recorder-player. I had to cover my mouth to stifle the whimper that threatened to escape.

*My father sat, bound to a chair, his face beaten and bruised and stared at the recorder which Jyrki had held in his hand.*

*"Tell her." Jyrki said. The coldness in his voice scared me. The madness behind it frightened me even more.*

*My father raised his head slowly, obviously in pain and began to speak. "Merlyn, what ever he asks don't do it...." He began and someone, whose back was to the recorder, stopped the rest of the sentence with a vicious back hand.*

I looked away but Navaari touched my shoulder. "If you are wanting to help your father you must bear to see his pain. Watch and detach yourself from your emotions and see with a hunter's eyes. There are clues in this waiting for you."

I bit back the angry retort that threatened to escape my mouth and did as he told me.

*My father's head rocked with the blow but if it hurt him further he did not show it. "Go to hell!" he spat, blood running from his already swollen and bruised lips.*

*Jyrki snorted and turned the small recorder on himself. "Yer see Mouse, he is very much alive. If yer want to save him then yer will do as I ask. If yer do not then my friend here will take care of Kit and the rest of those yer love." The holo recorder swung around to show me the man Jyrki was talking about, the one who had hit my father. It was the same man I had met my first time in the Cantina. The man I knew as Lorano Dek inclined his head ever so slightly to the recorder. "Yer see, Mouse, I have the situation in control. Do as yer told and all will be well," he said and then he swung the recorder around to show me my father and the image shut off.*

I trembled with the rage I felt. Power crackled around me and I had to fight the urge to smash the small recorder against the far wall. Navaari wrapped his arm around my shoulders and the boiling fury which burned my gut diffused into something else, something manageable. I released the heavy breath I had been holding and leaned against his shoulder.

"So, pup, what will be your first move?"

I glanced up at him and sighed, "I don't know, I don't even know if there is a solution that doesn't involve someone dying." I told him.

Navaari shook his head, "Well then, let us be making sure that you are not the one who dies."

I made a face, "The first thing I would try to do is find out where he's holding papa, but I don't know where to begin."

"Hmm." Was all Navaari said letting me that he too was going to have to think about this a little then he asked, "Why have you not returned to your ship since you landed?"

I looked at him. "You are the one who has been following me?" I asked not answering his question.

"Yes, although I am not the only one. You were right to be cautious in your comings and goings."

"Why did you wait till now to talk to me then?"

"I wished to observe the meeting between you and Jyrki Andando without you knowing I was there."

I shook my head. "I knew someone was watching me, I thought it was one of Jyrki's pals and that's why I didn't go back to my ship. I don't want him to know about it," I said and I explained to Navaari why I feared Jyrki finding my ship.

"So you think he will have a ship of his own?"

I nodded. "It makes sense. He will want to have complete control over the situation and using a ship he was not completely familiar with would not fit into that plan. He knows what I can do, hell he taught me most of it," I said crossly, "He knows me well enough to anticipate some of the counter moves I would make. Having his own ship would ensure he was prepared for that. Even if he knows about mine, he would be reluctant to use it but that would not stop him from sabotaging it anyway."

"Tell me how to bypass your security measures and then I can fly it for you, follow you to where he wishes you to go, to meet this son of Vader."

I nodded then frowned, "But I think that he has my family here on Nar Shadda, at least papa is here. He keeps saying family but I have not actually heard him say anything about Bedi or Bel and they are not in any of the visions I have seen or the recording he made. That man in the holo recording was at the cantina to meet me the first time I was there," I said, "It would not make sense if they were being held on a different planet or moon. They might be in a different city but I don't think so, I think they are close by, close enough to be able to watch me as well. He won't have that many people involved. Jyrki is a loner, he doesn't play well with others and especially not for something like this."

"It would be making things a lot easier if it was only your father to find and free."

I nodded, realising the implication of my words. I wasn't sure that Bedi and Bel were safe but the more I thought about it the more I began to get the feeling they were not on Nar Shadda and that Jyrki didn't have them captive. It was just a feeling but it was so strong I could not ignore it.

"Tell me about the second man."

"He's a killer." I replied without having to think about it. "He moves the way Uncle Vahlek does... did." I stopped and corrected myself, "He hides his power, his edge behind a front of feigned indifference and indolence but he moved like a gurreck. I think he's had training like Jyrki maybe from the Anzati. He has an easy smile but it never reaches his eyes. I think he felt he had me summed up inside of five seconds but he missed a lot of things as well. He underestimated me once. I saw that in his face."

"How?"

I recounted when I had told Lorano Dek 'no I would not meet with Jyrki that day'. "He was surprised and that was not faked. He's a big man and he's all muscle but he isn't hampered by it. Right handed but I think he could wield a weapon in his left if he had to. There were calluses on both his palms. Jyrki told him about me, as much as he knows and he watched me drop a spacer who would not take no for an answer so he is aware that I am not just fluff."

"Could you kill him?"

I nodded. "Yes." I did not hesitate on my reply. "But it would be a difficult fight."

Navaari gave me a little nod of approval. "So how do we go about finding them?" He asked, testing me just as he used to Hjal while teaching me the tricks of the Jhal'kai trade.

"Use the clues in the recording and the memories." I replied.

Navaari sat still, allowing me to think the problem through, then when he sensed I was ready we walked the problem step by step, looking for the tiniest of signs which would lead to the quarry, just as he had taught me and he had taught me well. At some point between the billionth viewing of the holo recording and dawn I fell asleep, slumped against Navaari's shoulder, exhausted beyond caring. When I woke up on my bed with a blanket draped over me, it was broad daylight and Navaari was gone.

For a moment, caught between sleeping and waking, I knew a sort of despair and wondered if Navaari's visit had all be another figment of my already addled imagination but when I saw that he had left behind something I knew he was real and here on Nar Shadda, sent by Thrawn to save my ass yet again. I reached over and picked up the tiny bone amulet and studied it with a smile. It had been carved in the shape of a wolf's paw print from the bone of a grellett which was hard, smooth and deceptively heavy. The snow wolf was apparently my spirit animal so Navaari's friend, Kerrjan, had said; noting the ease with which the sled hounds had taken to me.

"They recognise kin." Kerrjan had said.

"I am not related to sled wolves!" I had retorted completely missing his point so he had spelled it out for me.

"They recognise your spirit is the same as theirs, free and wild. You are kindred spirits. That is why they are happy with you, why you find solace when you are with them." He had explained.

His answer had made sense and I had just smiled.

By carving this for me, Navaari was giving me the strength of the sled wolf, reminding me that I was no longer the little girl I had once been. That Jyrki only held sway over me if I let him. I clasped it in my hand for a moment and a flood of images melted into me. What Navaari had really given me was his strength and his love. I slipped the leather thong over my head and tucked the tiny wolf paw pendant under my shirt, then rubbing the last of the sleep from my eyes I went to the fresher to shower and begin to put into place some of the plans Navaari and I had made the night before. Now that I understood I was not alone, that I was never truly alone I felt better about the terrible tasks that lay ahead.

The tap-caf was busy and I was glad I had been able to snag the small table outside all to myself. Situated in one of the Corellian Sector's prime locations, The Jumping Nuna was perfect for people watching and had the added bonus of making the

best Zabracki stim'caf around. I sat with the latest flimsiplast news magazine, pretending to read while sipping a 'caf blend that was spicier than I had bargained for but nice all the same. To the casual observer I was nothing more than one of the billion inhabitants of Nar Shadda going about my daily business. To the man who was following me I was probably boring the hell out of him, which was my intent because if he was bored then he might not figure out what I was really doing.

I had spent the morning meandering with a purpose through the core of the Corellian Sector. The routes I took were convoluted and would, I hoped, appear random but they were anything but. I had a specific destination in mind that I didn't want my ugly, short shadow to figure out. Around lunch time I decided to stop and get some food. Grabbing a bite to eat would give me time to sort through the plans Navaari and I had made the night before. Thinking about him made me smile, just knowing he was out there made me feel better even though we had agreed the night before that it would be to stay out of contact, no com-links or any other methods of communication because Jyrki wasn't stupid and it would be a really bad thing for all concerned if he found out I was no longer alone.

It was pleasant to sit and it allowed me time to stretch out into the force side of thing to tag this man so that I could easily find him again, a little like finding the signature engine wake ships left behind. Unlike Jyrki, the man following me was not force sensitive or else he might have felt what I was up to. This was one of those rare times when I was grateful for my strange force gifts; they meant I did not have to keep looking at the man following me to know he was there. I wondered how long we would keep this dance up until something interesting happened because I was not the most patient person in the world and sooner or later this was going to end. It was making me cross.

I was a little surprised, at first, that Jyrki had hired this guy of the job, he seemed nervous and out of his depth but then as I observed him better I saw this was all a ruse. Like Lorano Dek this man was a pro and equally as dangerous. While Jyrki may not have known the extent to which I had trained and become far better at the art of combat or the craft of using this unwanted power of mine he was not about to underestimate me, at least not as much as I would wish for. So I waited, playing jax and mouse with the ugly man. I had an end goal in mind but, as Navaari had said, it must be played out subtly.

"You must become the hunter not the hunted." Navaari had said, "Lead him without him knowing you are doing it. He is the one following you. He is not the one in charge."

From watching and listening to the holo recording Jyrki had made of my father for me as proof of life, I had managed to puzzle out, along with Navaari's help, that he was being held somewhere fairly close to The Burning Deck. Jyrki had been careless and there had been a very distinctive warning siren that could be heard clearly in the background sound of recording. I had heard it several times while sitting in the cantina both times I had been there and when I mentioned that to Navaari he made a call to the cantina to ask what it was.

"The very nice bartender informed me that this sound you are hearing is the warning siren for the Redbock Heights Hotel's shuttle bay which is situated on the lower

south side of the hotel. She tells me they have complained about it but the hotel insists it is necessary for its customers as well as the pedestrians who walk there. Apparently when the shuttle Bay door opens the pedestrian concourse also raises. When this happens, she said there was a second less annoying alarm that goes off for that."

We had watched the recording again, boosting the sound, listening for the sirens as well as anything else.

"I can't hear the second alarm or any mechanicals lifting the concourse." I had said.

"Perhaps the room is too well sound proofed for that. But it is a beginning, now we are knowing the area of the place this man has your father." Navaari had said, "So, we study the images again and find more signs."

The room my father was in, as far as I had been able to see from the recording, was small and had no windows on any of walls that had been shown. The light in the room was dim and completely artificial. All the shadows indicated a single light source, leading us to think that there were no windows at all which meant the room was either in the middle of a building, not very likely given the area which was all cafes, cantinas or hotels, or it was a part of an area no longer well used like a basement or subbasement.

Its sparseness had reminded me sharply of a utility room except it was far too large for that, and given the lack of furniture, junk or usable fixtures in the room, as far as we could see; I surmised that it was a place no one had been in a long time. Empty rooms on Nar Shadda were rare, space was at a premium, especially in the Corellian District, so this room had to be in a building that was either no longer used which meant condemned to be demolished or it was in one of the subbasements of one of the hotels. Because of the clarity of the warning Claxton it had to be very near the Redbock Heights Hotel, probably on the same side which narrowed down the field a lot.

After looking at a grid map and a tourist guide to this part of town Navaari and I had come up with three possible places. Now I wanted to check these places out. I had one day to figure this out before I had to meet with Jyrki again after that the game became more interesting and a lot more dangerous because chances are it would be taken off world. In space, on his own ship, Jyrki would have the advantage but down here it was equal footing, more or less, plus I had Navaari on my side.

I ordered lunch and ate the spicy soup slowly while pretending to read my magazine. In reality I was studying technical readouts of the buildings I wanted to look at. At Navaari's urging I had logged into the public archives and had been utterly surprised to find the building plans on file available for download for a small fee.

Navaari had shrugged, "Too long you lived under the shadow of secrecy and lies. Information such as this is usually not hidden but is open and accessible to the public. "

I had made a face but had not argued with him, then had paid with my cred-chip and downloaded the files on to my small hand held data-pad and studied them until my eyes burned. We had narrowed it down to three buildings and then had gone back to watching the recording until I had quite literally crashed asleep on Navaari's shoulder.

It was a warm day for Nar Shadda and beings of races, types and colours were out enjoying the day, ignoring the pollution and the general stench that I would forever associate with this place. The Concourse was busy and many of the shops were having

sales to try and pull in more customers. Shop owners barked at potential customers as well as each other trying to make more credits and on the whole the scene was raucous and lively. I set aside my magazine for a moment to watch the strange, unchoreographed dance and let my mind drift. The swirl of people moving along the sidewalk by the tap'caf swirled into a strange blend of liquid colour. I could feel the vision coming but I could not stop it. I could count on one hand the number of times I had been on the receiving end of a waking dream and none of them had been happy.

*The room was dimly lit and bare save for a chair in the center. It stank of stale urine and vomit tainted with the sickly coppery scent of blood. Something bad had happened here but it had happened a very long time ago, 'ancient history' a voice whispered in my mind. 'Mass murder, a moment in time gone bad, very, very bad. You don't want to look, girl. You don't want to look now, or ever....'*

*There was moment of peace then it was shattered by the sound of a warning siren, the shuttle bay door of the adjacent hotel opening. That hotel must have sound proof windows I thought absently otherwise no one would stay there ever.*

*Suddenly the room which had been empty and badly lit almost burst with light and action. Navaari moved like water, fighting someone I could not see. There was fresh blood and lots of it on the floor and the walls but I didn't know where it was coming from. I frantically looked around for my father but all I saw was a body lying on the floor. I couldn't tell who it was.*

*"Go!" Navaari shouted, "Go now!" but he was too late and as his form vanished into dimness I felt rather than saw the person move behind me. When I turned around I came face to face with Jyrki Andando, hatred blazing in his eyes.*

*"Why, Mouse, why?" He hissed between clenched teeth. "Why must you always take the difficult path?" He reached out for my hand but I pulled away, shaking my head, not understanding what it was I was seeing over his shoulder. The room had erupted into a mass of writhing, screaming beings most of them twi'lek but none of them were real. Their bodies were translucent, and ghost like and I could see through them. It looked for a moment as though I had stumbled into a night club during the busy dance time but to my horror I realised they were not dancing, they were all being slaughtered. Suddenly the searing pain of a knife slicing through my shoulder, the same shoulder he had stuck the Anzati blade into, brought me to my senses. I reeled with agony, far too much agony for the wound that had been caused and dropped to my knees. I was grateful when the scene around me swirled into darkness.*

*I blinked and found myself on a Star Destroyer, kneeling on the floor cradling a body in my arms, at first the face, covered by hair matted with blood, was Jyrki's but then it changed to my uncle's which then morphed into Navaari's. I tried to clear the sticky hair from his face but when I did so it was not Navaari I was staring at but Thrawn. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out.*

*Hands touched me then, pulling me back from the floor pulling me back from Thrawn's lifeless form. I tried to hold on to him but he was too heavy and I was not strong enough. I tried to back away but I could not move properly, as though something had bound itself around my lower legs. I looked around and realised I was up to my knees in snow, freezing cold and very much alone. All around me a blizzard*



*howled and in my hand I held my mother's lightsaber hilt. I had no idea how it came to be in my hand and as I slowly turned around to try and figure out where the hell I was, the whiteness from the swirling storm blinded me.*

As suddenly as this vision had descended down upon me so it receded and I realised I was not stranded on a planet full of snow and ice in the middle of a howling gale but seated in a pleasant tap'caf on Nar Shadda at lunch time. I looked at my hands hastily but there was no lightsaber and no blood only a bored sounding waiter asking me if I was alright and if there was anything else I wanted to order.

"I'm fine, just daydreaming," I said as I shook off the remnants of the vision and nodded, mindful that I was being watched.

The waiter gave me a sceptical look and asked again if I needed anything else, the underlying threat being that if I wasn't going to order I should leave so that another paying customer could have the table.

"Bring me another of these, please," I added tapping my empty stim'caf cup, "with a shot of brandy on the side."

The waiter nodded, picked up my empty cup and vanished into the dimness of the tap'caf. I sat back against the chair and drew a deep steadying breath. Puzzled by what I had seen and more than a little annoyed with it. I didn't like that in more and more of my dreams and visions I saw Thrawn and I hated that he was usually dead or dying. This vision was particularly bizarre because there was a second story going on in it that had nothing to do with my current situation. I closed my eyes to bring back the images of the screaming mass of people, mainly young female twi'leks who had been ghost like in the back ground of the room I had seen myself in. It was the same room as the one in the holo recording Jyrki had made, windowless but large, too large to be a storage room, it had been meant for something else, something grim and unpleasant if this vision was anything to go on.

*'Ancient history' the voice in the vision had said. 'Mass murder, a moment in time gone bad, very, very bad. You don't want to look, girl. You don't want to look now, or ever....'*

When he came back a few moments later my head was clear and as he placed the 'caf and the brandy on the table I asked. "Excuse me but have you worked here long?"

"Yes miss, almost fifteen years now."

"So you know the area well then?"

"I'd like to think so," He replied in a *get to the point* tone of voice.

"I heard that near here there was some sort of a terrible murder which happened around this area. Someone was telling me that it happened in the Redbock Heights, a very bloody slaughter?" I asked in that voice tourists sometimes used when they are unsure about a local urban myth and want it conformed.

The waiter, an older looking human male, furrowed his brow. "You'd be talking about the Dibbson slave ring murder but that weren't at the Redbock that were at the Grish'min Inn and no one stays there anymore. Inn's been shut down for maybe going on ten years now though the council won't tear it down on account that the owner still pays his taxes and everything. People says it's haunted, and most people stays away

from it, says they hear the screams of the dead coming from it still." The man said in the hushed voice of a co-conspirator telling a story.

"You seem to know a lot about it," I said mildly surprised.

"I aughta," he said, "I was working here the night it happened. Right mess it was too. Woulda never happened before the Empire, let me tell you, things was different in them days. Them jedi would have taken care of it before it got out of hand but the storm troopers, they was clueless." He shook his head, "It was a slaughter pure and simple, they say the room was red from all the blood that was shed. There were so many dead that they had to farm out the bodies to some of the mortuaries in the nearby sectors, not enough space for 'em all in the Corellian Sector. Place was crawling with stormtroopers and the like but even they was not man enough to handle what they saw inside. I remember clear as day one of 'em hauling off his helmet and throwing up his lunch. Put the customers right off, it did."

I shook my head in disbelief. "What happened?"

He snorted. "Slavers fighting over slaves is what happened. There was an auction, secret like, being held in the Inn's lower rooms. The story goes that the slaves had been taken from all over the galaxy, though it was mainly twi'leks and most of them were female and young at that, younger than you even. The shipment of slaves was supposed to head over to someone in the Duros sector but they was stolen and the owner, a nasty piece of work named Merken, wanted them back. When he heard that his slaves was being auctioned off here and by his arch rival no less, he went ballistic, called in his people and the next thing you know there was a bloody war going on. Instead of being able to work it out with money and spice like they usually would the two warring factions turned on each other and the slaves in the room. It was a blood bath from start to end. Sixty three slaves plus the owners and their gangs were all dead, torn to shreds. Only one to survive was a little twi'lek girl who saw the whole thing and testified, told the HoloNet news and everything. Don't know what ever became of her though. Big scandal for the Inn, seeing as how auctioning slaves outside of a proper auction arena ain't exactly legal though usually everyone turns a blind eye to it, you know. The inn closed down after that."

"Sounds awful," I said letting the breath I had been holding in slowly out.

"It was, them pictures was splashed all over the HoloNet, nightmares for months afterwards. Why you so interested anyways?" He asked suddenly a little suspicious.

I shook my head. "Someone on the shuttle I came in on mentioned something about a haunted hotel is all. I am staying at the Redbock; I asked about it there but they won't tell me anything, said it was not a story for lady-like ears to hear," I said with a nonchalant shrug, "I didn't want to stay in a haunted hotel and I don't think they wanted to lose my business."

"Don't imagine they would be wanting to discuss that seeing as how they is situated directly across from the Grish'min Inn. He nodded knowingly. "Don't blame you either but the Redbock is alright, though you might like to look over your bill carefully when you checks out, they has a habit of making expensive mistakes with their billing," he said with a wink. "If you know what I mean."

"Oh really, thanks I will make sure to keep an eye on that." I beamed a delighted and relieved smile at him.

The waiter nodded then seeing a frantically waving hand from another customer he gave me a polite shrug and went back to work. I had to fight from grinning like a mad thing or worse jumping up and down with excitement. I was certain that this place, this Inn the waiter had told me about was the place Jyrki was holding my father. It was one of the three buildings I had narrowed my search down to. It fit the profile and now it fit the vision I had just had.

I dumped the shot of brandy into my stim'caf and sipped at it thoughtfully. The trick would be how to get rid of the guy who was following me and get into the condemned Grish'min Inn to search it. I had technical readouts to the building so finding a way in should not be that hard to do. A little voice whispered in my ear to wait until I could talk it over with Navaari, who had given me several stern warnings against taking matters into my own hands, but another part of me felt that time was running out for my father and that if I didn't act now I might regret it more. So, I sat and waited, trying to logic my way around this situation, the way Thrawn did, hoping to find a solution that did not end up with me or my family at death's door.

Thinking of Thrawn made me melancholy. I missed him terribly and despite all of Navaari's assurances, I was certain he would not forgive me for running off in the manner that I had. I had reasoned out that he, of all people, would understand the need to do everything I could to save my family, after all he had lost his brother and I know he still mourned for Thrass even though he rarely spoke about him. I was certain that if he could go back and change things, he would have done everything he could have to save his brother's life. I knew he understood my reasons for coming to Nar Shadda I just wasn't so sure he would forgive me for the way in which I had carried out my plan. We had agreed no more secrets and I had completely ignored this in order to come here at Jyrki's command.

Now I was wasting time, letting Jyrki to set the pace and make the rules. I drummed my fingers on the table and sighed, this waiting around was becoming tedious and I had had enough. It was time to turn the tables; it was time I took the offensive. Instead of being the hunted I was about to take on the hunt. I drained my stim'caf, the shot of brandy in it burning as it slid down my throat. As nonchalantly as I could I got and headed into the dimly lit tap'caf to use the 'fresher. This was one of the most useful pieces of advice my father had ever given me. *Eat, drink and use the 'fresher whenever you get the chance because you just never know what will happen next and it sucks if you end up someplace thirsty, hungry and desperately needing to pee.*

I stood in the dimly lit fresher staring at my reflection as I splashed cold water on my face. I took a very deep breath and nodded to myself then I found the waiter and paid my bill giving him a generous tip on top. I lingered inside the tap'caf a few moments under the guise of watching the HoloNet feed they had on display and when the waiter had left the inside again I moved quickly to find the back entrance, which as luck would have it was through the kitchen.

I used all the force talents I had to make sure the cook and his helper did not notice I was there. Mind tricks, Lord Vader had called this talent and while it wasn't my strongest talent it was good enough to get me through the somewhat dubious looking kitchen and out through the back entrance into a small ally. I glanced around and reached out with that sixth sense. The man who had been sent to follow me was still

sitting at his table, expecting me to return no doubt. I breathed a little sigh of thanks because this gave me a head start. The ugly man was not stupid; it would not take him very long to figure out what had happened when I didn't come back to my table.

I glanced around the ally to see how best to proceed and spying an escape ladder decided that since most people thought in two dimensions the very best way to elude being followed again was to go up. Gathering my courage and ignoring the little voice in my head telling me this was a very bad idea I grabbed the first rung of the ladder and began to climb up it. It was time to go find my father, meet up with Navaari who was probably trying to figure out how to get into my ship and then get the hell off this planet. If Jyrki wanted to kill Luke Skywalker he was going to have to do that without my help.

Nar Shadda, also known as the Vertical City, The Smuggler's Moon and Little Coruscant, was a mess of buildings and durasteel. Situated in the Y'Toub system it was a moon that orbited Nal Hutta, the Hutt's home planet. When the Hutts took over occupation of Nal Hutta, thousands of years prior to the rise of the empire, they made the native species, the Evocii, their slaves and forced them into slave labour building up the Moon's infrastructure until it became a place that rivalled Coruscant for importance in the trade routes. The Evocii built from the ground up, and soon space ports and fuelling stations reached high up into the atmosphere. In between these massive ports and docking stations the rest of the city grew as well, because along with the prosperity and industry came the beings who lived and worked, hoping to gain a little of the wealth the moon was quickly amassing. All of this changed when the main trade routes shifted and as quickly as it had risen in status so it soon fell in to a back water state and was abandoned by the Republic.

Shortly after this the Hutts aligned themselves with the Honourable Union of Desevro and Tion and for a while managed to regain some of its former prosperity but this ended with the Tionese War and Nar Shadda sank back into obscurity becoming a haven for smugglers and other underworld acts. Law and order had long since ceased to exist and crime flourished. It became snidely known as The Smuggler's moon and in contrast to Coruscant's gleaming, luxurious looks Nar Shadda slowly slipped in polluted, congested cities surrounded by urban decay.

There was no law on Nar Shadda. After the Republic had left it in favour of more convenient worlds along better trade routes the moon's fortunes had turned to the seedy side and it had been left to its own devices in the area of government and law enforcement. The sectors were ruled by various crime syndicates and turf wars occurred frequently between these factions.

It was on Nar Shadda that the smuggler turned hero Han Solo first began his career working under such famous smugglers as Salla Zend and Shug Ninx. Names I knew by reputation only and whispers overheard while I had worked at Jabba's palace as a dancer. Solo had done a lot of work for the Hutts smuggling spice and other valuable cargos and had been one of Jabba's golden boys before he had been caught and boarded by an Imperial patrol and forced to ditch a cargo that was worth more than most people made in a year. After that Jabba had placed a sizeable bounty on Solo's head which was how he had gotten involved in the Rebellion somehow.

I thought about all of this as I scrambled up ladders, across walkways and sky-lanes. At one time this moon had been beautiful but now it was a decrepit mess which smelled just as bad as it looked.

I squatted atop one of the gantry ways I had discovered and watched the flow of movement below me. The area I had ended up in was a warren of alley ways, streets, covered over passes and walkways. It never stopped moving and the air was constantly full of traffic which only added to the noise and the small that forever permeated the place. At any given time this madness was a distinct disadvantage but right now I thanked whatever gods were watching over me for the chaos because it made blending in that much easier. I sighed as I dropped down from my perch to the walkway below it and continued towards my goal.

In a roundabout manner I had made my way via some fairly long and unorthodox routes to get to the area where the Grish'min Inn was situated. It was easy to blend into the crowds and dressed as I was no one even gave me a second look. A few times I stopped, slipping into a store under the pretext of browsing, to stretch out with my force abilities and see if I could catch the scent of anyone following me but as far as I could tell I had shaken the man Jyrki had set to tail me. By the time I had reached the backside of the Grish'min Inn it was dusk, the sun's light fading into a hideous canvas of violent reds and purples.

The building was as ugly as its history and I wasn't sure if it was because of the story the waiter had told me coupled with my vision or if I was projecting my own fears on to it but I thought the Inn was also malevolent. I stood in the shadows and contemplated my next move. According to the city plans I had looked at there was a warren of small service tunnels which led under the buildings in this area, connecting one to the next making easier for city workers to address any issues that may occur with the infrastructure which was dodgy at best. The Evocii had created them while they were building upwards, it saved time on getting from one place to the next and no one had ever bothered to close them down afterwards because the underbelly of Nar Shadda was a place most sane beings never wanted to go.

I slipped into the Redbock Heights and tried to look as though I belonged there as I made my way through the lobby to the turbo lift. I went up three floors and got out alone and went to find the emergency stairs so that I could head down into the sub levels. Most people did not use the turbo lift to go down and I didn't want anyone to remember seeing me head in that direction. The stairwell was badly lit and smelled of stale urine. I was grateful I had not chosen to stay in this particular hotel after all and wrinkled my nose as the stench increased the further down I went.

I stopped briefly to check with my data pad that I was still on the right track because none of the doors had any markings on them and several that I had tried has been locked. When I did find the right one, I was very relieved to find it unlocked and without an alarm. I slipped through it into a dirty looking service corridor and began to make my way down it to where the exit should have been.

For a long moment I stood staring at the thick durasteel door with its great lock and frowned. I used the force to see if I could discern if there were any sort of alarms attached to it but couldn't find anything and it wasn't as if I was particularly proficient this area of sneaking around anyway. With a shrug I withdrew my lightsaber, the one

that had once been Jyrki's from my satchel and used it to slice the lock open. The noise alarmed me in the quiet of the deserted hall and the stink from the melting duraplast and steel almost made me gag.

The lock, no match for the lightsaber's blade, gave way and I nudged the door open with my foot. Careful not to touch the still red-hot durasteel I slid through the opening into a completely dark passage way. I looked back at the door, debating whether or not to seal it shut behind me then decided not to. This place had not been visited in a long time judging by how undisturbed the dust on the floor and the cobwebs all around me were and it was entirely possible that I would need an escape route.

I consulted my little data-pad to try and figure out where I was going. According to the plans I had this tunnel led under the Redbock heights to its neighbouring building, a somewhat rundown apartment block, from there I would have to find my way across the main concourse to the Inn and then somehow get inside of it to find my father. I made a face. It was dark, somewhat damp and it smelled exceptionally bad, as though something had died here and been left to rot. I put my lightsaber away and pulled out the small pocket lamp I had brought with me. Its yellowish light was a small comfort in a place that was said to be inhabited by savage feral creatures.

Navaari was going to be so pissed when I didn't show up at my hotel room at our agreed on meeting time and I was beginning to think that perhaps he had been right in his statement about chaining me to the bed to make me stay put. The hotel cleaning staff might have looked at me a little funny but at least I would not be here in this situation now. The smell and the darkness were getting to me. Ever since Mattri I had difficulty being in dark confined spaces and the stale air this tunnel held was not helping the growing sense of panic I was feeling. *Just breathe.* I heard my Bunduki master's voice in my head. Easy for you to say, I thought but I did it anyway and began to navigate my way through the darkness to the next exit.

The next door was not locked but it squealed horribly when I opened it making me cringe. No one had come down this way in a while. The small corridor I found myself in lacked the stench of the first but was no less dirty. I scowled as I brushed away cobwebs from my face. According to the data pad I had to go up into the main building to get down to the exit that would lead me under the main concourse to the buildings across it. Essentially I was walking in a great big huge U shape. I sighed and continued, keeping my senses open for anyone following me but as far as I could tell I was completely alone. This was a part of the Corellian Sector that few people ever got to see and I was betting even fewer knew about it. I kept going until I found what I was looking for and stepped into the small service tunnel that would lead me to the building I really wanted to get into. It was a convoluted route and it was taking up way more time than I had thought it would. Navaari would know now that I had gone off on my own and he would be furious. I wasn't sure what scared me more, this tunnel or his anger.

The thick durasteel door that led into the Grish'min Inn opened easily. Too easily, I thought, given the difficulty I had with the doors leading to the other service tunnels which I had entered earlier. It made me wary but I sensed no danger when I reached out with the force only a sense of sadness and a lingering sensation of violence. Given the story the waiter had told me that was not so surprising. There were a lot of old, unhappy ghosts here and they were not overly happy about being disturbed.

I switched off the small torch I had with me and placed my palm on the door as it began to swing shut, letting it close quietly. It held no memories for me, which I thought was a little odd. I had seen flashes from the a couple of the other doors, nothing significant, more small snapshots of tired city workers called in to fix something. I waited for a few moments in the dark trying to get a feel for this place. I searched with all of my senses for any sign of my father but if he was here I could not find him. I drew a deep breath, turned the little torch back on and continued along the small service corridor which was supposed to end up in the boiler room. The Inn felt the same way the Jedi Temple had, as though I were being watched by wary, malevolent spirits, it made the skin between my shoulder blades itch. It wasn't a good sensation. I concentrated on my task, which was to find my father and tried to ignore the unease which was beginning to make me tense and jumpy.

After what felt like forever I found myself in the Inn's old boiler room. I could only stare at the huge antique machinery in awe. It must have been built long before the Clone Wars had started it was so old looking. It was almost beautiful, the way ships engines were beautiful and for a few moments I lost myself to marvelling at it then, shaking myself out of my reverie, I made my way through the forest of pipes and valves to get to the other door, the one that I hoped would take me into the main corridor in the Inn's basement.

I breathed a small sigh of relief as I left the boiler room behind and found myself in the basement proper. I shone my light around and took note of the place. It was in a sorry state. The walls were damp and any paint that had been on them had long flaked or peeled off. I could see the droppings of animals all over the floor and the stench of decay and rot was powerful. I found it hard to believe the owner of this place still paid for it and refused to let it be torn down or renovated, the place was a wreck.

I stopped to consult the blueprints I had to see if I could locate the large room in which the slave auctions had once been held but there was nothing listed on the plans I had. This didn't really surprise me much; such a place would not have been well advertised and in the time the building had been drawn out and built there could have been substantial structural changes made. I felt a wave of despair wash over me and for a second I truly wondered what I was doing. How could I ever hope to find my father, best Jyrki's men and live? It all seemed so hopeless. It was as if the melancholia of the building was seeping into my skin turning me into one of its sad ghosts forever trapped in this awful place.

I leaned with my back against the wall and scrubbed at my face with the palms of my hands. I was tired and coming here alone had, as usual, been a very bad idea but, I rationalised, it had to be done. Jyrki was my problem and what he had done to my father made me angry beyond belief. I could not ask anyone else to risk their lives to help me in this thing because it was my problem alone to deal with. It was easy to rationalise my stupidity in this manner but a small part of me knew I was wrong and going off alone would only serve to make things worse not better. Thrawn had been right, I was reckless but this was Jyrki's fault, forcing my hand and it made me furious.

I felt that thread of anger and used it to stave off the terrible sense of doom I was feeling. I could almost hear the various teachers I had had in my life telling me to buck up and get on with it, to stop feeling sorry for myself and use all the lessons I had been

given to the best of my advantage. In the dark I made a face at these unseen nagging voices and pushed away from the wall to study the blue prints once again.

*There are always clues, you just have to see them,* Master Kjestyll had once told me so I studied the plans again, looking for the unusual. I found it by looking at what was not there and once I saw it I shook my head at the simplicity of it all. A hidden space made to look as though it were part of the foundation. A room without windows, large enough to contain a lot of beings, near enough to allow the sound from the warning siren across the street to sound through and difficult to find. I traced the only possible route to it on the data-reader, memorised it and then, slipping the reader away, began with more determination to get this over with. For a moment I considered turning back to find Navaari and get help but then decided against it. This was my fight and Jyrki was my problem, I just hoped he wouldn't be my death as well.

I found the passage easily enough and stretched out with my senses as much as I could. I could not feel any danger but there was a presence, a familiarity lurking beyond the wall ahead of me. For the first time in my life I wished I had thought about getting a blaster. The only weapon I had on me was the lightsaber and that was tucked away in my satchel. I hadn't even thought to bring a knife of some sort, then again I had not really thought at all.

From the passageway I was in, there was only one way into this room and that meant if Jyrki was beyond the door I would be more or less defenceless when I entered. I looked around to see if there were any other options and noticed an air vent opening covered by a grate. A room without windows had to have some method of ventilation and I was annoyed with myself for not thinking about this earlier. I back-tracked until I came to a place I figured no one would hear or see me. Took out my lightsaber and carved hand and foot holds in the wall. The metal grill was heavy and didn't want to come off with any ease. When I finally did manage to yank it out of its socket the sudden momentum sent me backwards off the wall to land on the floor on my back. The grate went flying and clattered loudly enough that had there been anyone around to watch for intruders they would have heard it. I lay on the filthy floor, winded as well as a little stunned, and swore with a savageness that would have made Jabba blush.

I waited until I was sure no one was coming before I got up, trying to brush off the dirt that had clung to me. Between the cobwebs and the dust I was starting to resemble an oversized Jawa and I felt as though I would never get clean again. Once more I climbed up the wall and then with a great deal of effort managed to squeeze into the ventilation shaft. It was dusty and small. I had enough room to crawl forward using my arms to drag me along but I couldn't turn around so if there was no way out I would have to wriggle backwards again. I didn't relish this thought and for a moment panic overwhelmed me. I fought to get my pounding heart under control, thinking of my father, thinking of Navaari and thinking of Thrawn. How pissed would he be if I died getting stuck in a ventilation shaft I thought, not to mention embarrassing, especially after all I had gone through in my life? I took a gulp of air, fought my fear down to a manageable roar and began to crawl forward as quietly as I could.

It seemed to take forever, though in reality was less than ten minutes, until I found the place I was looking for. I inched forward as silently as I could and peered through the slats of the ventilation grill. Sure enough, in the center of the large, decrepit



looking room sat my father tied to a chair, his head slumped forward. For a moment my heart stopped, I thought he was dead but then I noticed the soft rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed in and out, still alive, just not conscious.

As much as I could I scanned the room but neither saw nor felt the presence of anyone else. They had left my father alone here to die and it made me furious. My guess was that Jyrki was off doing other things and figured there wasn't much chance of my father getting out of this by himself. I considered getting out by opening the vent but when I tried to push on it the thing wouldn't budge so that meant worming my way backwards to get out the way I came. It was even more difficult that I had bargained for and by the time I slithered out of the shaft and back into the hall I was utterly covered in grime, cobwebs and goodness knew what else. Quickly I made my way back to the door and tried it. It opened quietly, easily but touching the handle left me shaking with the memories it spat into my head. I squeezed my eyes shut and blocked them, a mixture of past and present, terrified slaves and Jyrki's insanity.

I slipped into the room, grateful it was not that well lit and after making sure there were no unseen enemies hiding in a corner someplace, I made my way to the center of the room and crouched down by my father's unconscious form. When I touched him he moaned and I could see he was in a lot of pain. His face was swollen and bruised, blood had dried and crusted around his nose and mouth. His lips were cracked and very dry looking.

"Papa...papa," I whispered as I began to untie the complicated knots which held my father to the heavy metal chair. My fingers trembled and the knots were tight.

My father stirred and tried to open his eyes, "Who..."

"Papa, it's Merlyn. Papa, you have to wake up. I need your help to get out of here, I can't carry you." I whispered hoping he would surface enough to be able to get out of here without me having to half carry him along.

"Merly?" My father whispered hoarsely.

I realised as he tried to speak that his mouth was bone dry, and when I looked at him more carefully I understood that he had not been given food or drink for some time. I had been on the receiving end of Jyrki's hospitality once; I knew what my father had gone through. I fumbled in my satchel for the small water bottle and gently put it to his lips. He drank some but spilled more, still it helped him. I hated Jyrki for this. I hated him with a fury that was almost blinding.

"Papa, it's going to be okay, I'm going to get you out of here," I told him resuming my work with the knots.

"No, pet no...you need to leave...Jyrki...", he struggled against the ropes and when I got the last knot undone he slid gracelessly to the floor.

I pulled him to a seated position and then squatted in front of him to hold his face in my hands. He groaned in pain. "Papa, you have to try and stand." I told him and then I used my shoulder to brace him as I helped him get up off the floor. He was heavier than he looked and I struggled with supporting him.

"Merly...it's Jyrki he's the one..." My father despite his condition became agitated. "You need to leave me...trap... he plans...."

"I know papa," I said gently, trying to calm him down. "What about Bedi and Bel?" I asked.

"Safe," He breathed. "Got word from Vahl, sent them to Corellia before Jyrki and his friends came..." His voice trailed off as he sagged in my arms again. I had no idea how I was going to do this; he was too heavy for me to lift. I wrapped my arms about his waist and tried to hoist him up so that he stood but Jyrki's treatment had left him weak. For a moment, I just stood there holding my father tightly, my head against his chest, listening to the sound of his heart. He lifted his head and our eyes caught. I saw tears glisten in his.

"So sorry Merly, so sorry," he said and I felt my own heart break. "Couldn't stop them...."

I put the water bottle to his lips again and this time he drank most of it down when he was done I drew a deep breath and found strength I never knew I had pulled his arm over my shoulder and took as much of his weight as I could. "We have to go now papa." I whispered and twisted so that we face the direction of the door. It was slow going, my father's legs were weak from sitting and being tied for so long, from lack of food and water. It was more like trying to drag a bantha carcass through the desert sands than helping a living man walk to freedom. I prayed to whatever gods were out there to get us through this but they had decided to take the night off.

As soon as we got through the door, before I had gone four steps a powerful arm grabbed me. I stumbled, squeaking in surprise, hampered by the weight of my father who was leaning heavily on me. Dek hit my father on the jaw and he dropped to the floor in a semi conscious state just as I spun around. I came face to face with Dek and felt the bite of a vibro blade snick my throat as I blindly fought to be free of his hand which held me fast. My struggles lasted only a few seconds before I was slammed violently against the wall face first. All the air in my lungs left with a single woosh and I saw stars. I felt the power in the arm that braced itself across the base of my skull and knew if I even tried to move the owner of the arm would break my neck without even trying. I had not even seen this coming.

"You're a bloody pain in the arse, just like he said you would be." Lorano Dek hissed in my ear as he used a set of stun cuffs to bind my arms behind my back. "Too bad you didn't figure out that there is an observation cam in that room." He taunted. "Clever enough to find this place but not clever enough to figure out the trap. He said you were smart but blinded by your attachments. He said to wait, that you'd come to us. He's madder than a spice addict but he knows you right well enough." He eased the weight off my neck slightly.

I reached out through the force to see if I could sense Jyrki nearby but there was nothing, all I sensed was the dull thud of a headache starting in my shoulders. I wondered for a moment if I had suddenly gone head-blind but when I moved a small piece of rubble that lay at my feet I knew that was not the case. The noise caught Dek's attention and he smashed my face back against the wall with his hand.

"Do that again and I'll hurt you. He doesn't want you dead but he didn't say anything about not being in pain." He hissed in my ear as he wound his hand through my hair pulling on it so hard it brought tears to my eyes. "If you struggle I'll scalp you the hard way and then I'll kill your old man. So be a lady and play nice. Put the trickery away." He spun me around by my hair so that I face forward and I had to grit my teeth against the pain. My father was flat on the ground too weak to move but still alive. With

his other hand Dek grabbed my father's inert body from the floor and dragged us both back to the room we had just come from.

A meter beyond the doorway Dek stopped, shoving my father forward as hard as he could. I winced as I watched him sprawl across the floor with a dreadful thud. He didn't move afterwards. "Should I kill him?" Dek asked the man who was seated in the metal chair in the center of the room.

Jyrki shook his head and sat back against the chair, one leg over the other, his ankle resting on his knee. He was dressed in black and it made his pale skin luminous. His hair which had grown long and shaggy was loose instead of tied back and shadowed his angular face. His hands draped on the chair's armrests like dead animals and for a split second I saw the image of the Emperor seated upon a throne of bones.

Nausea suddenly swept through me like a heat wave, my stomach heaved and I retched. Dek spun me away still holding my hair while I threw up the contents of my stomach on to the floor. When I was done he hauled me back around to face Jyrki. I tried to wipe my mouth with my shoulder but that was ineffectual. The smell of fresh vomit did nothing to improve the room or the situation any.

Jyrki watched this for a moment and then got up and came towards me. "Yer never learn, do yer Mouse?" He said, cupping my face in the palm of his hand, cleaning the remnants of spit and vomit from my lips with his thumb. I stared into his eyes and saw nothing of the person I had once known, all I saw was a deep, dark madness. In that moment I was terrified. I shivered even though it wasn't that cold and Dek tightened his grip in my hair. Jyrki patted my face in a tender, loving fashion and walked over to where my father lay. He crouched down by my father's side and put two fingers to the artery on his neck.

"Stronger than he looks, yer father," Jyrki commented, "Fought harder than he should have, all for yer Mouse, all to save yer. He wouldn't tell me where yer were so I had to make him. Still he wouldn't break but the drugs we gave him did the job, I got enough out of Kit to know how to get the message to yer. Then the Tze'yusha'Jin interfered, had to be dealt with which wasted time. But yer got the message and yer came."

I just stared at him, "Why?" I whispered.

"I told yer," Jyrki said, "I need yer to help me eliminate the son of Anakin Skywalker."

I just looked at him. His truth was mixed in with lies. He wanted something else, something that had been too hidden for me to pick up on before. "Let papa go." I spat. "He's never been anything but kind to you. He took you in, he gave you work...."

Jyrki just smiled and got up slowly. "Attachments, Mouse, they will destroy yer every time." He sighed as though speaking to me were a huge effort. He got up slowly, trying to hide the wince of pain. His knee still hurt, I knew that from how he moved, it made me smile which didn't go unnoticed.

"Lack of love and forbidding attachments is what caused the downfall of the Jedi Order!"

"Yer trouble Mouse is that yer never learned to let go." He told me as he paced.

"I never learned to let go?" I spat, "You're the one who won't let go of me!"

"Yer need a teacher, Mouse, someone who can show yer the ways of the force, someone who can show yer the path."

"Path? What path?"

He smiled, "The true Jedi path."

I struggled against Dek's grip on my hair and it hurt, "The true Jedi path? The Jedi are dead Jyrki, they don't exist anymore. They died when the Emperor activated Order sixty-six. He wiped you all out, decimated the Order so that he could have power. It's gone and it's never coming back."

"Yer and I will change that." Jyrki said turning his back to me. "Yer the daughter of a powerful Jedi, her blood runs through your veins, yer told me so yerself. I am also strong in the force so together yer and I will have force sensitive children. We will make the Jedi strong again; we will take our rightful place in the galaxy once more."

I was too shocked to speak but when Dek chuckled behind me I found my voice. "You...you want to mate with me?"

Jyrki turned his head to look over his shoulder at me. His eyes burned into mine and I felt my heart skip a beat but not from desire from fear. "There was a time when yer would have come willingly to my bed Mouse. There was a time when yer would have given yer soul to have me strip yer naked and make love to yer."

I opened my mouth then closed it again, repulsion shuddered through me bringing a cold sweat and fresh bout of nausea, when I got that under control I whispered, "I thought the Jedi were not allowed to have children, were not allowed to have attachments."

He shrugged and turned back away from me. "Things have changed, the rules have changed. We need to start a new Jedi Order, one that will not fall to darkness. Luke Skywalker must not be allowed to live; he must not be allowed to breed. Yer and I will stop this. This has nothing to do with attachments, Mouse; this has to do with practicality."

I shook my head despite the pain it caused. I could not believe what he was telling me, I could not believe what he wanted to do. "You honestly think I will sleep with you so that you can propagate force sensitive children? Do you really think I would let you near me? After all you have done? You really are mad, completely and utterly out of your mind." I spat, "There is no way in all the nine Corellian Hells I will let you touch me in that manner."

Jyrki shrugged. "Of course yer will Mouse," he said softly, his voice almost a caress, "yer have no say in the matter and if yer don't do it willingly then yer will be forced. It isn't as if yer are innocent in the ways of mating any more, is it?" He watched my face closely and smiled in satisfaction when he saw the expression in my eyes. "I know a lot about yer and yer lover. The blue skinned alien who fancies himself the Empire's new saviour. I know more about him than yer think. Antygra told me all about him, the Emperor's favoured alien tactician, Chiss brilliance, isn't that right? I know he was sent into exile but that was just a ruse. The lies about his death may have fooled most but not me, I know that he lives still, I just don't know where but I am betting yer do, don't yer. Yer share his bed now just as yer did when yer were a palace doxy whoring yerself for the Emperor. Don't think I don't know about yer, because I do. Yer will breed

with me and that's the end of it. Yer not an innocent anymore and if I have to force yer then so be it."

The sudden despair which washed over me was almost overwhelming but I bit it back and concentrated on breathing, concentrated on the force. In my head I felt the subtle brush of a familiar, gentle touch. I wasn't sure which of my ghosts had come back to aide me but it was soothing. I drew a deep, calming breath and relaxed into it. The force flowed around me, it flowed around the room and I could now sense Jyrki in it even though he cloaked himself very well. I opened myself up to this ethereal power completely, letting it shine through me. It felt like the Tatooine sunlight and I welcomed its warmth. I could have sworn I heard my mother's voice whispering in my ear to be patient, whispering in my ear to let go of the anger and the fear. I projected these things into the force directly at Jyrki. He felt my touch and turned around in surprise.

"How did yer...?" He began but trailed off as he stared at me, at least I thought he was staring at me but then I realised he wasn't, he was actually looking past my shoulders. I frowned and tried to twist from Dek's grip watching Jyrki in horror as he began to move, to draw a weapon, a blaster.

All of a sudden, at the very same time, I sensed another presence in the room but before either of us could say another word I felt Dek's body twist. The sickening crack that followed the motion told me Dek's neck had just been broken. I felt the fingers that had held on to my hair release and jerked away to see Navaari out of the corner of my eye but at the same time I could see Jyrki move to stand over my father, a blaster in his hand. It was pointed directly at my father's head.

"Stop or he dies." Jyrki said quietly.

Ignoring Jyrki's threat, Navaari reached down and picked up the control for the binders from Dek's inert body and I felt the locks release. The binders fell to the ground with a clatter that sounded too loud. I rubbed my wrists and glanced at Navaari. He had a small, single handed Dantassi bowcaster style weapon trained on Jyrki. The deadly looking quarrel glistened so I knew it was laced with poison.

"Are you whole?" Navaari asked me in Dantassi Cheunh never taking his eyes off Jyrki.

I nodded. "Tja."

"Put the weapon down or I will kill her father." Jyrki said again.

Navaari cocked his head to one side. "Are you that fast?" he asked, his Basic heavily accented.

Jyrki sneered. "Are yer willing to risk it Bone-Trader?"

"Are you?" Navaari played the bluff back into Jyrki's hands. They never took their eyes off each other.

I watched as Jyrki considered his options. Navaari was large, masked and fierce looking. The Bone Traders had a terrible reputation which Jyrki well knew and he was weighing this now against his odds of survival. I watched, holding my breath, as Jyrki stepped back from my father's body but he never lowered the blaster and I could see the hatred blazing in his eyes. How weird it was, I thought, that sometimes we become the very thing we feared the most.

"A'myhska, bring your father here." Navaari told me switching back to his native tongue.

I hesitated a moment then warily did as he asked, grasping my father under his arms and began to pull him towards Navaari. I had only gone two steps when all the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I twisted around to see a flash in the doorway.

"Navaari! Behind you!" I yelled but he was already turning. I saw it all in slow motion, the short, ugly man who had been following me fired his blaster just as Navaari shot at him. Navaari's aim was true and the quarrel thudded deeply into the man's chest. He was dead before he hit the ground but he had gotten a shot off and I watched in horror as a bright blue blaster bolt hit Navaari squarely in the chest sending him flying backwards. I screamed and dropped my father to run to where Navaari lay. He was not moving, I wasn't sure he was breathing.

I didn't see that Jyrki had also sprung into action and as fast as I was so he was faster. He took the butt of the blaster he held and slammed it against the base of my skull. A blinding white light shot through my head accompanied by a moment of perfect stillness. Then, as my brain caught up with the body, pain exploded all around me making me suck in my breath as I slid into unconsciousness.

*My head pounded and for a moment I wasn't sure where I was, moving was painful but the need to know where I had ended up overruled than the maddening headache. Slowly the scene unfolded and I found myself on the planet I had been born on somewhere, it seemed, out in the Dune Sea. The desert stretched out wide before me. The sand had turned a warm reddish-gold colour in waning suns' light, shadows and light exaggerating the ripples created by the waves of the wind as far as the eye could see, sloping up and down into crested dunes looking like a sea of honey coloured water. The twin suns hung low in the sky and the heat haze shimmering off the still burning sands made the horizon look watery and ethereal but I shivered in spite of the warmth in the air. I felt the tell-tale breeze that whispered a storm was coming and frowned, something wasn't quite right because the air smelled like cold pepper not like warm pasha spice.*

*"You always pick the most difficult path to follow." Said the soft voiced man my Uncle had named Qui-Gon Jinn.*

*I turned around to face him. Gone was the old farmer's poncho I was used to seeing him in instead he was clothed in full Jedi robes and his long brown hair, only partially tied back, flowed around his lined face catching the fading light of the suns.*

*"Why do you come to me?" I asked him.*

*"I knew your mother very well; she was one of the gentlest beings I have ever met," he replied .*

*"Gentle?" I asked crossly. "She, like every other Jedi, went to war. They fought; they killed and in turn were killed by those they were trying to protect."*

*The sorrow which passed across his face made my heart ache, made me sorry for my unkind words. "War changed the Jedi Order in ways we could have never imagined," he replied . "Your mother was special and I cared for her very much. You are her legacy Merlyn Gabriel. I would not see you fall to the darkness which both hunts and haunts you."*

*I sighed. Sometimes I felt as though my ghosts were at war over my soul tugging it from one side to the other and back again. "You haven't answered my question," I said.*

*"I come to you because I owed your mother a debt, because when she needed me to listen to her the most I did not. She knew she would have a child, she knew that for a long time before you were born. I have tried to be a guide to where she could not," he said.*

*"She knew?"*

*He nodded, "She had a vision, she told me this but it was right before I left with my Padawan to go to Naboo. I told her we would speak of it when I returned."*

*"You died on Naboo." I pointed out. I remembered a dream I had once of this very thing but it seemed very far away, a half remembered memory.*

*"Yes, I was arrogant and the young Sith Zabraki I fought was faster, stronger than I was," he said, "I failed in many respects not the least of which was the training of Anakin."*

*"You blame yourself for his failure?"*

*"He did not fail us," Qui-Gon said, "We failed him. It was the arrogance of the Jedi Council coupled with their fear of his powers which drove him away, drove him to seek guidance from someone who seemed to care for him. He turned to Palpatine and Palpatine used the boy's need for love, need for acceptance to create Darth Vader. It was Palpatine who showed Anakin what we could not, trust and affection. By the time the boy realised what had happened it was already too late. The Jedi Order let Anakin Skywalker down in every way possible, so yes, we failed him," He sighed and looked away from me, "I failed him." He added softly.*

*"Dying isn't exactly failing." I pointed out.*

*"It was the ultimate failure caused by my own arrogance but I found a way to bridge the gap between worlds, a way to come back and communicate to the living. Where I failed him, I could help you," he said, "You have a hard journey before you, child."*

*I laughed. "I stopped being a child a long time ago; even Navaari no longer calls me that. And as far as difficult journeys, when has that not been the case?"*

*He smiled slightly and shrugged one shoulder. "Yet you choose to walk this path. You could have done things very differently but that is not your way." He chided. "You choose to face your destiny but you fight it also and that is what makes it so difficult."*

*I made face. He was, after all, right.*

*"It will be a terrible, difficult road you now have chosen to walk but use the force; it is stronger with you than you believe." He reached out to place a hand on my shoulder.*

*"I am not a Jedi and I don't ever want to be!" I snapped, tired of all this Force business, shrugging away from his touch.*

*He chuckled, "Indeed you are not and had you been taken in by the Order you would have been a storm in the calm," he said. For a moment he said nothing and I thought that he was finished but then he continued with a voice laced with sadness. "You do not ever have to be a Jedi, young Merlyn, that particular path was never*

*yours to choose and now that way is closed to you but that should not stop you from sensing and using the living force around you, let it be your guide. Do not let fear and anger cloud your judgement, look past the lies and the desire for revenge. You have already seen what lies at the end of such a path and it is not a place such a spirit as yours should be."*

*I frowned. "That sounds like a lot of Jedi mumbo jumbo to me." I told him.*

*He laughed and it was beautiful sound, rich and warm, "Perhaps the words are but the sentiment behind them is not. You will find your way, you are strong and smart. Your mother would have been proud of the woman you have become." He smiled. "I am proud of you. You are ready to face the hard way ahead of you and the terrible trials yet to come."*

*"Terrible trials?" I asked not liking the sound of the words. "Have I not gone through enough already as it is?"*

*"Through hardship we learn strength," He replied cryptically.*

*I sighed. "Then at least tell me what to expect?"*

*"You already know; you have been shown many times. You have been given the tools to survive and you have the strength to persevere."*

*"That's not terribly helpful." I told him.*

*"No perhaps it is not," he replied, reaching out to lift my chin with the tips of two fingers. "But it is not my job to make the way clear to you, it is my job to be a guide, I cannot fight this battle for you child, I can only offer you wisdom and guidance."*

*The world around me shifted and the air thickened with the sudden moisture of a terrible storm. I realised I was no longer on Tatooine but somewhere on Coruscant or perhaps Nar Shadda. Suddenly a huge thunder clap tore the air around me and the ground shook violently.*

*"You should wake up now, child and be ready." Qui-Gon said just as a second, even louder thunderclap tore through the air and this time the shaking was so bad I lost balance and fell, waking up in the process.*

I opened my eyes slowly; my head hurt and everything swam in a blurry haze. For a second I thought I was in the cockpit of the shuttle I had flown from Nirauan to try and find Thrawn after the fall of the Emperor. My heart skipped a beat and a moment of panic swept through me but as my vision and my thoughts began to clear I realised I was not sitting in the cockpit of a lambda shuttle but was actually lying on a bunk in a small cabin on what sounded a lot like a YU class ship. I reached up to touch the base of my skull and felt the spot where Jyrki had hit me. There was a large, painful lump but the skin had not broken. He had known exactly how hard to hit me to knock me out but not cause any serious harm. I got up from the small bunk slowly, wincing at the pounding at the base of my skull which seemed to get worse a second after I moved.

Time paused as I sat and looked around. The cabin was designed for a single person, probably the Captain but Jyrki had never used it. It was utilitarian, sparsely furnished and the only belongings in it were mine. I pulled my satchel and searched through it not surprised to see my lightsaber missing but everything else was there and for that I was grateful. I sighed as I took out an analgesic patch from the tiny first-aid



pack I had brought along and slapped it on the back of my neck then I pulled out the bottle of water and drank, thinking of my father and then Navaari as I did so.

I replayed the last few moments in the Grish'min Inn's hidden room, the sound of Dek's neck breaking as Navaari killed him, the blaster bolt hitting Navaari square in the chest, my father lying, half dead from the abuse at Jyrki's hand, on the dirty floor and then the smash of pain from the blaster hitting me on the back of the head. I bit back the tears which threatened to come. My impulsiveness had cost Navaari his life. I didn't know how the hell I would ever begin to tell Thrawn this and I didn't think he would ever forgive me for it either.

Despair wrenched through me. What had happened, what I had caused to happen, was so awful that I couldn't bear to think about it. I couldn't believe that Navaari was dead but I had seen him shot, I had seen him fall and I had not seen his chest move with his breathing before Jyrki had rendered me unconscious, but no one survived a blaster bolt to the chest. I swallowed back my tears which made my throat ache. Crying would not do me any good now and it certainly wouldn't do my pounding head any good either. What was done was done and I couldn't turn back to the chrono to fix it, I could only hope to somehow end this fight once and for all.

After a few moments, when the pain in my head began to subside, I took stock of my situation. I tried the door but it was locked with a security code I couldn't crack and there was no other way out. I sat back down on the bunk and listened to the sounds of the hyperdrive. The ship had a slight shimmy and the hyperdrive sounded old but healthy enough. Jyrki may have been a complete nut job but he was a hell of a mechanic and I was quiet certain that, in spite of her age, this ship's engines were solid which is why, when a few moments later there was an almighty bang and I was thrown violently to one side, I was more than a little shocked. I was even more surprised when the lights went out plunging me into total darkness and the ships engines went completely dead. Panic swept through me but I squashed it down quickly, while I could afford to lose it on the ground, in space, panicking meant the difference between living and dying and I had been trained better than that. I took a few deep breaths and waited, a few seconds later the dim red emergency light flicked on giving me enough light to see by and the dull throb of the sublight engine kicked in. I sat still, trying to figure out what had just happened. For sure we had come violently out of hyperspace but it hadn't been so bad that the ship had blown up. I listened carefully to the sounds the ship was making. The sublight engine was slow and struggling, Jyrki had push started it and the engine had not liked that very much.

I tried the comm panel by the door but it was dead, the main electrics on the ship seemed to be out. I tried the lock on the cabin door again but nothing happened and the small indicator light stayed red. Frustrated and angry I began to pound on it yelling for Jyrki to let me out. It was one thing to be locked in while the ship was running properly but quite another to be locked in when something went wrong. When my fists hurt from banging on the door, I kicked at it with my foot, shouting at the top of my lungs. I was pretty sure he would be in the engine room and wouldn't actually be able to hear me so I was surprised when the security light suddenly went from red to green and the locked snicked open.

I opened the door manually and took one step out of the tiny cabin. The corridor was pitch black not even the emergency lights were on which was really unusual. I couldn't see anything beyond the dim radius of the red lamp from my own cabin nor could I sense anyone in the corridor. I wasn't sure what sort of YU ship we were on so I didn't know her lay out well enough to just walk around in the dark blind. I turned around to get my satchel which still held my small hand torch when someone silently clapped a hand across my mouth and pushed me back into the cabin. The door behind me shut softly and before I could struggle the person who had silenced me released me. I spun around ready to fight but stopped mid motion when I saw who stood before me. For a second I wavered unsure if who I was seeing was real or a ghost.

"Zte'sa?" My voice sounded small, child like to me ears. My uncle nodded making the gesture for silence and gathered me into his arms, holding me tightly.

"Are you okay?" He whispered in my ear.

I nodded, too stunned to speak. When I found my voice all I could think to say was, "How? He told me you were dead, he told me he had killed you."

"I wanted him to think this was the case, we can discuss the details of 'how' later. Suffice to say he saw what I wished him to see and thought what I wanted him to think" He replied quietly. "The ship is a YU-four-ten model so you should be familiar enough with the layout and the comm-panel. Can you get to the cockpit and unlock the controls?"

I nodded, "I think so but what are you going to do?"

"Take care of Jyrki."

"He'll probably be in the engine room trying to fix the hyperdrive."

"That was my intent." My uncle said tersely.

"You sabotaged the engine?"

He nodded, "Unless he has a spare motivator, the main hyperdrive won't be functioning any time soon. I disabled the back-up as well," he said holding out his hand so that I could see the small engine part he had removed from the spare making it impossible for Jyrki to start the secondary hyperdrive. I made a face at him and he slipped the tiny part back into the satchel he wore slung across his body.

"Do you know where we are?"

"Somewhere in the Ando System, I believe," he said, "Do you have a weapon?"

I shook my head and he pulled out a small, sheathed vibro blade and handed it to me. "As I recall you are a tad inexperienced with blasters.

I took the blade from his hand and slipped it into the waistband of my skirt at the small of my back under my coat. I retrieved my satchel and slung it across my shoulder. "He took papa," I said quietly, "Navaari is dead, shot with a blaster."

My uncle looked at me sharply. "Is Kit still alive?"

I nodded, "He was still living when Jyrki knocked me out, but ...," I wavered, "he was in bad shape."

"Kit is a strong man Lei'lei; he's survived far worse than Jyrki Andando." Uncle Vahlek said quietly but his voice was filled with sorrow. "You are sure the Bone Trader is dead?" He asked.

"I saw him get shot, a blaster bolt to the chest at point blank range, saw him fall but I didn't see him breathe." I felt tears well up in my eyes and brushed them away; we didn't have time for crying.

"We can mourn later," he said, the expression on his face was grim and angry, "Right now we have work to do." He handed me a small personal comm unit. "Don't use it unless you have to and then only click it don't speak. When the ship is secure I'll come to the cockpit, lock yourself in and unless you hear me give you four clicks do not open the door, do you understand?"

I nodded and he kissed the top of my head. "Be careful, Lei'lei I'm not sure he is alone and he may not be in the engine room anymore."

I didn't want to leave my uncle now that I found him alive and I held onto him tightly, burying my face in his coat, breathing in his scent deeply. "I thought you were dead. I thought everyone was dead."

"You give up on us too quickly." He peeled himself away from me and stroked my hair. "I'm not that easy to kill," he said lifting my chin up so that I stared into his pale green eyes. "Look at me Lei'lei, I know you're scared, tired, in pain, and sad but I need you to get past these things right now because our survival depends on your courage and ability to bypass Jyrki's security." He sighed, "Everything will be fine, just remember all that you have been taught, you can do this. Now go and don't worry about me." Then he vanished into the darkness, moving without a sound.

I fished about my satchel for the small hand torch and turned it on, then headed towards the cockpit. My uncle had been right about the ship type, an old YU-Four-Ten, and it was in rough shape. If Jyrki had bought it then he had probably gotten it from a salvage yard, if it was stolen then chances were the previous owner was grateful to be able to claim insurance on it.

The YU-four-ten series were interesting ships in that for a light freighter they had a lot of cargo space, more than most ships of the same class, but the extra cargo space meant the ship was slower and less manoeuvrable than the YT series, which most smugglers preferred. This was a good hauling ship if speed wasn't an issue and my father had flown one long before Jyrki had started to work for him, I knew the lay out of the YU-Four-Ten well so it didn't take me long to get to the cockpit. I was grateful to discover that Jyrki had not locked the door and I slipped inside quietly, relieved to find it empty of nasty surprises.

I glanced around and saw that the comm station had power so my uncle must have found a way to disable the emergency lights on the main ship. Clever really, the dark gave him an edge. I closed the cockpit door and then locked it using the manual override. I sighed as I sat in the pilot's seat and began to unravel Jyrki's security to the system. He was every bit as clever and as tricky as I remembered and it would not be an easy job, lucky for me I had learned a few more things about slicing since my time training under him and he had not varied his techniques much. I managed to slice the main helm and nav controls faster than I expected which left a little nagging worry in my belly that I ignored for the time being. After that it didn't take long to get back helm control and pull up the nav charts to see exactly where we were.

My uncle was right we had come out of hyperspace in the Ando system in the Dulfilvian Sector which was part of the Mid Rim. I traced the flight plan Jyrki had

tabbed into the nav computer and frowned, it was convoluted and erratic designed to throw anyone following us off the trail. I wondered if anyone had been tailing us or if someone had managed to put a tracking device on the ship but the proximity reader showed clear space. Out of curiosity I pulled up the charts for the area, just to see if staying here was a good idea or not, until we could get the hyperdrive back online and make sure Jyrki was either dead or at least subdued, a job I was happy my uncle had taken on.

The Ando System had three planets, Ando, Ando Prime and Andando. I found it ironic that we had popped out of hyperspace near a planet with the same name as the man who was trying to destroy my life. I called up the charts for it and grimaced when I saw it was nothing more than a molten ball of rock with the closest orbit around the single star also called Ando. The planet Ando, which had the most temperate climate of the three orbiting bodies, was home to the Aqualish and as far as I knew they were sympathetic to the rebels. I had no desire to end up there especially since almost all the planet's surface was covered in water, something that would make finding a decent landing zone next to impossible. The third planet, Ando Prime had the largest orbit and was mainly a glacial world.

There wasn't much information on Ando Prime. The indigenous species, the Talid were quiet, nomadic hunters and little was known about them although they had been known to trade from time to time most off worlders steered clear of them. Ando was also home to some Aqualish and human settlers and the planet had seen a rise in population due to growing mining colonies but for the most part the thing Ando Prime was best known for was its pod races. At sublight speed, Ando Prime was our closest, best bet and I liked it because it was sparsely populated, had a climate I understood and vast open areas of emptiness where I could land the ship for repairs if it came to that but I hoped it wouldn't.

As I sat waiting for my uncle to hurry up and join me I began to sift through the onboard controls looking for hidden traps which Jyrki might have laid in case he lost control of the ship. He had taught me to never take anything for granted and that if something felt too easy then chances are that was because it was too easy. I was in the middle of unravelling a complicated little trap which would shut the sublight engine down when my comm clicked four times making me jump in fright.

I let my uncle in and sat quickly back down, locking the door again. "So?" I asked as he strapped himself into the co-pilot's chair.

"He went to ground. I didn't want to waste time searching for him and risk leaving you alone up here. It will be better to let him come to us. Can you make sure he cannot access any major controls except from here?"

I nodded but I didn't feel quite as sure as I looked. Jyrki was full of tricks and this was his ship. I sighed. "I can try and get us to Ando Prime, find a decent docking bay?"

"Yes. If you think you can nurse us that far," he said, "I would prefer we got out of space and finished this fight on the ground."

I nodded and revved up the sublight engine, listening to it complain as I did so. "I have no idea where he got this tub but we'll be lucky if she holds out long enough for me to find a place to land." I grumbled.

Ando Prime slowly grew larger and larger as we got closer and closer. It was a big ball of white surrounded by a thin haze of bluish atmosphere. I tried to scan the surface for a decent landing area but the scanning system was not being cooperative. I swore and my Uncle looked at me.

"Jyrki's managed to lock out most of the secondary control systems and I am having a really hard time digging through his coding." I growled.

My Uncle nodded. "He always was good at that sort of thing, though I thought he taught you all of his tricks?"

"I wish that were the case." I sighed as I punched the consol in frustration.

My uncle shook his head. "That won't help Lei'lei."

I was about to reply when the proximity alarm started shrieking.

"We've got company."

"What sort?"

I glanced at the screen and made a face. "Imperial, TIE fighters, four of them." I tried to get the comm system to work. I had imperial codes that would get the TIEs off our back and maybe even allow us to land on what ever transport had brought them out here to patrol.

I flipped the shields on and nothing happened. I swore again and smacked the control panel with the heel of my hand twice. "For the love of the Almighty Sarlacc does nothing on this bucket of bolts work?" I yelled, hitting the panel a third time. Much to my surprise the shields came online.

"Can you signal them?"

I shook my head. "I have helm control and the nav computer but nothing else is working properly. The comm is dead, jammed by something either external or by something that Jyrki had done. Either way we can't tell them we're not the smugglers they seem to think we are. Bet this blasted ship was registered to someone in the rebellion or something dumb like that!"

The ship rocked as we were suddenly hit by blaster fire. I growled and pushed the sublight engine to max, winced as it whined like a dying dewback and hauled on the helm to try and dance away from the TIEs. "Can you see if you can...." I was about to ask my uncle to go and work one of the two working guns on board but suddenly we were shooting back at the TIEs. "Never mind, Jyrki beat you to it. Fine let him kill good Imperial pilots I don't need that on my conscience anyway."

More shots blasted at the shields and as I swung the ship to starboard. "Ktah!" I swore in Cheunh, "It's like trying to steer a pregnant bantha! Better strap in Zte'sa, this is going to be a hell of a ride!"

"Head down to the planet, Lei'lei TIEs are less manoeuvrable in atmospheric flight. You might be able to dodge them in the North East mountain range." My uncle said as he punched up Ando Prime's nav charts.

"Hang on!" I pushed the helm down and we began the sharp nosedive towards Ando prime's atmosphere. Another blast hit us aft and warning peeps loud enough to wake the dead screamed from the helm control. "Well, we just lost the hyperdrive, good thing it wasn't working anyway," I said with a grim smile.

"They'll go for the back up next; probably think we're trying to bounce off the atmosphere to get away from the planet's gravity well." Uncle Vahlek explained.

I kept swinging the ship in a side to side motion, making it almost seem to scoop the stars. The inertial dampers were not the best and the motion was making me queasy. I felt the shudder as Jyrki fired back at the TIEs following us and hoped that maybe he could convince them we were unimportant but that was not the case and just as we were about to head into the upper atmosphere of Ando prime they shot out the back up hyperdrive leaving me with sublight engines only and shields that were beginning to fail.

I switched extra power to the rear shields and got the ship ready for a hard entry into the planet's atmosphere, hoping what was left in the forward shields was enough to take the re-entry heat. This was not a good way to land anything, especially not a ship that was half shot to pieces and already wobbly on power. We hit the atmosphere with a bang. The ship bucked, shuddered and fought the sudden resistance of gasses as it plunged inward on an angle of approach most pilots would never have dreamed of using.

"Pull up Lei'lei!" Uncle Vahlek yelled through gritted teeth. The gravitational forces of the planet were now in effect and I felt as though my teeth were going to fly through the back of my head. "Pull up now!"

"I'm trying!"

"Try harder!"

"Damn it, if you think you can fly better you're welcome to take the helm!" I throttled back and slower than I would have liked the ship began to respond to me yanking on the yoke as hard as I could. All I could see was white from the clouds and they never seemed to end. "What's on the radar? Anything in our way? I can't see a thing!" I yelled, "I'm flying blind here!"

"Pull up more or we'll smack straight into one of the mountains!"

I screamed at the ship as it sluggishly began to curve upwards instead of downwards. She moved like an overweight Hutt. "This ship is a piece of ...!"

"Those TIEs are still on our tail!" My uncle interrupted and suddenly we broke through the thick cloud to stare into the ugliest, sharpest mountain range I had ever seen.

Another round of blaster bolts hit the shields making us buck and rock. I heard Jyrki return fire but there were still four blips of light on the radar. The shields dropped to seventy percent.

"Try to shake them in the mountains!" Uncle Vahlek suggested.

I glanced at him. "Are you nuts?" I asked. "What do you think I am, a bloody pod racer?"

"No but you can tap into the Force and use that. Anakin Skywalker used to do that and it enhanced his skills greatly. You have the same abilities, use them."

"Don't remind me!" I hissed through gritted teeth. I barrel rolled the ship and headed towards the closest and largest of the mountain ranges Ando Prime had to offer. The steep and jagged peaks looked ferocious and cold. Wind picked up the powdered snow from the tops of the mountains and swept it high into the air. Plumes of white, wispy snow danced around the mountain peaks like lace wedding veils flying in a breeze. It would have been a beautiful sight had it not been so deadly. As we swept downwards I could feel the strength of the howling winds that were sweeping around us, working against us. The only consolation I had was that it would make it tough for the TIEs

following us as well. The ship wallowed and rolled as winds caught her under the belly and I struggled with the helm to keep us both straight and up right.

"Head through that passage!" Uncle Vahlek pointed to where he thought I should go. "North East from here there is a storm brewing, might give us some cover!"

I glanced at the radar and saw what he was talking about. "That's not a storm that's a bloody full out blizzard!" I said. I'd seen enough on Hjal to know the difference.

"Great cover," he said, raising both eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes and headed in the direction he had suggested, sweeping lower towards the mountains until we had to negotiate between the peaks, looking for the valley channels to swing through that would be large enough for me to still out manoeuvre the TIEs. The winds picked up and every now and then a large gust would catch the ship from underneath, pushing her sideways hard. I wrestled with the controls to get her back on course but it was the hardest thing I had ever done. I was fighting gravity, wind and trying not to smash into the side of the mountains we were flying past at break neck speeds. I swept through a smaller pass and flipped the ship sideways to fit through the narrow opening. One of the TIEs wasn't fast enough and suddenly there were only three blips on the radar.

I felt Jyrki fire from the starboard turret and watched with sadness as he hit the TIE closest to us. The ship exploded in an impressive ball of fire but I didn't rejoice in seeing it.

"Lei'lei!" My uncle yelled, "For Sarlace's sake watch what you are doing!"

I hauled on the yoke and managed to miss the sharp outcrop of rock by centimetres, rolling the ship sharply to starboard. Adrenaline coursed through my body and my heart hammered so hard in my chest that I thought it would explode. I took the ship upwards again and headed into the dirty looking weather front my uncle had pointed out. The ship bucked hard as she hit the front face on. Wind and snow came at us from all sides and suddenly I could see nothing but white. Now I had to fly by radar and I hated it. Another blast hit us and alarms started to scream on the comm.

"We're going to lose the shields," I said, "I can't see a thing in this crap!"

My uncle didn't comment and for the first time since this whole chase began I saw a glimmer of fear in his features. He glanced at me hiding away all traces of his worry and looked me straight in the eyes. "Use the force, child, it's a gift not a curse and it might just save your life and mine."

I looked at him and nodded. I took a deep breath and tried to get past the screaming comm alarms, the bucking ship, the terrible sense of doom and my own fear to tap into that one part of me that knew peace, to become the stillness. It was like being bathed in sunlight and for a second I let it engulf me. My Uncle's voice, the alarms and even the presence of the remaining two TIE fighters rolled away leaving me calm, leaving me serene. I breathed it in and let it flow through me and suddenly I could see the path that the storm had hidden, as though the force was lighting it up like a landing bay.

The ship moved, for me, as though she were in slow motion. I could see what was about to happen before it occurred. I knew the location of the next curve, the next outcrop the next surprise and could dodge the obstacles accordingly but it was tiring to keep the concentration up all the while fighting with the ship for control. I sensed rather

than saw the third TIE explode as it smashed at full speed into the out jutting cliff face we had just skimmed by. I knew a sort of sorrow then as I felt the life within the TIE's cockpit vanish as though it had never existed. The momentary sadness was a distraction and my concentration slipped. The last TIE took advantage of my mistake and the twin ion blasts caught the sublight engine squarely. There were sparks and explosions and then everything went dead.

I swore and closed my eyes, reaching out for the threat of light that touching the force brought me. It was there but tenuous and I had never been trained for this. "Hold onto something, we're going in hard!" I said through gritted teeth. If Uncle Vahlek replied I never heard him because I had sunk back into that strange nether world which using the force seemed to bring up. Keeping the ship straight and flat without the use of any engines was one thing but doing it through a blizzard was quite another.

We skimmed through the long narrow valley and I was greatly relieved to see it open up as the range of mountains we had danced through gave way to barren looking foothills and lower, flatter snow covered ground. The ship rocked and bounced like a badly behaving ronto but I kept her as straight as I could. If we flipped or landed in any position other than on her belly we were all dead.

We bounced as we hit the ground, like a flat stone on still water. The movement made me think of Thrawn skipping stones on the lake by the Imperial Retreat on Naboo and for a second I giggled. It wasn't a good sort of sound and my uncle looked at me sharply while he gritted his teeth against the terrible forces and motion of the ship. I could hear the screaming of metal as it ripped apart and hoped that at least most of the ship would hold together. Crash webbing bit into my body as it held me tightly against my seat. Without it I would have been sent flying, without it death would be painful and probably messy.

Gravity was not being friendly and the ground was hard as well as unforgiving. We bounced again making snow spray in a wide wave as the bow of the space ship tore up the ice field we were crashing onto. Bits of the ship came apart and sparks showered us as more of the remaining electronics fried. It never seemed to end and all through it I never let go of the helm, in spite of the fact that now it no longer mattered what I did, the ship was dead and the only way we were going to stop was when gravity, snow and what ever else we hit prevented the ship from moving.

The end, when it came was hard and sudden as we smashed into the edge of a rocky outcropping. A piece of rock chipped off and flew at the cockpit screen smashing through it, flying between my seat and my Uncle's to thud loudly against the cockpit door. Tempered transparasteel shards showered through the cockpit, stinging as they cut into skin. I flung my arms up to protect my face and my uncle did the same thing. The only thought that went through my head was *'Blast, how the hell are we going to get off this damned rock now?'* because a smashed view-port meant the ship was completely wrecked. We sat for a few seconds in shock before realising we had stopped and had lived to tell the tale. I undid my crash webbing and struggled to get up, brushing shards of transparasteel off me as I did so. I had superficial cuts on my hands and my face which bled a little. The wounds stung as icy air blasted at them through the open cockpit.



"Are you alright?" I asked my uncle who was trying to do the same thing but the fastener of his crash webbing was jammed so he was stuck in the co-pilot's chair. My breath laced the air in small white puffs. It was freezing outside and it would not be long before the ship inside was unbearably cold.

He nodded, watching with a frown as I drew the vibro blade from its hiding place in my belt and unsheathed it. "What are you doing Lei'lei?" he asked, struggling with his crash webbing.

I gave him a hard stare. "I'm going to go find that son of a bitch and I am going to finish this dance once and for all," I said through gritted teeth. My uncle reached out to try and grab my arm but I pulled away from him, shaking my head as I did so. I was furious beyond belief and the only thing I could think of was how much I hated Jyrki. I saw worry, then fear flash in my uncle's eyes but I no longer cared. I wasn't scared of Jyrki anymore I wanted him dead, the look on my face told Uncle Vahlek everything he needed to know. For a single moment we stared at each other and then I left the cockpit ignoring my uncle as he shouted for me to wait.

*Enough messing around!* I thought bitterly. *This ends now, one way or the other.*

I made my way slowly through wreckage of what had once been a perfectly serviceable freighter. It was bitterly cold. My breath misted the air in lace fine white which vanished as quickly as it had appeared. I could feel the gusts of icy wind sting my cheeks as it blew snow into what was left of the YU four-ten's hull. My father used to joke that any landing you walked away from was a good landing but in this case I wasn't so sure I'd have agreed with him. As I took stock of the damage done I was astounded that both my uncle and I were still in one piece. The ship's cargo holds, port and Starboard, had been wrenched off leaving gaping holes on either side of the ship's hull. The aft end of the ship, where the engines had been, was also a mass of torn and twisted durasteel. Only the midsection and the cockpit of the ship had actually survived more or less intact. What hadn't been welded to the deck or attached firmly to the bulkheads had gone flying and lay smashed beyond recognition.

The air was rank with the cold, peppery smell of snow and the greasy, sweet stench of hyperdrive fuel, burnt durasteel and electronics. It made my eyes sting and my throat burn. I did my coat up and was careful not to touch the freezing metal with my bare hands. The temperature had dropped so rapidly that a white frost had settled on the parts of the ship which had been warm prior to the landing; the condensation had frozen in an instant. During my time on Hjal Navaari had taught me everything he knew about cold weather survival and as I looked around at what we had landed in I understood that unless help came, sooner rather than later, our chances of survival were slender.

I picked my way gingerly through the mess towards the aft section of the ship. If Jyrki had been in one of the lower gun stations he would be dead but I was certain he had chosen the mid section gun turret and chances were good he was still alive because it was still intact, although the ladder leading up to it was a mess. I tapped the rails with the vibro blade listening to the hollow clanking sound I made but there was no answer. I sighed and shivered. There were not that many places left intact for him to hide and if he had gone outside in this weather he would probably be dead inside of an hour. Turning

away from the turret hatch I made my way further aft to see just how badly wrecked the ship was and sucked in a breath when I took in the sight. For as far behind us as I could see there was a trail of blackened snow, ship wreckage and fuel. It looked every bit as ugly as it had felt and I silently thanked what ever gods had been watching out for us because we shouldn't really have survived this crash at all. The YU-four-ten were hardy ships used for long heavy cargo hauls but crash landings on a glacial planet during a blizzard after being shot to hell by Imperial TIE fighters was not a part of the specs. This ship had gone above and beyond the call of duty.

A noise from behind me made my heart jump and adrenaline surged through me. I turned around but there was nothing there, just flakes of snow as they swirled in through the various hull breaches. My heart pounded in my ears and in my chest so loudly I was certain it would wake the very dead. *Fear will kill you faster than anything else* Master Kjestyll had once told me and I could feel it work through my guts like maggots through a rotting carcass. I drew the deepest breath I could and the cold air made my lungs ache. I could feel the slow beginning tell tale tingle of ice burn in my fingers and my cheeks and I wasn't sure what scared me more, the prospect of Jyrki killing me or the cold doing the job for him.

*Keep moving*, Navaari's voice whispered in my head. *The worst thing you can do in the terrible cold is stop moving. Your body starts to protect itself by withdrawing blood circulation from the extremities, your feet, your hands, and your face. These will feel the ice-burn first and if you wait too long you'll lose them all together because without blood circulating through them the flesh dies.*

I whapped my arms around my body and jumped up and down to get blood moving through my extremities. Women, by nature, tended to have poorer circulation in their hands and feet because the body wanted to keep the reproductive organs warm. In extreme cold this became even worse as the body tried to protect all the vital organs from freezing. Sometimes, I thought crossly, being a girl had its down points.

Again I heard a noise from somewhere behind me. I stopped moving and stood still for a moment trying to sort out the various sounds I was hearing, metal slapping against the hull of the ship and wind moaning through the cracks and breaches. *Use the Force child*, a familiar voice murmured in my ear. I jumped but no one was there. My ghosts, I frowned, they followed me everywhere but I did as the voice had commanded and opened myself up to the living force.

The power of the Force never ceased to astonish me. It filled me up the way water filled a cup to a thirsty man. It tingled as it rippled through and over my body and I felt as though I could almost reach out and touch it even though it wasn't anything tangible. If Jyrki had survived the crash he would feel me now, know where I was and, I hoped, come to me. I was tired of playing Hide and Hunt games with him and the cold was wearing my already raw patience to a razor thin edge. Gripping the vibro blade too tightly in my hand I turned to head back towards the cockpit, back towards my uncle.

When it happened it happened too fast for me to realise what was going on. He moved into my view, ghost like and pale. His black hair was flecked with flakes of snow and his blue eyes blazing with a fire that could outshine Tatooine's twin suns. In his madness he was glorious, even beautiful but also terrifying. For a moment I forgot he was just a man, a man whom I had once loved and adored, who had taught me how to fix

engines and believed in me, a man who had once saved me from being raped and shown me how to defend myself. He had been my whole world and I could not have imagined being without him. Now I could no longer imagine him being in my world at all, in fact I had set out with the notion of removing him from my world all together.

"Hullo Mouse," Jyrki said softly, "Nice landing." The blaster in his hand was pointed at the floor.

I stared at him unblinking. Flakes of snow fell on my eyelashes, obscuring my view of him. I looked at the knife in my hand and almost laughed. It seemed so pointless against the weapon he held, white knuckled, in his hand. He advanced towards me, his limp prominent, and I took a step back.

"Did yer call the TIEs down on us?" He asked

I shook my head. "If I had, do you think they would have been firing on us?"

His smile was cold. "Imperials have no loyalty not even to their own. Yer not that important no matter what yer think."

There was another long silence which I broke. "So what happens now?" I asked keeping eye contact with him.

He shrugged slightly with one shoulder. "Now we dance, Mouse," he said, "Yer always did like to dance so let's see how good yer've become." and he drew the blaster up to point at my heart but before he could shoot a blur from my right caught my eye and just as Jyrki fired the gun my uncle shoved himself against me violently. I fell, crashing against the bulkhead near a gaping hole, twisting my head in time to see the blast, which had been meant for me, hit my uncle on his right side. His body arced backwards gracefully, slowly. Pain contorted his features.

I ducked before Jyrki could fire at me again and swept my leg around in a move that Master Kjestyll had taught me, catching Jyrki at his bad knee. His second shot went high as he fell, the bolt bouncing off the bulkhead and ricocheting past his own head.

"Lei'lei!" I heard Uncle Vahlek cry and I turned to see him pull something out of his coat pocket. The movement was painful and he was as pallid as the snow around us. He tossed the thing he had kept in his pocket to me before passing out. I caught it in my hands without thinking wincing as a myriad of images burst through my brain. My birth mother's lightsaber gave its knowledge violently. I had a moment's grace to let the barrage of memories wash through me while Jyrki regained his balance and, momentarily distracted by my uncle's voice, halted for a second before realising what I held in my hands. There was utter hatred in his eyes as he brought the blaster up to shoot at me. The lightsaber ignited with a dull pop and a deep throbbing hum filled the silence. Snow hissed against the brilliant green blade and as Jyrki fired his blaster I deflected the bolt back to him without thinking about it. The bolt caught the gun squarely, destroying it completely.

For a moment Jyrki held the dead blaster in his hands and stared at it then at me in disbelief. "Yer have no rights to wield that weapon." He hissed, reaching at his belt to unclasp the one he had taken from my satchel.

"I have as much right as you do." I told him sharply. "At least my mother made this one with her own hands; the one in your hands was just a training weapon, your training weapon. Master Yoda himself handed it to you."

For a moment the madness that had swept him away seemed to leave and I saw the little boy he had once been, the man I had known and loved but the moment passed and whatever had been left of his soul was swept back up inside the terrible rage that was eating him alive.

He swung high as he ignited the weapon and it hissed through the air like an angry hornet. Snow sizzled in the wake of the blade's passing but he missed his target because I had already moved away. Backing towards the gaping maw in the side of the ship I wanted to take this fight outside, away from my wounded uncle, away from the deadly durasteel debris and out into an environment I knew and understood far better than Jyrki realised.

The wind was savage. Snow blasted like needles at us both, so cold it felt like fire upon my skin. I was grateful to feel solid ice beneath my feet, here the wind had blown most of the new snow away and what we stood on was hard packed and firm on an ancient glacier. I could see him fight with the cold on his hands and face. His hair, like mine, was being whipped about, the ends stinging the skin they struck. For a moment we stood like two statues to a timeless, never ending theme, good against evil, black against white, our arms and weapons raised just like the heroes and villains of stories old and past except once upon a time we had been on the same side. It broke my heart but I pushed my sorrow aside. The storm howled about us as if to urge us on, covertly trying to bring us into its own form of madness, to drown in the swirling snow and seductive cold.

It was Jyrki who moved first, swinging his lightsaber in a single sweeping arc leaping towards me so fast that I almost didn't block it in time. The gritty sound of blade upon blade set my teeth on edge as it had so many times before but I was used to seeing red on blue not blue on green and for reasons I could not identify this made me sad.

*Use the force girl!* This time the command was stern and familiar. *"I taught you better than this!"*

This voice, his voice, stirred up too many emotions but I did as he told me and opened up to the powers that surrounded everything and found a little warmth in its strange guidance. Memories that were not mine seeped into my brain, into my body. My birth mother's embrace through a weapon she had not touched in over twenty years. This was her legacy to me, her gift, knowledge of fighting in way I had only ever seen one other person do and he, too, was dead. I twisted the blade with my wrist so that Jyrki's slid away and move around him, a pirouette on one foot to sweep my blade in a deep semi circle that, had he not blocked, would have cut him in two.

Surprise flickered through his features. "How did yer learn to fight in this manner?" he whispered.

"You would never believe me if I told you," I said, gritting my teeth against the unrelenting cold. I could feel the death kiss of ice burn and knew that we were not only fighting each other but time and the environment as well.

He swung his blade in circles with one hand, warming his hands, fighting the chill. He wasn't used to this sort of weather and I could see the tell tale signs of cold fatigue in his movements. It was his anger, our anger which was keeping us going. I drew a deep steadying breath, allowing the force to flow through me, and giving up the rigid fire of hatred that was burning in my gut. There wasn't enough room for both.

Jyrki stepped forward and pushed his lightsaber towards my face, I blocked and parried but he never stopped moving, swinging at me again and again. Now the fire which burned in his soul burned through his eyes as well and I could feel the force ripple through him as it did me. He wasn't using his anger to give him more power in the force but it was there, just as mine was, waiting like an alluring mistress in the wings.

I blocked and swung. The lightsabers crashed together, their grating sound adding to the cacophony of the storm. The glow from the blades lit up the area around us in an eerie blend of blue and green which made the scene surreal. It never seemed to end, the back and forth of offence and defence. I could feel my limbs tire from working against Jyrki's strength as well as the cold but I could see he, too, was tiring. We struggled in the drifting snow; some places on the glacier were clear others were not. It hampered our movement and changed the dynamics of the fight. I could tell that the cold made his knee ache just as my shoulder felt as though it were on fire. Old wounds which we had given each other or helped to worsen, the legacy of two lives entangled forever.

"Why won't yer stop, Mouse?" He yelled above the howling winds.

"You stop! You were the one who couldn't leave things alone, couldn't leave me alone!" I answered smashing my blade towards him, sweeping low to try and cut his legs out from beneath him. He saw the move and countered it so quickly I barely had time to react to him, swinging my saber up just in time to prevent my own head from being sliced in two. We stood there for a moment his blade perpendicular upon mine which I held parallel above my head. "I loved you!" I yelled at him feeling my strength wane.

"Then yer only have yerself to blame!" he hissed. "I never asked for yer love."

His words made me suddenly angry. It gave me a burst of strength and warmth allowing me to flip his blade with mine, to dance out of his range and gather my energy for the next blow.

"You're a bloody idiot!" I told him. "You've spent your whole life running away from a ghost." I swung at him, the hiss of the blade through the blowing snow sounding like sand across the desert of the Dune Sea.

Hatred crossed his face as he caught the edge of my move and countered it with his own. "And yer served my ghost as handmaid!" He screamed. "Why, Mouse, why?" he asked, pleading, "Why did yer never leave him?"

I understood then, his fears, his deepest darkest secret. It wasn't Lord Vader or even Palpatine he had spent his entire life running away from it was himself. It was his terror of turning to the Dark Side of the force and becoming like Anakin, so consumed by his lust, his greed and his fear that he would eventually become the monster he had had nightmares every night about.

Oh Jyrki had kissed this dark side of the force, even danced with it a few times but unlike Anakin, he had never truly coupled with it, never lain in bed and thrust himself whole and forever into the sweetness of its seduction. Even now, even in his madness, he understood that this was a line he could never, ever cross because if he did he would be truly lost. I watched his ice blue eyes stare at me, demanding an answer, demanding a counter attack but when it came it was not what he expected, it wasn't what I had expected to say either but it was the truth.

"Because I loved him too," I said softly, so softly that I wasn't sure he had heard above the winds until I saw it in his eyes. His sudden disbelief and utter repulsion physically hurt to watch.

"No, Mouse," he whispered. "That's not possible, he was a monster..." I did not hear the words only saw them form on his lips, lips that had gone blue with the cold, lips I that had ached to kiss with mine once upon a time.

"Yes he was," I agreed quietly, "But I loved him anyway."

His hatred was fanned by my words from a spark to a flame, contorting his once handsome face into something ugly and twisted. I watched in silent horror as finally he stepped over that line which he had drawn and plunged headlong into the darkness he had feared for so long.

I knew this dark lover's touch. I had felt its caress when I had fought in the Rite of Tet' against the Griff boy. I knew the sweetness of its voice, the power its embrace gave because Lord Vader had encouraged me to do so but I also understood it was a choice one made and I had stepped away from it, choosing consciously not to feed its never ending hunger. Jyrki did not see it this way, he had been taught it was absolute with no way back. When he fell into the dark side's open, waiting arms I watched helpless and in awe.

He blazed.

The fight blossomed then. He used his anger well and was ferocious. I drew upon the living force, as well as my birth mother's gift of memories, to stave off the terrifying flurry of attacks. He was relentless and fighting him took all my strength. It didn't matter that I had been well trained and become proficient in various combat styles, he had been my first teacher and he knew me too well. I was cold as well as beyond tired, these two things working against me. Where his anger warmed him, I felt only icy fear.

Our lightsaber blades crashed together again and again, sending the stench of ozone and steam into the ferocious air around us. The light from our weapons caught the snow as it whirled about, making it twinkle in greens and blues, tiny stars swirling around us, beauty in darkness. Ghosts whispered in my ear so that I found a measure of strength in the memories passed on to me from my birth mother through her lightsaber's touch, showing me how to fight, each step and counter step, each thrust and counter thrust. She had been very good at her craft and had I followed in her footsteps so too would I have been.

We waltzed in the terrible cold, fighting as only embittered lovers could. Our emotions flaring about us like the corona of a sun. I no longer felt the sub zero temperatures or heard the winds. I no longer cared that I could not feel my fingers any more or that my feet had gone numb in my boots. All I knew was the sweetness of perfect movement and counter attack as Jyrki and I danced through the snow in a duet only one of us would walk away from. When I faltered, stumbling backwards, betrayed by snow which had drifted, I thought it was I who was lost.

Jyrki raised his blade high, the gleam of victory in his eyes, and swung it with all his might downward to cut me in two but instead he met only snow and it hissed as the blade sliced through the place I had managed to roll away from. Coming to my knees I knelt there, my birth mother's lightsaber in my hands between my legs, its blade barely above the ground. I understood what true weariness was. Cold beyond belief I watched

as Jyrki staggered, trying to recover from the momentum of his previous move, trying to catch his breath. He saw me on my knees and without a pause he lunged towards me. I looked up at him, staring directly into his face. Our eyes met and for one single, perfect moment we shared everything, a second of clarity in the midst of the tempest, like the stillness in the eye in the storm and then he raised his arms. He began to arc his blade downwards in a movement that was almost perfect but before he could complete the motion and slice me in two I rose up on my knees and thrust my own blade deep into the heart of his chest. His back arched involuntarily and his arms reversed the movement he had started. His fingers splaying in unexpected pain, allowing the lightsaber he held to drop behind his back, its blade vanishing with the automatic switch off before it hit the ground.

In slow motion I watched as he sank to his knees never taking his eyes away from mine. I mirrored his movements because my blade, which had pierced straight through his body at his solar plexus, was still ablaze. *This was how Qui-Gon Jinn had been killed*, I thought absently. For a moment I thought I saw Qui-Gon's body superimposed over Jyrki's but shook the hallucination away. As though seeing it for the first time I yanked the lightsaber backwards out of his flesh and sat back on my knees, his mirror image before him. The fierce green light from my birth mother's weapon illuminated Jyrki's ashen face and he stared at me in disbelief.

"Mouse...it hurts..." He whispered, his hand reaching out but never managing to touch me.

I shook my head. "Why?" I asked, "Why did you do all of this? Why?"

But he opened his mouth but no words came out, puzzlement crossed his features as if he had suddenly woken up from a terrible dream only to discover it was not a dream at all. The madness in his eyes receded and I saw only the man I had adored once upon a time.

"I loved you so much, Jyrki, more than you will even know, more than I will ever understand in spite of everything." I gulped a deep breath, the cold hurt my lungs. My voice trembled as I told him these things but they seemed hollow because there were no words to describe what I felt. I wasn't sure if I actually felt anything at all. Tears formed in my eyes now and I wished that this was one of my terrible nightmares and I would wake up to find that none of the events had taken place, "I forgive you for what you did to me." I whispered but I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to forgive myself.

His face was whiter than the snow, making his pale blue eyes seem more brittle, more fragile than ever before. He didn't speak but a strange serene expression passed across his features. His hands clasped over the wound and he gasped in pain, exhaling his last breath slowly, the white of it misting the air and fading as though it had never truly existed. I watched silently as he died. It was mercifully fast. He didn't fall but stayed on his knees, slumped over like a Bunduki Master in deep meditation. Blowing snow landed upon his head and stopped melting, turning his black hair white. I switched off the lightsaber I held in my hands and realised that the day was waning.

The storm which had raged around us was slowly dying off and it had stopped actually snowing. I looked up and saw the mountains behind us back lit by the edge of the storm clouds as they gave way to the light from the setting sun. The jagged mountains seemed to me to be on fire. The fine, powder snow being swept of the peaks

looked like macabre wedding veils flapping in the wind. I drew a slow, deep breath and the tears that had welled up in my eyes now ran down my cheeks freezing to the skin before I could wipe them away.

*Get up child, before you freeze to death!*

I felt the subtle brush of a ghostly hand across the back of my neck. The touch was warm. I struggled to get to my feet realising now how cold I truly was. I staggered back towards the wreck of the ship to find my uncle. He was unconscious and nothing I did could wake him. He was cold to the touch and I could not feel a pulse. Suddenly it was all too much and I had no strength any more. I curled up beside his body, trying to share what little body heat I had left with him.

"I'm so sorry." I whispered over and over again as I wept into his coat. When the false warmth came, bringing its seductive drowsiness with it I didn't fight against it. As I drifted into the no man's land Navaari had called the snow siren's kiss I could have sworn I heard voices, shadowy figures moving around us but I was too tired to fully open my eyes, instead I surrendered to the cold and was grateful that its embrace was painless.

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I sat on the floor of the medlab with my back against the bacta tank in which my uncle was suspended. I could feel both the steady throb of the ISD *Judicator's* hyperdrive engines and the soft rumble of the machinery which kept the bacta circulating and the oxygen pumping through the breathing mask on his face. *Touch and go*, I heard the whispered prognosis for my uncle's recovery. The blaster wound from Jyrki had done a lot of damage and the cold hadn't helped either. He had suffered severe iceburn to his hands and no one seemed sure if the bacta would save them or not. I could not bear to look at the thickly swollen and oddly coloured fingers but I wouldn't leave his side either. He was hovering between life and death because he had taken that blaster shot and saved me. *'I am sworn to protect you Lei'lei,'* he had once said, *'no matter what the cost.'* Now his words haunted me.

*'Well, this cost was too high,'* I thought bitterly.

I wasn't sure how the landing party that came in search of us had found us and since no one would answer my questions about it I gave up asking. In the end I didn't care. All that mattered was someone had come in time to rescue Uncle Vahlek and me from freezing to death on Ando Prime. I had guessed that the last TIE that had not been destroyed in the chase which had brought the YU-four-ten down had returned to the ISD and reported our location but why a rescue party had been sent out for a downed rebel freighter was another mystery altogether.

I had been in a barely conscious state of shock when they had brought us onboard and taken us to the medlab where a med droid had treated my own iceburn injuries which were painful but not nearly as severe as my Uncle's. After being given a clean bill of health I had changed into warm, dry clothes that did not stink of death and wreckage. I had refused the bed they had offered and had taken up vigil at the base of the bacta tank they were sliding my uncle into. No amount of cajoling or stern lectures could make



me move and eventually the med-techs had given up. It was too much work or effort to argue with me and they had other things to do.

I couldn't face the food they brought, the thought of eating made me ill. It was an effort to drink the water that was pushed into my hands but the threat of an IV line for fluids made me compliant. Someone had placed a blanket over my shoulders but I wasn't sure who because at some point I had drifted into that half awake - half aware state where everything seemed very surreal. Time expanded around me like hyperspace until I no longer knew when or where we were, nor did I much care. For the second time in my life I had killed another human being only this time it had been someone I knew, someone I had cared about. The consequences of my actions left me hollow.

I became aware that we had reached whatever our destination was because the sound of the hyperdrive engines changed and eventually shut down to give way to the sublight engines instead. I leaned back against the bacta tank and closed my eyes. Through the Force I could sense my uncle's wavering thread of life and I whispered silently for him to hold on. If he heard me or if it helped I never knew but it was the only thing I had left. I heard the murmur of voices talking around me but this was nothing new. I had become invisible to the med-techs who had decided that it was best to just leave me alone in what ever miserable hell I had wrapped myself in. *Catatonic* was one of the words they used a lot but they were wrong I wasn't catatonic at all I was just empty. It wasn't until I realised that amongst the unfamiliar voices there was one I knew intimately did I look up to see who it was.

Thrawn's features were a mask set in stone and I couldn't read him. He glanced at me for a moment, our eyes meeting briefly before I looked away and he turned his attention back to the doctor who was speaking to him in hushed tones.

"She hasn't left that spot in seventy-six hours except to use the fresher, we've tried to get her to lie down but she refuses to listen, when we tried to sedate her she became... violent," He sighed, "It was easier to let her be where she seemed the calmest." The doctor said, his voice was a mixture of frustration and worry, "She won't eat and barely drinks anything we give her. She won't speak to us, she hasn't said a single word since coming on board so we have no idea what happened to her. We think she is in shock but aside from treating the ice burn there isn't much else we can do for her, there were no serious external injuries. We thought it best to leave her be until we got word from you."

Thrawn nodded and glanced at me again before turning his gaze to the man floating in the bacta tank that I was leaning against. "What of the Tze'yusha'Jin? Can he be moved yet?"

Shaking his head the doctor said, "I would not advise it. His condition is stable but critical. He was brought onboard with hypothermia and severe ice burn. He was shot and the blaster bolt did a lot of internal damage. To be quite frank, I don't know how he survived it. His will to live is very strong but moving him right now could kill him."

Thrawn nodded then turned to look at me again. His red eyes pierced through the haze in my brain but I said nothing. There was nothing to say. He sighed slightly as if deciding something difficult and then turned back to the doctor. "Sedate her and get her ready to be transferred. Doctor Thracer is familiar with her medical history perhaps he will be able to do more."

"Yes Admiral" The doctor said. He gave the med-tech who had been quietly standing by me a curt nod and before I understood what they were doing I felt the pressure and slight sting of the hypospray at my neck. A tingling warmth spread underneath the skin and I realised what had been done.

"No!" I protested wanting to stay by Uncle Vahlek but there was no strength left in my body, no real fight left in me and the last thing I remembered before the medlab tilted backwards into oblivion was Thrawn's steady, unreadable gaze.

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I woke up in a bed but it wasn't in the med lab and it wasn't the one I shared with Thrawn either. Guest quarters on Nirauan near the main medlab, I realised. The world entered back into my brain slowly, bit by bit and each single step was painful as the memories of what had happened flooded through my mind, drowning out everything else. I didn't want to be awake. I didn't want to be alive but in spite of my own wants the universe had other plans. I lay staring at the ceiling of the small, unfamiliar quarters I was in wondering if it was possible for a human being to feel so devoid of any sensation what so ever and still be alive. I decided that it was because I seemed to be living but I could feel nothing. I got up for lack of anything better to do and went to the fresher because despite everything I had been through my body still worked as usual and I had to relieve my bladder.

For a long time I stared at the face reflected back to me from the mirror over the wash basin. I didn't know this girl who had deep dark hollows under her eyes and cheeks, whose hair looked like wamprats had nested in it, whose eyes looked as though they had been stolen from the dead. Every time I closed those eyes I saw Jyrki's face as he had died. I couldn't shut it out, nor could I forget the terrible anguish in his voice as he had whispered his last words. *"Mouse...it hurts..."* he had said but I was never sure what it was he was describing. Was it the pain of being speared to death by a lightsaber blade? Being betrayed by everyone he loved, turning to the dark side which had been my doing, my fault or something else. A myriad of emotions had flashed through his eyes as his life had ebbed away and I had not been able to read any of them. His death had given me no answers only more questions and the guilt which rested on my shoulders was so heavy I thought I would break from the weight of it but I didn't.

I shuffled back into the bedroom and dressed mechanically then I left to see if I could find out how my uncle was doing but instead I found myself face to face with Thrawn who had just been about to come in through the door. I backed up letting him enter and pass me but I didn't know what to say. What was there to say? Because of me Navaari and Jyrki were dead, my father terribly injured and my uncle was hovering in the in-between. I didn't know how to cope with what I felt and nothing had done in my life had wholly prepared me for this, even though I thought it should have.

Thrawn stared at me with an expression that wavered somewhere between sorrow and pity and I wasn't certain which I hated more. The emptiness I had been feeling was inexplicably replaced by anger. "What?" I finally asked sullenly, breaking the awful silence, hoping he would lose some of his impeccable Chiss cool and rail against what I had done.

"A'myshk'a," he began, "I have some terrible news...."

I waved my hand at him to stop. He wanted to tell me about Navaari but I already knew what he was going to say and I didn't want to hear it. I felt guilty enough as it was. "I know he's dead, Za'ar. I saw him being shot!"

Thrawn frowned. "Shot?"

"Navaari. I saw ...." I started the sentence but let the words trail off because Thrawn was looking at me in a way which suggested that we weren't talking about the same thing.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is alive, Tekari," he said carefully.

My eyebrows bunched together. "Alive?"

Thrawn nodded. "He is the reason the *Judicator* was able to find you. That bone necklace he gave you had a tracking device implanted in it. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was able to transmit the code and the frequency to the ship so they could come after you. The TIE squad only had orders to disable the ship, no one expected things to get so out of hand." There was anger in his last sentence.

My hand went to the small pendant which still hung around my neck. I hesitated for second not able to take in this new information. "Navaari is alive? How? I saw him get shot."

"Armourweave," Thrawn explained. "He wore a form of Chiss armourweave under his clothes. It's very effective. The blast only stunned him but it didn't kill him.

My brain raced through the possibilities then and came to a single, terrible conclusion. "Then...then who...my uncle...?"

"The Tze'yusha'Jin is in stable condition. His recovery will be slow but he will live," Thrawn said interrupting me. I could see he was still trying to find the words for what he needed to tell me.

"So what is the bad news?" I asked. "Am I going to be charged for murdering Jyrki or something?" The anger in my voice surprised me but he understood it was covering up my sudden fear.

Thrawn drew a very deep breath. "Perhaps you'd better sit down."

"Just tell me!" I told him crossly so he did as plainly and as quickly as he could.

"Your father is dead."

It was like being slapped hard across the face. For a second I forgot how to breathe and the world swam about me. Thrawn moved, catching me by the arm and gently pulling me to sit down on the side of the bed.

I looked up at him but I wasn't sure I had heard him right. "That's not possible. He was alive when I was there...when Jyrki knocked me out, papa was still alive."

Thrawn nodded. "Yes he was but his condition was grave. By the time Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was able to get him to a medical facility it was too late."

"No." I shook my head slowly. "No."

Thrawn's shoulders heaved as though the weight of his own words pushed down upon him so much he was almost unable to bear it. "His heart gave out. He was too long without food or water and the torture he endured under Jyrki's hand as well as the cocktail of drugs pushed into his system were all too much. He died in the medical facility."

"He was alive!" I yelled at him, my body trembling with anger and fear.

"Tekari, please...." Thrawn started but I shook my head.

"No. I don't believe you, no!" I was shouting even though I knew that he was not lying to me but, irrationally, I couldn't seem to accept the truth because accepting this truth meant I had failed my father in every way possible.

Thrawn stayed silent as he reached out to comfort me but I pulled away, springing up from the bed and backing out of his reach. "Don't touch me." I couldn't look at him, "Please...."

He withdrew his hand. "I am so sorry," he said. The expression on his face was heart breaking but all it did was make me angry although I didn't know why. He was not the one responsible for any of this, I was.

"Go away," I said softly, so softly that when he didn't move I thought he hadn't heard me.

"Merlyn, I don't think you should be alone....," He started but the look in my eyes when I met his gaze stopped him cold.

"Get. Out. Now." I hissed between clenched teeth. The rising fury that was beginning its journey from the depths of my gut blazed in my eyes and for a split second I thought I saw fear in his but maybe I was mistaken, maybe it was worry. He gave me a small nod and then, without another word, he left.

I stood in the middle of the silent room feeling like the center of a terrible storm. Anger boiled over and I could feel it flood my veins with fire that burned like the gut rot my father had loved to brew. It spilled out becoming something that I couldn't control. I had never truly understood how Anakin could have succumbed to the Dark Side of the force until this moment but now I knew it was easy. I laughed as I felt the tidal wave come, welcoming its touch and gave in to its own brand of insanity.

It was like watching a HoloDrama from the inside out. I didn't think I just moved, grabbing a hold of the nearest piece of furniture, a chair I think, which I hurled with all my strength against the wall. For a second I watched as it flew, almost in slow motion, to smash against the duracrete. It felt good to hurt something, anything. Time wavered and paused as if it could still be turned back, as if the onslaught of what would happen next could somehow be prevented but then, like a mass of water too long held back by a damn that can no longer keep it at bay, the rest of my anger roared through me.

I stopped thinking.

Whatever I could lay my hands on I destroyed, venting the terrible anguish within, only made worse because I tapped into the force. Unnatural strength flowed through me and it was intoxicating but it was also painful. A part of me knew this was wrong and from someplace deep inside my head I heard the whisper of someone begging me to stop but I didn't. I screamed at the top of my lungs as I tore at the world around me, no longer sure who this creature that I had become was.

I wanted to annihilate everything. If it could break then I broke it, if it could be lifted then it was thrown, if I could rip it apart with my bare hands, I did so until my fingers bled and when there was nothing left to destroy and my fury was completely spent I crumpled to the floor in the middle of the room, like a broken doll, kneeling amidst the wreckage that my divine madness had created.

The blinding white noise in my head receded leaving me alone to wonder in a sort of awed shock at the damage I had done. I wasn't certain what unnerved me more the

fact that I was capable of such terrible dark passion or the fact that I had welcomed it. In the aftermath of the rage I felt only cold and began to shiver uncontrollably. This was how Navaari found me. He didn't say a word as he entered the room, he didn't look at the terrible mess my wrath had created he simply looked at me. He was masked and it made him seem fierce.

"Go away." I whispered, my teeth chattering.

"No," and he stepped over the carnage of broken furniture to crouch at my side when he reached out to touch me I slapped his hand away.

"Go away," I said again trying to put some push behind the words but I had nothing left in me to be forceful with.

He simply sighed and shook his head. "No," he repeated and that was when I looked up into his eyes. I had expected to see anger, contempt even hatred for what I had done, for what I felt I had become but instead all I saw was love and compassion.

"Go away Navaari, please." I whispered, pleading. My body was trembling as shock replaced the anger. I couldn't fathom the terrible emptiness I felt as I spoke and my voice sounded strange and very far away. "Papa is dead because of me, I thought you were too. Everyone I care about gets hurt so, please, go away."

Surprise flickered across his features, "This was not your doing. You did not kill Kit Gabriel. Jyrki Andando did that. None of what happened was your fault and you cannot take that burden on your shoulders," he said gently.

Bringing up Jyrki's name was a raw wound reopened, his face framed by black hair and snow swam in to my mind. "I killed him Navaari, I killed him in cold blood." I sat staring at my hands; I didn't recognise them, scratched and bloody. These hands, my hands had held the lightsaber which had taken Jyrki's life.

Realising the topic had been switched he frowned at me and shook his head. "That I am not believing, little one, that man pushed you until you had no place else to go, until there was no other choice but to end it once and for all. You were doing what you were forced to do but it was not in cold blood."

"I killed him." I whispered shaking my head. "It doesn't matter why or how or whose fault it was. In the end I took his life away. I tried to hate him for everything he did, I tried but in the end I failed because I loved him but I killed him anyway. I just wanted to help papa and now they are both dead." I realised I was rambling and stopped. There didn't seem to be any logic in what I was saying but somehow Navaari understood.

"The person who was Jyrki Andando died a long time ago he just did not realise it," he replied. "You gave him something he never expected to find which was love, hopeful, unconditional love. It is not your fault he was not accepting this gift you give away so freely. It was not your fault he was so damaged he could not return it and be happy. Do you know how rare this is? Do you know how precious you are?"

I swallowed down the tears, shaking my head in denial. As I opened my mouth to say something all that came out was an ugly sob. I fought it down, almost choking with the effort. Jyrki was dead because I had killed him. My father was dead because I had not been able to save him, I had not been fast enough or smart enough, even with all the training I had gone through, and now because of this he was dead. I looked around the room and for the first time realised what I had done.

"How can you say these things?" I asked, "Look at what I have become." I gestured around the room.

He reached out again and stroked the sweat soaked hair from my eyes. "Better to be unleashing your rage on ugly furniture than on a living thing, I am thinking," he replied. "All that passion and pain, it has to be going somewhere, you cannot be holding it all inside of you even though you try. You are far too small a vessel for so much emotion."

I turned away from his gaze and looked at the wreckage again. "What if the next time it is someone I love? If I could kill Jyrki I could ...."

He pressed his fingertips to my lips shaking his head. "I am thinking there will not be a next time, pup; you would not let that happen and this has been a very long time coming." He spoke gently, "And I am thinking that after all that you have been through, you are to be forgiven for redecorating a room in this manner." He paused and then said, "You control your temper and your strange power, not the other way around. You would not knowingly hurt or harm any living being without just cause."

"How do you know?" I asked in disbelief.

He smiled. "Because I am knowing you." And before I could protest or say anything to the contrary, he picked me up from the floor as though I really were still a small child and cradled me close.

I could not stop my whole body from shaking. This cold seemed to come from the inside out and since Ando Prime it was all I had known. I wondered if I would ever feel warm again. I held on to him, my arms around his neck as he carried me out of the wrecked room down the corridor to a small study that Thrawn sometimes used late at night when he couldn't sleep. He set me down on the small couch and sat beside me, removing his mask as he did so. His words were the absolution I had not understood I had needed to hear and as terrible as my anger had been so my grief and my guilt were even worse. When I buried my face in my hands he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me to him, letting me cry.

I have no idea how long we sat like this, time had become irrelevant but eventually I became aware that I had stopped crying and was just clinging to Navaari as though he were some sort of life raft and perhaps he was. He stroked my hair and hugged me closely as though to let go of me would be to lose me and he wasn't about to risk that again. Only after there was a very lengthy silence did he speak.

"Your father was a good man, little one. The doctor at the med clinic told me his last words were for you, to tell you he loved you, to tell you he was proud of you. They tried everything but his heart was just too weakened." Navaari's voice was full of sorrow, "I was there, pup, I watched them work to save his life but it was not enough, sometimes no matter what we are doing, it is never enough and I am so very sorry that I was not fast enough to help him in time."

I moved then, lifting my head so I could look at him. "You're sorry? You didn't do anything to be sorry for I was the one who rushed in head long and screwed it all up. I was the one who didn't think or plan. I just dived in and everyone suffered because of it."

Navaari's smile was kind. "You were simply being you and I was expecting nothing different which was why I made that pendant for you, easier to find you when

you go running off if you can be tracked," he said, "I should have taken that pash'kja'anta who had been following you out of the hunt as soon as I saw him the very first time but I did not and that was my mistake. Perhaps if I had done so there would have been enough time." The regret in his voice was painful to hear.

I laid my head back down against his shoulder. I didn't know what words to speak, how ease his own terrible guilt and pain. "It wasn't your fault either," I said at last, "It was Jyrki's. He made a choice and it was a bad choice."

He kissed the top of my head, "Are you calm now?" He asked.

I nodded although I wasn't sure calm was the quite right word, sad, empty, lost, riddled with guilt may have been better ways to put it but Navaari knew me well enough see past my lie.

"Then you should perhaps be finding your Ta'kasta'cariad and letting him know that you are in one piece," he said with a small smile. "He was worried about you."

"Worried?"

Navaari grinned. "You are fierce beyond belief sometimes especially when your emotions are choking you. He was concerned you would hurt yourself out of guilt and anger."

"Why didn't he stay and stop me then?"

"Because he also understands that sometimes storms need to be unleashing their fury before they can find calm again. You, little pup, are being a very, very wild storm when you choose to be."

And for reasons I could not fully comprehend that statement made me smile but my sorrow overrode it. "Where is papa's body, Navaari?" I asked after a small silence.

"His body rests on board of the *Judicator* in cold stasis." Navaari replied.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska felt it the best course of action. He believes that you would be wishing to return to your home world for the death rites."

I felt tears well up in my eyes again, but there was no anger behind them, only an aching grief. "Has anyone told Bedi yet? She is...was his wife."

"I believe it has been taken care of."

"Za'ar?" I asked.

Navaari nodded. "He was thinking that while this was a job you would feel duty bound to do, it was one you should not have to but he can tell you more when you speak with him, and you need to speak with him. He worries far more than he lets on and you are having a very bad habit of being the cause for great worry, so please go and speak with him. Let him see that it is just bad furniture he must replace and not his bond-mate. He is waiting for you in his private study."

I nodded and got up slowly. I was surprised at how much I ached, how much my physical body hurt. "Thank you." I spoke quietly, almost shyly.

Navaari gave me a look I equated with an oncoming lecture and I wasn't wrong. "You are thinking that you are all alone but you are not. There are so many who love you dearly who are wanting to be there for you when you fall, when you need help. You need to learn this lesson and stop shutting everyone out. That does not protect them nor does it help you. You are not alone Kycsi'i, not now not ever. Remember this."

I bent down and kissed his cheek. "Ariathe'Ia-te'ka Pa'tjad'cu-sjä." I told him. I *have great love for you, honoured grandfather.*

"And I for you, child," Navaari said wearily, slipping on his mask again, "Now, enough sentiment. I have to be eating something and then I must rest; you are quite tiring you know. Go and make peace with your Ta'kasta'cariad,." he watched me leave without following.

Thrawn, just as Navaari had said, was waiting in his private study. I opened the door and slipped into the dimly lit room. He was standing facing the window, he wasn't wearing his uniform and it somehow made him seem less austere more vulnerable. When he stayed where he was, not turning to look at me, I went to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. I laid my cheek against his back, closing my eyes when his hands covered mine, his warmth replacing my cold. After a long moment he turned to face me without breaking the circle my arms had made. He didn't say a word, he didn't have to. He just pulled me to his body, one hand cradling my head against his chest, the other around my waist and holding me tightly as though I were the most valuable thing he had ever held.



## **Chapter Eight**

The funeral for my father was well attended. It felt as though half the planet was there and many had come from as far away as the Core; many people had liked and known Kit'gar Gabriel and he would be sorely missed. That so many pilots, spacers, mechanics and traders had come to pay their last respects was almost overwhelming and my father would have been surprised as well as touched had he known how many beings cared about him.

"He had a good reputation for being fair and honest." One of the older pilots told me. "You always knew that Kit would treat you right when you landed at his dock or needed repairs."

"Your father was a great pilot in his day, Merly. We were all surprised when he suddenly decided to get married and settle down. Never saw him happier then when he was talking about his family." A pilot named Kirtis told me.

I could only nod in reply, too choked up to reply.

People gathered in the morning in Bestine and then, in hired multi carrier speeders, we drove, in single file out to the dunes near the house my mother had loved so much. The black ribbons that had been attached to the speeders fluttered in the created wind as we travelled reminding me of Jyrki's hair being whipped by the storm on Ando Prime. Even here I could not escape the images that had been indelibly carved into my memory. I was grateful when we reached our destination.

My father's body lay wrapped in the traditional black burial cloths and was laid on a repulsor lift which was escorted to the site where he would be buried. At Bedi's instance my father was to be laid to rest next to my mother's grave.

"She was the love of his life." Bedi had told me through her tears as we discussed this surreal subject of where to bury him after I had arrived home. "I knew that, I always knew that. It's why I had to leave when I did."

I had only nodded. I knew a little about unrequited love and the havoc it could wreck. I also knew that my father had loved Bedi as well and I had been glad they had been able to find each other again so many years after my mother had passed away.

The funeral was led by Merl Tosche, who, when he had learned of my father's death, had asked for the honour. He had known my father a long time and they had been good friends. As neither Bedi nor I felt up to the job and Uncle Vahlek was still too weak, I was grateful he had taken on this task. He was a man of few words and the actual ceremony itself was fairly short and to the point, something my father would have appreciated as he had never been a man for long flowery speeches.

Once the official eulogy was given and the body lowered into its final resting place then covered first by stones so that it could not be dug up by scavenger animals and then with sand, people were given time to bid my father farewell in their own way. As family we had the right to go first but I chose to ignore this in favour of being the last. By the time my turn came a heavy silence had fallen over everyone and everything. I stood for a long time staring at the mound of newly piled sand. I was certain the most people who knew me were expecting a speech of sorts about how much I had loved my father along with a story or two about him but no words that made any sense came to mind. Instead,

I simply wept silently, tilting my face forward so that my tears dotted the desiccated sands with their precious moisture. I stayed silent too long and I could feel the tension shift in the air as people behind me began to get uncomfortable. Grief, as ugly as it was, also had its own decorum and I was breaking the rules.

"Merly?" Bedi's hand touched me lightly on the arm, reminding me that I was not alone and people were waiting.

I nodded, feeling my throat close and that terrible ache in my chest threaten to choke me whole. "Good bye daddy." I whispered, "I am so, so sorry." I had to cover my mouth with my hands to stop from saying more, to stop from sounding like a very little girl rather than a grown woman.

It was Bel who brought me back into the world by hugging me tightly. "It wasn't your fault." She whispered in my ear but I knew better.

Once I was finished speaking the last part of the funeral rites could begin, the laying of small tokens at the grave stone. Chulpas, carved from Jappor snippets or small stones, strung on a leather thongs where wrapped about the grave marker.

It was a man named Gaelyn Scharr who had carved the grave marker from a hard stone which could only be found in the strange cliffs that ranged far out beyond the Jundland Wastes. The Sand People called these strange rocks Heart Stones because they survived centuries of scouring sands and winds. They believed these peculiar stones had once been a part of the very soul of the planet and they considered them sacred, that they were powerful and full of magical properties. Settlers had picked up on this and had long ago begun to use the stones to mark the graves of their dead with them. What the sand people thought of this no one knew but the Tusks never touched or disturbed any grave marked with Heart Stone.

One by one we stepped forward to lay these tokens of love and respect at my father's feet when I set mine down I thought it ironic that the symbol I carved on mine said exactly the same thing as the one that Lord Vader had given me to lay on his wife's grave.

#### *Forgiveness.*

I saw people's questioning looks as I set the snippet face up so the symbol could be read but no one dared ask what it meant. I almost lost it then, faltering a little as I went to stand up. Thrawn, hidden behind the clothes and the mask of the Dantassi, laid a hand upon my shoulder giving me a touch of strength and understanding. He knew what I had carved and although he had disagreed with it, he respected my feelings. I had let my father down and he had died because I had not been fast enough or clever enough to see past the trap which Jyrki had set for me. I had told Jyrki that I had forgiven him for what he had done to me but I could not forgive him for my father's death, I couldn't forgive myself either. No matter what anyone said I would always feel responsible for what had happened even though it had been beyond my control. I wept then, tears coursing unabashedly down my face. I had loved my father dearly, despite our sometimes rocky relationship and now he was forever gone leaving a hole in my heart that I wasn't certain would ever completely heal.

When the rites were complete we returned to Mos Eisley for the reception which was held at the docking bay. It seemed appropriate as this was the place my father had seemed the most alive. I wandered amongst the crowded rooms of the house and

landing bay half aware that people spoke to me, nodding absently at their sympathetic touches and murmured words of condolence. Bedi had decided to have the affair catered so there was more food and drink than anyone knew what to do with but I couldn't touch anything, I had no appetite and the very thought of eating made me ill.

Because there were so many people, the reception went well on into the evening. As family I was considered a host and required to remain for the duration for the entire event, just as Bedi and Bel were. I was grateful that all of the people who worked at the docking bay had offered to stay and clean up, making the work go faster than expected. When the last mourner left I let out a deep sigh, as though I had been holding my breath since I had first opened my eyes in the morning. It had been an utterly exhausting day and both Bedi and Bel, after much cajoling from me, retired to their respective bedrooms leaving me on my own to contemplate everything that had happened.

It had been, as funerals go, beautiful, at least this was what everyone had told me. I didn't remember much of and had I been pressed for details the only thing that came sharply to mind was the scent of the hot sand and the haunted look in my uncle's eyes.

Uncle Vahlek had been stoic and calm though his sorrow was plain to read on his drawn face. His wound, the one he had received saving my life, pained him greatly and he moved with a stiffness I wasn't sure he would ever lose. The doctors on board the *Judicator* had been loath to let him attend but he had insisted to the point of being obnoxious and Thrawn had told them to let him go, promising that he would be returned promptly after the ceremony.

Navaari and Thrawn, dressed as Za'ar, had stayed near me, silent, imposing figures in full Dantassi clothing, even more impressive given how hot they must have been beneath the layers of clothing and their masks. Thrawn had felt it best to keep his face hidden and I had not disagreed. There were rumours that an up and coming art auction slated to happen in a couple of months might draw in prominent members from the New Republic so for Thrawn, the last Imperial Grand Admiral, staying out of sight seemed like a good idea. The New Republic had spies everywhere and it was no secret that Tatooine was home to their most famous member, Luke Skywalker.

If anyone had thought to question the Bone Traders' presence at my father's funeral they had kept it to themselves, after all my father had known many, many people, but I felt a certain easing of tension from the crown when neither of the Bone Traders had come to the reception. It seemed surreal to me that so many people would fear the Dantassi and I had to keep reminding myself that once upon a time I had been terrified of them as well. Most people had assumed they had gone off to hunt but I knew that their lack of presence at the reception was because, by then, they were in a shuttle on their way back to the ISD with Uncle Vahlek so that he could continue his healing treatments. I had not seen them leave and I wasn't sure when or if Navaari or Thrawn would return. During the funeral there had not been any time to discuss what I or they would be doing next. I had assumed that Thrawn would get in touch with me when things had settled down. He knew when to give me the space I needed.

With house now oddly silent in the wake of the mass of people who had been there earlier, I stayed awake, sitting in the kitchen staring at the walls cradling a cup of

tea in my hands. The tea had gone cold without me even taking a single sip. I was exhausted but I couldn't sleep. This house and the docking bay were too full of memories. Everywhere I looked I saw either my father's ghost or Jyrki's shadow and I wasn't sure which hurt more. It seemed strange to know that everything I was looking at was mine now because my father had left all he had owned to me. I had just shaken my head at Bedi's words as she had told me this. I didn't want the docking bay, or the houses that went along with it. I didn't want any of it and I told her that.

"Wait a while before you make these decisions, Merly, you might change your mind." Bedi had said.

But I knew I wouldn't although I hadn't argued with her. "Will you stay and run it?" I had asked instead.

"If you want us to."

"It's Bel's home. It's your home too." I had countered. "I can't live here or work here anymore. I have a life away from this place now. I'll have the papers amended to make you both co-owners then there is no more discussion about it." I had spoken in such a way that she knew I was neither joking nor would I take no for an answer. Papa had not updated his will since after my mother's death and I had been certain he would have wanted me to make sure that both Bedi and Bel were taken care of.

She had nodded, her expression a mixture of relief and sorrow. She had thought it was because of my grief for my father's death that I had felt this way but the truth was that Jyrki's ghost haunted me here more so than anywhere else and I couldn't bear to be near any of it.

I had not told her what had happened on Nar Shadda or Ando Prime. All she knew was that papa had sent both her and Bel to Corellia to pick up a shipment while he had stayed at the dock to take care of some business. *Call it a small holiday with some work on the side*, he had told them, *you could both use a little get away*. He was gone by the time they had returned but it wasn't unusual for that to happen so neither of them had thought much about it. He never told them the truth; that Uncle Vahlek had sent a warning that Jyrki had something terrible planned and they should all vanish for a while. I had guessed that my father had decided enough was enough and that if no one else would take of Jyrki, who was hurting his little girl, then he would. He hadn't wanted to worry them but maybe he should have. When Jyrki had come to the docking bay to wreck havoc, he had found only my father and I guessed that papa had gone without much of a fight because the place had been left undisturbed giving no clues as to what had really happened.

I had learned from Navaari that Thrawn had told Bedi that papa had died from a heart attack while on Nar Shadda, brought on by what looked like a mugging and that the med team had not been able to save him. When pressed for details he had said he did not know, which at the time was the truth. Bedi and Bel had both had accepted this because the medical report had backed up the basic information. It hadn't seemed necessary to go into the graphic, terrible details and now that Jyrki was dead, I wouldn't have to worry about him going after the rest of my family. So what had happened on Nar Shadda and Ando Prime would stay a secret only four people would know. I wished it was as easy to forget as it had been to hide the truth.

Every time I closed my eyes to try and sleep I saw Jyrki's face as the lightsaber's blade pierced his body or my father tied to that awful chair in that terrible room. I didn't know how to get past these images or the terrible nightmares that had me bolting awake, screaming almost every night. On Nirauan Thrawn had been there to comfort me when I had woken in this manner but on the ISD *Judicator* I had been alone because Thrawn was onboard his flagship, the *Chimaera*, a ship he would not let me board for reasons he would never quite explain. In the end I had not argued with him because I had wanted to be near my uncle who was still in recovery on the *Judicator*. Only after security had come running two nights in a row to see that I wasn't being murdered in my quarters did I take the doctor up on his offer of sedatives but they didn't really work as intended, they had just made me glassy eyed and vacant.

I sat for a long time in the kitchen of the house in Mos Eisley before finally making up my mind to get the hell out and go some place where I could think without interference from all of the ghosts which trailed around. I left a note to say where I was headed and why, packed enough things for a few days and caught the shuttle out to Wayfar. From there I walked to my uncle's house where I was greeted by his little bearded jaxes who, although had been fed by the little care taker droid, pretended they were all starving.

I spent the rest of the night half dozing with Khavi purring contentedly on my lap. It was oddly comforting to be in the company of the little furry creatures my uncle doted upon. Since I had last been here their numbers had increased because Khavi had given birth to kittens that were now all grown up. Maddy and Mayhem still owned the house but now they had to contend with Nixi, Eira and Sja. If the little feline like creatures found it difficult living so far away from their natural home of Rori, which was the swampy moon orbiting Naboo, they never let on.

Jaxes, my uncle had told me could also be found on Endor but the species on Rori were easier to tame. They made good house creatures, keeping away small rodents and bugs with their natural hunting abilities and they were affectionate companions when they chose to be. I was always happy when Khavi jumped delicately onto my lap and made herself at home, taking it as a sign of acceptance. I woke before sunrise and despite the fact that I had not really slept well, I felt more at ease and more refreshed than I had since Jyrki's cryptic message had arrived on Nirauan. Grateful to have the place to myself, the day passed easily and I spent much of it crying or dozing intermittently.

*Cleansing the spirit*, Ma'kehla would have called this, I didn't know about that but it felt cathartic to just cry with no one else around even though the comfort of another was a good thing. This time I understood that having time to say farewell to the ghosts of the dead was necessary. Grief was a terrible thing and I had experienced it from a very early age all the way through into my adult life. It seemed to me that half of the lessons I had learned were about how to cope with loss, not that I did a very good job of that, but for reasons I couldn't explain it hadn't dampened my own love of life any, in fact, if anything it had made me understand that life was fragile and precious.

I loved my uncle's house; it was a place of peace and quiet. Out past Wayfar it sat at the edge of the sands near the rocky bluff. In the distance I could see the towers of

Jabba's palace and it was an impressive sight, especially at suns set. A few other hardy people had built out here but it was mainly still deserted and I was grateful for this. During my time on Tatooine when Lord Vader had banished me from his sight, I had spent a lot of time in this house and it had become my second home. My uncle had long ago given me a key-code so I could come and go as I pleased and given me free reign to decorate the lower bedroom as I saw fit. I was never been more grateful for this than now.

When the day drew to a close, I sat outside on the stone veranda and watched the twin suns set. The last rays peeked over the hills behind Jabba's Palace and lit up the sky in fierce colours of reds and oranges and for a moment it reminded me of the mountains, laced with drifting snow, on Ando Prime. The ache of what had happened on that planet returned and I wondered as I sat there in the quiet of the desert's twilight if I would ever be able to get past what had taken place, what I had done.

*Taking a life changes a person*, Thrawn had once told me and he had been right. I had killed and I wasn't certain I would ever be able to come to terms with all that had happened. As the last of the day's light had vanished giving way to the night I looked up into the sky, searching for the first star and was surprised to realise that it wasn't Jyrki or my father who were on my mind but Thrawn and suddenly I had missed him most of all.

When the air turned cool I went back inside to make something to eat and maybe watch some old Holo-Dramas that my uncle liked to keep around. The jaxes bugged me for food and, after both they and I had eaten, I lounged on the couch, dozing rather than watching some old Holo about unrequited love that I had stuck into the player.

Sometime after midnight I woke up, startled by a vague nightmare that involved Thrawn but I couldn't remember it clearly once I was fully back in the world again. As I made tea to take outside so that I could sit on the carved sand-stone veranda and watch the night sky I wondered if I would ever be free of these nightmares which clung to me. Probably not, I thought as I wandered outside, wrapped in a thick poncho to keep the night's chill at bay.

Chenini, a slender silver crescent, began to climb into the sky following her sisters into the dark blue, star covered blanket. It was rare to see all three moons in the sky at once and I knew that all over Tatooine the Sand People and the Jawas would be holding their various rites to celebrate the rare celestial occurrence. Both peoples were superstitious and the moons held their sway. For me it was as if Tatooine was finding its own way to say farewell to one of her fallen sons.

I sat, leaning back against the house outer wall, watching the third moon of Tatooine rise, cradling a cup of mint tea in my hands. The night was cool and the soft hiss of sand upon sand as grains snaked over the rolling dunes was a lullaby I had almost forgotten. Somewhere in the distance I could hear a herd of banthas lowing and it carried through the air like some mournful lament. I got up and wandered to the edge of the steps to see if I could catch a glimpse of them in the moons' light but they were too far away, instead I watched as a lone figure walk through the sands towards the house, moonlight reflecting white where his face should have been. I stood stock still and waited, the cup of tea in my hands sending steam into the air like a beacon. I knew who it was without even thinking about it. I knew his walk; I knew the mask he wore and

what he looked like underneath it. What I didn't know was why he had come all the way out here in the middle of the night when he was supposed to be on board of his ship trying to re-establish the Empire's rule on the galaxy.

I did not speak as Thrawn, dressed in his Dantassi clothes his face hidden by the antique bone mask with a small pack slung across one shoulder, approached the house. If the trek from Wayfar had tired or even winded him he showed no signs of it. Keeping himself in shape was something he took seriously and for some reason this made me smile. I waited and watched as he untied his mask and held it in one hand. When our eyes met there was a moment of electricity but also a moment of uncertainty. Then after what felt like an eternity he spoke.

"Should you not be asleep?" he asked.

I stared at him and shrugged, "Sleep is overrate,." I told him as I sat back down, my legs dangling over the edge of the veranda. "Did Bedi tell you where I was?"

He shook his head. "You're still wearing the necklace with the tracking chip. It made it easy to find you and I did not wish to wake your household up. It is quite late by the time I arrived on world."

My hand went to the small, carved bone pendant slung on a slender leather thong. For a moment I played with it then with one swift sharp pull I tore it off and flung it as far away from me as I could. It disappeared in the sand. Thrawn's expression as he watched me do this was unreadable but then he smiled and set his pack on the ground, coming to stand beside where I sat. We stayed like that for a long time not saying a word. In the moons light his face was all shadows and lines, more handsome than ever before and the glow from his alien red eyes even brighter than I remembered. He took my breath away, even now.

Eventually he broke the easy silence. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii will not be impressed when he learns you threw away his clever little track A'myshk'a-where-ever-she-goes tool," he said.

I shrugged. "He doesn't need it any more. I don't need it any more either," I said, half expecting him to be cross, instead he just nodded. "So to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit out here in the middle of nowhere?" I asked.

Thrawn pulled off his gloves then reached for his pack out of which he pulled a small box. "I thought you might like to have this returned to you," he said as he handed it to me. I did not need to open it to know what lay inside of it. My ma'arilite necklace, the one I had left behind when I had gone off in search of Jyrki and my family.

I sighed as I opened it, biting my bottom lip as I just stared at the small pendant made luminous in the moons' silvery light.

Thrawn watched my face carefully misreading my expression, "Do you not wish to have it back?"

I shook my head and handed him the necklace, shifting and pulling up my hair so he could fasten it around my neck. "Yes, of course I do. I took it off because I was afraid to lose it but...," I said with a sigh. "It's just ... well... we seem to do this a lot."

I felt rather than saw him nod. "Yes we do. I sincerely hope this will be the last time that I have to return it to you after some unfortunate circumstance," he said gently, kissing the nape of my neck to let me know he was done. I was surprised that his small kiss made me shiver.

I moved to face him, my fingers brushing the small stone that now sat at its rightful place about my neck. "Thank you," I said after a long pause looking up into his face.

It was his turn to draw a deep breath. I could see a thousand questions flash through his eyes but he didn't ask any of them. Instead he just smiled as he stood there, his arms folded across his chest, his face raised to the sky, his eyes closed, as though he were basking in the sunlight not that of the moons. Then as if deciding something he turned to look at me and asked, pointing at my cup. "What are you drinking?" He asked.

"Mint tea, would you like some?" I got up before he could answer and turned to go in and fetch him a cup but before I could take a step he reached out for me, catching my free hand in his.

"Wait," he said as he jumped up on the veranda to join me, making the distance between us small. Suddenly, where there had been an air of quiet melancholy was now the decided tingle of something else, something electric. He watched my face carefully as if he could get all the answers he sought from simply looking into my eyes but when that failed he said, "We need to talk."

"Talk?" I asked carefully taking a step back from him. "No, I don't think so." I told him, wrongly assuming he meant he wanted to hear the details about what had happened on Ando Prime. "There's nothing to talk about."

His fingers brushed a strand of hair which the breeze was playing with back from my face. "Oh yes, I think there is. We have much to discuss, my dear, especially about what will happen in the future," he said with a slight smile, speaking in such a way that I no longer knew what sort of conversation this was supposed to be.

I frowned at this familiar game. "So you came all the way out here, in the middle of the night to give me back my necklace and have a little chat?" I asked.

His lips curled into a lazy smile. "Can you think of a better reason to come to Tatooine in the middle of the night?" He countered, taking a step towards me. This time I didn't move.

"I hear the suns' rise can be quite spectacular." I countered.

"Hmmm, well perhaps our talk can wait until dawn then."

I shrugged and glanced away from his gaze. "Shouldn't you be on board your ship plotting the New Republic's overthrow?" My words sounded a little sharper than I had meant them to.

"I am taking some leave time," he replied, his words cool and business like. "You and I have some unfinished business and I wish to deal with it before things get too busy." He spoke casually but there was a hint of need under his words. He moved forward again backing me up against the wall.

With the sandstone wall of the house at my back, I glanced up at him casually with just my eyes, "Unfinished business?" I asked.

His gaze on my face was intense. The air between us pulsed. "Call it reconnaissance if you like. I wish to find out more about this supposed art auction Bedi was telling you about and who better to ask than you?"

"Who indeed," I murmured, understanding that, while maybe he did want to talk about serious things, this was his way of saying we needed time with each other and we



didn't have much of it left before he began the full push of his current campaign. Duty would always come first but I was grateful that sometimes I came a close second.

I suppose he saw these thoughts plainly written on my face, he was better at reading me than anyone else and he shook his head as if to tell me I was the one who was wrong. "You truly have no idea, do you A'myshk'a?" He said softly as he cupped my chin with one hand, raising my face up to meet his.

"Probably not," I said with a slight shrug, not all that sure what he meant but not wanting to ask either. "But does that matter?"

There was a lengthy pause while he considered his answer, "No and if I were to be honest, perhaps it is part of your charm," He replied thoughtfully then, before I could say anything else, he kissed me as though he had not seen me in a hundred years. I was surprised by the sudden ache of need which shot through me. Grief, it seemed, could be overruled after all and I ignored the cup of tea which fell from my fingers to shatter on the stone floor beneath us in favour of returning his passionate kiss.

On Nirauan, although we had slept in the same bed, there had been no physical intimacy between us. I had been so wrapped up in my grief and guilt that I had not even wanted to be touched. After that first reunion in his private study, I had backed away from him, shunning any contact. I had felt tainted somehow, as if the residual violence of all I had done still clung to me and I was afraid I would go mad all over again. He had left me alone letting me know he was there should I need him, never pressing me to speak about what had taken place on Ando Prime even though I knew he wanted very much to learn all the details. I didn't have the words to describe what had happened and I needed time to sort everything out. He had understood this and had given me space. I suppose he and Navaari had figured out that I wasn't going to go off the deep end or try something insanely suicidal but I needed time to mourn without interference from another.

It was a hard thing to come to terms with, the death of my father, he had always been there for me no matter what even when I didn't that that was the case. A presence that was as solid as he was strong and now, in what seemed like the blink of an eye he was gone and I hadn't even been able to say good bye or tell him that I loved him as well. It had a devastating effect on my soul and I had not wanted to be near or touched by anyone, but now, after the funeral, after the final goodbye I found that I wanted only Thrawn along with all he had to offer and nothing else. It was almost as if I understood that sometimes in order to get past the bad one had to also find the good, and he was definitely good for me.

He did not fight when I grasped him by his coat and pulled him into the house, down the stairs to the bedroom that was mine. For far too long I had been surrounded by death now suddenly I needed confirmation of life. I hoped he understood this, I suspected he did. My fingers trembled as I tried to undress him as fast as I possibly could without actually tearing off his clothes. So far all I had managed was the removal of his long coat. His boots he had kicked off himself. The buttons of the shirt he wore were frustrating me, small and fiddly they fought with my trembling fingers making me swear like a true spacer and seriously consider ripping the shirt apart with my bare hands.

His bemused smile was that of someone who knew me just far too well. He took my fingers in his and stopped me. "Slow down, Sjiu Tekari, I am not going to vanish."

I bit my bottom lip and looked up at him without moving my head. "I don't know," I replied, "That seems to happen to people around me."

He sighed, caressing my face with his fingertips, "Well, I am here now and we have a moment's grace. I do not plan on leaving you or this plane of existence for a very long time."

"What you plan and what tends to happen is not always the same thing," I retorted.

His eyebrow arched and then he smirked, "On that I would disagree with you, my dear. My plans are carefully laid out and it is rare for them to fail." His finger traced from my chin, down the side of my neck across my collarbones. "You, on the other hand, never plan; you act on impulse without considering all the possible outcomes. Hence the never knowing how things will turn out."

I took a deep breath and, slowly this time, began to unbutton the shirt he was wearing, finding it easier now that I wasn't rushing. When the last button came free, he shrugged the worn fabric off his shoulders and tossed it on the chair near the bed. "There are some things you just can't plan for." I told him.

"Yes and I am looking at one of them right now." He countered, easily undoing the dress I wore, smiling appreciatively as it fluttered to the floor to pool at my feet like water. I stepped out of it pushing him a little towards the bed. He resisted and he was stronger. When I made a face he threaded his fingers through my hair, drawing my head close to his mouth, "Patience, Tekari, patience." He murmured in my ear. His breath, warm upon my skin, made me gasp with a need so sharp it was almost painful.

I whimpered then, and raked my nails not so gently down his back.

"Play nice," he said easily, catching my wrists with his hands. "Or I will make you wait even longer." The thread of threat made me shiver, it would not be the first time he'd said or done such a thing.

I swallowed and glared at him. "I can hurt you."

The corner of his mouth twitched, "I know and sometimes, my dear, I even find that pleasurable, but for now let me have my way, there has been enough pain for the moment." His smile turned decidedly feral. "You may bite later, if you still feel the need."

I stared at him for a second but backed off because he was right. His answer to my retreat was to kiss me again, lips and tongue exploring my mouth as though I were something to be savoured ever so slowly. He tasted sweet, like honey in warm sunlight. My heart skipped a beat as his fingertips continued to traverse my body. How many times had he charted out the curves of my breasts, my belly, my hips and everywhere else? I had long since lost count but every time it was as if he had found something new, something delightful and precious.

I reached up to touch his face. His skin seemed impossibly blue under the pale of my own fingers. He smiled and followed the motion of my hand with his head as I stroked along his jaw to his lips. When my fingers rested there he kissed them lightly. My heart pounded against my chest, the rapid movement was visible and it felt as

though it was beating loud enough for the entire galaxy to hear. His smile softened as he took note of this.

"Like an avian beating its wings against a cage," he said as he rested his hand above my heart. He leaned forward and said, "It is good to know I can still stir you up like this."

His eyes had gone that eerie deep glowing red I had come to associate with desire; the hint of blush which graced his cheeks and other tell tale signs let me know I wasn't the only one being stirred. For another moment the galaxy paused, waiting to see what would happen next and then Thrawn moved his hand. My back arched involuntarily as he ever so lightly brushed my breast with his fingers. The barest of touches seemed to ignite a storm and I growled at him. I wanted more but he wasn't giving it, at least not right this minute. His way with me was elegant and slow, showing me what his carefully thought out methods could lead to, though all it did was rile me up until I felt as though I would burst into flames from the inside out. I guessed this was also part of his plan.

"So, you were calling me unpredictable?" I asked, switching the conversation back to the earlier topic of planning for things as I undid his trousers, sliding them over his hips and buttocks with the flat of my hands so that I could feel his bare skin. I watched him step out of the crumpled fabric and nudge them aside with his foot.

"Would that be so farfetched?" He asked as he deftly removed the last of my clothes.

"Navaari would disagree with you, I think," I said as I admired his naked body, lithe and strong, stroking that dark line of hair from his navel to his groin with my fingertip and smirking at the positive reaction my touch created.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly, "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii has had many long days with you on Hjal to get to know how your chaotic mind works. I, on the other hand, am still exploring all the possibilities. You are a fathomless mystery, my dear, and I would prefer to take my time unravelling all of your secrets."

There was something else beneath the sensual words and casual foreplay, something I couldn't seem to put my finger on. I glanced up to find an answer in his face and he smiled at me, one of those rare and brilliant smiles no one else ever got to see. He continued his work of mapping out my body but he had not missed the questioning look in my eyes.

I shivered under his touch. "Why are you here, really?" I asked as he closed the gap between us, the warmth of our naked bodies rivalling the desert heat. He was intoxicating and I was starting feel drunk with the desire I felt.

He stopped for a moment and regarded me carefully, "Because you need me to be here and because I need to know that after all that has happened you are really alright." He answered.

The plain truth of his words took my breath away far more than even his erotic touch. I glanced away suddenly afraid, suddenly sad without actually knowing why. He drew my face upwards with the crook of his finger and when I looked up into his eyes there were tears in mine. He brushed them away with his thumbs. Time paused for just a moment as we just stared at each other and then, because it was the way of things, the moment passed giving way to the next.

When, finally, he decided he had toyed with me enough I did not protest. He lifted me onto the bed and lay over me, covering my body with his. I loved how his skin felt against mine, warm and velvety, but now I wanted more than his gentle touch. My own patience, such as it was, had long ago left me in favour of giving way to my desires and since, I as he had often enough said, was a creature of passion, I decided that there had been enough foreplay. He did not resist when I hooked one leg around his hip, pulling him to me, into me and when we joined, the way all lovers join, I let the real world and all its sorrows slide sideways with a gasp.

He moved with that sense of surety which only came when one knew the terrain one was mapping out well. His hands completed the ritual of exploration and his mouth, teased and tasted all that lay underneath him, sealing the claim as his. I did not mind the powerful sense of possessiveness that rolled off him in waves as he slowly, deliberately thrust his weight into my being; in fact I rather liked it. Belonging to him in this way gave me a place in the galaxy I needed. I dug my nails deep into his skin; my own way of telling him that, while I might be his, this ownership thing went both ways. I knew when he hissed between clenched teeth that with the bite of pain I had made my point.

"Sheathe your talons, Tekari," he said gently, "I already wear your token. No need to make Rukh think that my being with you is dangerous."

"You mean it isn't?" I teased.

He smiled. "Not in a way I'd have anyone else know about." He brushed a lock of hair from my face.

I loved how the light caught the bracelet at his wrist, the one he wore which marked him as mine. As far as I knew he never removed it. I stroked it with my fingertips and the gesture did not go unnoticed. I grinned at the mention of his Noghri body guard and wondered just what magic Thrawn had used to ditch him this time. Rukh had the most annoying ability to stick to him like glue, taking his job as the Admiral's body guard very seriously. I did as he asked and un-dug my nails from the flesh of his back, glancing to make sure I hadn't actually drawn blood and smiled as he caressed my face gently, all the while moving inside me with a slowness that was both agonizing and tantalizing.

I decided to up the ante a little and tapped into the force, making him remember what I had done to him on Myrkr, making him gasp with the sudden sensation, making his eyes narrow and his smile turn animal like. Not playing fair he would have said but I would have countered that nothing was fair in love or war and this was always a little of both. We had danced this routine many times so the words no longer needed to be said out loud but I could read them well enough in his eyes.

Suddenly, the need to couple as though we had never seen each other before and perhaps never would again was maddening. I could not get enough of him and at some point, when we rolled over so that I rode him and not the other way around, I felt as though all the power in the galaxy resided in this one simple act. I had often wondered if Palpatine had loved someone the way Thrawn and I loved each other then perhaps this galaxy would be a vastly different place. While possession and passion had been damned by the Jedi, love I understood could save us all from falling. Straddling his body, I felt like a goddess and he raised his eyebrows at me as I laughed out loud.

"Do you know how truly beautiful you are?" He asked as I leaned forward to kiss him. The scent we created was a perfume I found heady and breathing it in made my head reel as though I were completely intoxicated.

I shook my head in answer because the truth was I didn't. I only knew how I looked to me and my opinion on that wavered from day to day. He reached up and brushed my hair back from my face again, more a gesture of affection than actually useful. For a moment we stopped and just stared at each other, then driven by something far more primal than love he placed his hands on my hips and pulled me deeper onto him. His want was infectious and as it mingled with mine it spiraled out of control. Still, he had taught me the rewards of taking my time and because he had tortured me often enough with his infinite ability to go slow, so I moved my body at a languid pace in rippling undulations like rolling waves on the dune sea or pale moon's light on cool, blue water. I smiled victoriously as he growled with an urgency he very rarely showed. I could feel his control give way to his ever rising need which echoed my own.

With my head tipped so that I bared my throat to him, I arched my back in a deep crescent mimicking the little moon that had risen in the sky earlier on. I opened myself up then to the full power of the living Force, its magic swallowing me whole. It flooded us both the way rays of light poured down onto the ground and I felt my body give way to his, shuddering with an intensity that almost drove me mad. How it was that he could do this to me with taste and touch was a mystery I hoped would never be solved.

Not quite done yet I moved until I heard his own voice cry out as he finally lost that measure of self control which made him so vulnerable. I knew in that moment that I would never, ever love any man the way that I loved him. It scared me to death to give away so much of myself but at the same time it was also a freedom I would never completely understand.

When the moment passed and the last vestiges of pleasure gave way to a good kind of weariness, sweat soaked and satiated we parted, the one becoming two, and lay silent, entangled in each other's limbs, basking in the sudden calm that washed over us both. Only after our hearts had slowed down and our breathing had returned to some semblance of normal did he break the quiet in the room.

"Do not ever leave like that again," he said.

"I won't." I replied knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"Promise me," he insisted.

I looked up into his face, a little puzzled by the pain hidden behind his words. "I promise," I whispered.

My answer satisfied him because he nodded in a way that said this matter is now closed.

"But you knew..." I said after another long silence.

"How could I not?" He asked with a sigh.

"And yet you still let me go."

"Could I have stopped you?" He asked. "Would you have forgiven me if I had?"

I sighed and moved away from his embrace. When I didn't answer him he shifted to his side, leaning his head on his elbow to look at me better. "It was only a matter of

time before Andando tried something else to get you to come to him; you were his obsession and your father was his trump card."

"I never thought Jyrki would go after my family, I thought he was better than that. His fight was with me not them." I swallowed down the sudden wave of grief that speared through me with a deep breath.

"Which is part of what makes you so unique, Tekari; in spite of everything you see the good in people not the bad."

I shrugged. Navaari had said much the same thing but it didn't ease the grief or the guilt any. Anger and something else flashed through me. "I slaughtered him, Za'ar. I plunged my birth mother's lightsaber straight through his chest, I watched as he died and I saw the look on his face! He didn't think I could do that to him, he didn't think I would." I poked the exact spot on Thrawn's chest so he would know where I meant. He wrapped my fingers with his and placed my hand over his heart but I pulled away and sat up, hugging my knees tightly to my chest.

I was a little taken aback at the sudden expression of exasperation which crossed Thrawn's features, "You did what you had to do," he said firmly. "Stop agonising over something that was inevitable."

I looked away from him but he reached over and grasped my arm making me turn back to face him because he wanted me to feel the full force of his next words.

"He would be alive if he had he stayed away from you and your family but he didn't. He may have been a good man once but he turned ugly and his obsession pushed him to a place most men never go. He was cruel and vicious, caring only for his needs not yours or anyone else's. Stop thinking he was something he wasn't. I don't need to list all his crimes against you but let me remind you of what he did to you when he kidnapped you. Let me remind you of the mess you were after you managed to escape. You still cannot speak to me of what happened there, what he put you through but you wake up screaming sometimes yelling for him to stop, to let you go. Someone who loves you would not have done that to you, no matter what. Jyrki put you through all manner of hells and lied to himself to make doing so okay. He would have killed you and fabricated some sort of story to tell himself it was for the best and not regretted it."

I did not want to hear these words. "Stop it."

But Thrawn just shook his head. "No, you will listen to me. I am tired of seeing you hurt especially at the hands of that man. Now he's dead, and that's the end of it. Jyrki Andando knowingly backed you into a corner you had no chance of escaping without either him or you losing your lives. It was and is that simple," he said. "This guilt you're shouldering is pointless self pity and it's beneath you. I won't placate you in this useless waste of energy. Yes, he's dead and yes, you killed him but what choice did you have?" He shook his head in frustration. "By the same token, I won't pretend that everything is alright because it is not, I understand that but you have to stop thinking you are to blame for your father's death because you are not. You need to stop feeling guilty for killing Jyrki, because personally I wonder if, perhaps, that wasn't what he really wanted all along. Yes, taking a life marks you and you know that, he's not the first and he might not be the last but you did not instigate this fight nor did you continue it. You did not set out with the single goal of murdering him and in the end it was self defence which cause his death by your hand nothing else. This little war he started is

done and over with. He pushed you and you ended it but it could just have easily gone the other way and we would not be having this conversation. Then you would have been killed, many more people would be mourning including me and, had that been the case, I absolutely guarantee you that Jyrki Andando would still be just as dead."

His words stung but they were also true. I scrubbed at my face with my free hand, tried not to cry and failed. He wasn't being unkind so much as he was being honest and while I didn't want to listen to these words I desperately needed to hear them. He was right and I knew it but that didn't make it any easier to swallow.

"Tekari," He relented a little, "I wish to Da'hajn that I could have saved you from this nightmare but I could not. You and that man were bound together by a thread stronger than anything anyone else could have severed. I know what he meant to you but I also know what he did to you, even if you are willing to forgive him for that I am not. I am grateful he is gone because I don't believe, given his relentlessness in stalking you, that he would have ever let go of his obsession with you. I know you feel guilt for what happened but you need to let that go."

"It's so damned difficult," I said between clenched teeth, angrily wiping my tears away. I was so tired of crying.

Thrawn drew a very deep breath and let it out slowly. "I would worry greatly if you found it easy."

I made a face at him and shrugged out of his hold on my arm. "He should have left my family alone, his fight was with me."

Thrawn nodded, "Yes it was."

There was a long moment of silence then, heavy and full of sorrow, Thrawn said, "I am so sorry that we could not be in time to save your father. I would have had my people there sooner but we were engaged in combat at the time."

"It wasn't your fault," I said automatically, finding it odd how I seemed to say the same words over and over again. "It also wasn't your fight."

He looked at me. "Perhaps not but that doesn't ease my regret any."

I shrugged slightly and got out of the bed, suddenly too restless to lie still any more. I picked up the robe slung across the chair and slipped it on. "Papa would have said that regret is for people who don't have anything better to do than look backwards and wallow in the what-if." I stood staring at him for a moment. "I thought I had lost everyone, so when you look at it from a certain point of view I was lucky. It could have been much, much worse," I said bitterly because while it could have been worse, the grief was still the same. More tears sprang to my eyes this time but I just blinked them away.

Thrawn nodded, got out of the bed and slipped back into his trousers. "I brought a bottle of brandy with me, so why don't you and I go upstairs and watch the dawn? I am told that sunrise on Tatooine is quite spectacular."

With glasses in hand, we sat out on low wall of the roof top deck of my uncle's house and watched as Tatoo I and Tatoo II began to illuminate the sky with their brilliance. I rested my head against his shoulder and sipped at the Corellian Brandy he had thought to bring with him. This was ours, this moment in time, like so many others we had shared. Sitting together watching the dawn and while it may have been a different planet the sensation of it never changed.

"How long are you here for?" I asked as the first true rays of Tatoo I's light began to dance across the dunes making the sand sparkle.

"Just long enough," He replied cryptically then added on a more serious note, "You and I need to discuss how things will proceed between us for the next while because there will be little time for this relationship and lengthy conversations of any kind while I am running this campaign," he said then added, "And I wanted to speak with you face to face so you wouldn't get any funny ideas."

"You want me out of your way," I said without any reproach.

"Yes, well there is that, although if I really wanted you tucked away someplace safe, I'd ask you to return to Hjal with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii. No, I would like you close. Nirauan still has need of a translator. Plus, I want your help but in a behind the scenes capacity and I would like you to do some work for Ged Larsen, act as a liaison for his people and mine. You have some remarkable talents which are being wasted; I have need of those skills but I want you safe and I will make no excuse for that."

I nodded. "Okay, but I want to stay based on Nirauan." The thought of trying to fit in on another ISD did not appeal to me.

He smiled, "That was the idea, though I am quite certain you would not mind piloting every now and then? Kirja'navaar'inkjerii flew in your ship to Nirauan so it has been returned to the base. I thought that a private transport vessel would be of use for undercover missions, provided you feel up to this of course. "

"I think I could handle that." I agreed, swirling the brandy in the glass I held. "Will we have any time together?" I asked hated that the question sounded needy but what I wanted to know.

He shrugged slightly, "That I cannot guarantee. If my plans go well it will be a busy campaign but hopefully short. However, if things do not go according to plan then I cannot say how long it will take. I can tell you that I will do most of my work from the *Chimaera*, because the last thing I want is for anyone in the New Republic to discover the base on Nirauan so I won't be there all that often and you will absolutely not step foot on board the *Chimaera*." The sudden firmness in his voice made me glance at him sharply but before I could protest or say anything he continued, "It is my hope that with the tasks assigned you will be far too busy to miss me that much. However, it would not be the first time that space and duty have separated us and we've survived it before."

I nodded, reaching out to touch the bracelet he wore possessively; it made him smile. I didn't like this arrangement and he knew this but I had accepted it for what it was and he knew that as well.

"I will only get one chance to set this right, Tekari; there is no room for any error, no room for distractions as pretty as they may be." He brushed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers to stress what he meant, "Once law and order have been re-established and the reigns of the Empire given over to someone capable of leading it without falling prey to his or her megalomania then, I assure you, I have plans for you and me."

I smirked a little at the perceived subtle innuendo in his words and downed the last of the brandy in my glass. The suns had both fully arisen and their light was almost blinding. A heat haze had already begun to shimmer off the sands, making the silhouette of Wayfar in the distance seem more like a wavering mirage than a real town. The wind



had picked slightly and I could hear the snaking sands hiss across the dunes. The scent of pasha spice which came from a small scrub plant that grew on the rocky areas of the desert was heavy in the air. I could feel the subtle pressure of a sandstorm even though none had been forecast and smiled. By the end of the day we would be enfolded in the fierce embrace of ferocious winds and I looked forward to it. I kicked my legs back over the edge of the wall and slid off it back onto the deck. Thrawn watched me, the expression on his face unreadable until I tugged him by the waist band of his trousers. The slight smile that turned up the corners of his mouth was feral and full of promise.

"Has enough time passed?" I asked, coyly tilting my head to one side.

"You are insatiable, you know that? We have a lot to talk about, to plan in a short amount of time and we should be getting some rest before doing so," he said knowing exactly what it was I wanted from him.

I just arched an eyebrow and my smile never changed. "And here I was thinking the Chiss had incredible stamina."

His slight smile turned suddenly dangerous and he got off the wall to join me with an ease that was as graceful as it was beguiling. He slid his fingers under my hair and drew my head close to his face so that when he whispered in my ear his breath on my skin made the small hairs on my neck stand on end. "Are you challenging me, my dear?" he asked.

I drew back from his hold to stare him squarely in the eyes and grinned. "Yes, Admiral, I do believe I am."

"Well then, Tekari," He said, "It's your move."

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For three days I had both the house and Thrawn to myself. I cherished every moment of it knowing that soon enough I would see very little of him and there would be a chance maybe I would lose him to the campaign he was planning. It was bittersweet. We spent as many hours talking about what was to come and how to deal with the possibilities as we did in the bedroom working on our tactile conversational skills. His plans were extensive and the tasks he had set for himself and his people were daunting.

In the moments where he wanted to be alone and had sequestered himself in my uncle's small, private work room I had strayed outside and let the quiet of the desert sweep over me, as though the winds which shifted the grains of sand across the dunes could somehow scour the pain and the hurt from my own skin. Over the course of the three blissful days we had together I healed. I was more than sad when they came to an end, marked by the arrival of a shuttle returning my uncle home early on the morning of the fourth day.

He looked better than when I had seen him at the funeral, less drawn, less pain ridden. He had not said a word as he had wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a slow, solid embrace which stole my breath and made me remember what it had felt like to be a child in his arms. His sorrow was plain to see, the loss of my father had hit him hard. They had been close friends for a very long time. I suspected that Uncle

Vahlek had always believed of the two of them, he would be the first to die and not the other way around.

Thrawn had greeted my uncle solemnly in the manner of a Dantassi warrior which had surprised me but neither man had offered any explanation. Instead there had been some sort of silent understanding which had passed between them, shutting me out. I recognised this sensation from my time on Hjal, where the males, especially the warriors and hunters had their own language and codes. There were just things in the galaxy of men that no matter what, women were excluded from.

There had been banter over a late breakfast and then my uncle had passed on to Thrawn the dispatches he had carried with him for the Admiral to deal with before the shuttle returned shortly after sundown to take Thrawn back to the *Judicator*, from there he would return to the *Chimaera*. I did not want him to leave but kept silent about my feelings. I was quite certain he knew and even understood what was going through my mind but how I felt was irrelevant in this matter. He was the leader of the Imperial navy and he had work to do. I might have been bound to him by word and mark but in the end it would always be his work, his mistress who held his sway. My uncle who had sensed that restless unease which comes with a parting between lovers, retired to his bedroom to "take a nap" so that Thrawn and I might spend the last hours of our time together alone.

In the quiet of my bedroom we had shut the rest of the galaxy out and loved as though the end of everything we knew was about to crash down upon us like a terrible storm. Only after the frantic passion of coupling passed and I lay, quiet and melancholy in his arms did we talk in hushed tones about the what-ifs to come. I was scared and I didn't bother to hide it. I had lost too much too soon and the prospect of losing him as well frightened me to death. I was grateful that he did not try to coddle me with lies by telling me, as he stroked my hair, the skin of my back and the curve of my waist, that everything would be alright and that this story would have a happy ending. He was preparing for war and death was always his ghostly dance partner waiting in the wings for her turn on the floor. He knew it and I knew it but we didn't speak of it. Instead we spoke of inconsequential things, small talk to fill the enormous gulf which was widening by the minute as he pulled away to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

"You greeted my uncle like a Dantassi warrior but he's not part of the clan," I said, breaking the heavy quiet which had blanketed us.

"Yes, I did," he said with a slight smile.

"You've never done that before, did something change?" I asked.

Thrawn's expression was warm. "That is something you will have to ask the Tze'yusha'Jin. It is not my story to tell," he said.

I nodded. Men and their secrets, I thought, there was no end to them. I sighed and twisted about so I lay on my stomach to look at him, my chin resting on crossed arms.

"I will return for the art auction," he said after a while, as if that made his upcoming departure easier to swallow. "Especially if the painting listed is genuine."

"And I will get to see you then, yes?" I asked.

"If time allows for it." He shrugged casually, teasing.

I glared at him. "You will make time," I said.

He just smiled without dignifying my words with an answer and instead asked, "So you've decided to remain here for the next two months then?"

"Yes. I need to be with my family." I nodded.

"And they need to be with you, my dear." He finished for me, "I would feel better knowing you had spent time with them instead of heading straight back to Nirauan. There's nothing on the base that requires your urgent attention."

"There is a lot of paperwork to sort out here, with the docking bay and stuff plus I need to help Bedi go through papa's things." I explained.

He nodded. "I am quite certain she will be glad of your company while going through what must be a painful experience. I am relieved to know that you won't be alone either."

"Well...that and Uncle Vahlek will need someone to baby him even though he won't admit it."

Thrawn smiled. "Your uncle is a strong man but I am quite sure he will appreciate your company, just don't cook for him."

"Ha very ha!" I said, pinching him. There was another moment of quiet then I changed the subject away from my cooking, "Uncle Vahl brought you good news today didn't he?" I asked.

Thrawn nodded. "The warlord Zsinj has been defeated by the New Republic which means one less predator in the pool to deal with. The dispatches he brought carried that information."

I frowned and picked fluff from the blanket I was lying on, "I thought that he was an Imperial Admiral."

"He was until after Endor, then he decided his chances were greater if he struck out on his own. He gathered his fleet and took on the galaxy, he did very well."

"That doesn't surprise me, he is a clever man."

"Was. He's dead now."

"Oh?"

"Mm." Thrawn nodded, "Seems tangling with the New Republic did not agree with him."

"How did he die?"

"If the information I received was correct his ship the Iron Fist was obliterated by concussion missiles."

I rolled back over onto my back with a sigh. "Did you know he spoke over sixty different languages?"

"No, that I did not know."

"He told me once at one of the palace parties. We had a very long conversation about the nuances of linguistics. He was very clever," I said smiling as Thrawn reached to run his fingers through my hair and then wincing as he caught a knot. "So now that he's dead...does that mean it's your turn to step up and scare the rebels into submission so we can get back to some semblance of order?"

"I would not call what I am doing scaring so much as worrying. They don't know who I am, they don't know who it is that is causing the problems they think they do but really they do not. They are aware that someone is stirring up things in the Outer Rim, and the Unknown Regions and they have heard rumours of a few battles that have been

quite decisively won. They are concerned, they are worried but they are not scared, not yet."

Zsinj had kept the New Republic hopping for at least the last four years. He had taken his fleet and waged a private war on them, declaring himself a warlord and forsaking the Empire, or what was left of it. I had heard bits and pieces about his escapades but had not paid much attention. I had had other things to worry about and for the most part I didn't really care. He had been just another greedy megalomaniac trying to get his piece of the galactic pie and he had been fairly successful as well, by all accounts.

At one time he had been a so-so graduate of the Imperial Academy and, as he had told me himself, had been told that he should go into support where his tactical genius could be of use because he would never have what it took to be a real leader in the Navy. He showed them all how wrong they were in thinking this way and when he managed to effectively deal with a Nightsister threat for Palpatine the Emperor had taken notice and promoted Zsinj to Admiral, giving him his own ISD to command in the process. After the fall of the emperor, Zsinj had stayed quiet and out of the spotlight, not wishing to cross Isard. I don't think he feared her so much as he was biding his time and when that time came he jumped at the chance to take over as leader of the galaxy. From the accounts I had read at the time, Zsinj's attacks were quite clever and well thought out and he harassed the New Republic for several years. I was a little sad to hear of his demise but not all that surprised.

"So what happened to his fleet? To his men?" I asked.

"They scattered and joined up with various smaller warlords." He answered thoughtfully. "And continue to pick at the New Republic's fleets."

"Why don't they join with you?"

"They do not know I exist," he said matter of factly.

"So now the stage wide open for you."

He smiled. "Yes, in a manner of speaking."

"So you could recruit Zsinj's leftovers?"

He laughed and shook his head. "It doesn't work that way."

"So what is your way?" I asked.

"You know more about that than you should."

I frowned, "Well it's not enough."

His expression changed. "Don't." He warned.

"Was this part of your plan?" I insisted. "Waiting for him to be eliminated?"

"Not at all, I simply have my own agenda," His lips tightened. "Why are you pressing me about this?"

"So will you go to Wayland now?" I didn't answer him instead I got straight to the point.

Thrawn's sigh told me he was tired of this question from me. "I have told you before, I will go to Wayland when the time is right and not before. One does not simply drop into the Emperor's top secret storage facility to scavenge through the bones left behind without planning first." He chided, "And first I have to find the exact location, your instructions on how to get there were a little vague."

It was my turn to sigh, "I want to go with you when you do head out there."

"No," Thrawn said coldly, "I have said this before and I shall say it again. I do not want you anywhere near that place. I have my reasons so do not push the matter or you will not like the consequences. It is dangerous and there are a myriad of precautions that must be taken before even I step foot on that world."

I glanced at him sharply. "What do you know about it that I don't?"

His red eyes fixed on me with a hard, almost unforgiving stare. "Plenty," he said sharply letting me know that any further discussion on this subject would be met with much resistance.

"Fine!" I snapped back.

He sighed and continued to stroke my hair, "Listen to me, Tekari, do you think I say these things simply to order you around? Have you not realised by now that when I ask you to stay away from something it is because I wish to protect you from harm? Wayland is a place that is dangerous. When you were there you were under the protection of both Vader and the Emperor, if you were to show up at the facility tomorrow that would not be the case and if I recall correctly being there scared the hell out of you. Do you think that Palpatine would not have defences in place to protect this fortress of his, especially one full of his secrets? Do you think you are a skilled enough warrior or force user to go up against what ever he left in place to protect these secrets?"

I blew at the lock of hair covering my eyes noisily. "No, probably not."

He nodded, "There are forces at work you know nothing about."

I glanced at him, "Then explain it to me."

"No," he said, then relented speaking more gently, "Your curiosity will be the death of you. So I am asking you, as your mate, as the person who shares your bed with you, to please, please leave this alone."

I sighed, "Okay." I finally said after a very lengthy silence.

"I have your word you will not go there at all, ever." He pressed.

I made a face and hesitated but the look in his eyes and the expression on his face told me there was only right way to answer this request. "Okay, damn it, Yes, you have my word." I mumbled but I wasn't sure I was telling the truth.

He nodded, however there was a wariness in his eyes I rarely saw. He didn't believe me. "I mean it Merlyn, leave Wayland be. It is not for you."

A moment wavered between us then, something angry and stubborn. I didn't like being told what to do and I didn't like the fact that he was keeping secrets from me even though I knew he kept many things from me and it had never bothered me before. This time it did, but I wasn't sure why. There was something beneath his words which scared me as though the spectre of the Emperor had suddenly reappeared.

"What about Myrkr?" I asked as though that topic would be any different.

He sighed. "What about it?"

"We went there for a reason."

"Yes, we did."

"I heard you were keeping a close eye on all activity on that world."

A frown crossed his face and for a moment I thought he would not answer me. "It is a place of interest, as you well know, and it is also a place which is a haven for a variety of smugglers as well a people who deal in information. I am keeping an eye on things there."

"Since when have you ever needed to go to the underworld for information?" I asked.

He frowned at me, "There is a lot about my work you do not need to concern yourself with and, as it does not involve you, I do not feel the need to share every detail with you."

"I don't ask you to either but I am tired of not knowing...!" I was starting to get cross although I wasn't sure why.

His jaw clenched, "Listen to me carefully A'myshk'a, I am a high ranking official in the Imperial navy and you, my dear, are not a part of that. I will not divulge sensitive information to you simply because we share a bond and a bed. Why are you suddenly pushing so hard on this? You know better, you've never done this before so why now?"

I swallowed, "I don't know," I said half believing it to be true.

"Do not lie to me."

I gave him a filthy look and said nothing.

"Hm." He made a little noise and made a come here gesture and only after I was leaning against the warmth of his bare skin did he continue, "Look, I understand that you are afraid. You've lost a lot in a short amount of time and no matter how much you think you're putting on a brave face the death of your father cut deeply. I know you're scared to lose me as well but you won't. However, making me angry by doing something stupid is not a very good way to maintain this relationship. You need to trust me; you need to let me do my job without having to worry about you as well."

I made a face. "You're keeping secrets from me."

"Of course I am and for your own protection."

"Big secrets."

He lost his calm, "What the hell do you think would happen if, for some reason, it got out that the last Imperial Grand Admiral had a mate who was as headstrong as she was foolish? Do you think that the various factions all vying for a chunk of the galaxy would just smile and say how cute? No, they would come after you and all the people you love to get to me. The less you know about my business the better off you are. The better off what is left of your family are so leave my business alone." His words were as hard as glacial ice and just as cold.

I stared back at him not budging.

He cocked his head to one side, "I have said this many times before but you don't seem to get it. I did not plan on becoming involved with anyone in this empire. I wished only to serve my people and protect them, this was a route to get what I wanted, but instead Da'hajn had other plans and you, chaos incarnate, are a part of my life whether I want it or not. I did not need such a distraction but now that you are in my world I would not have it any other way. However, you need to put aside your own wants and your own headstrong, somewhat selfish desires to meddle in my affairs and listen to me. I have everything well in hand, all the possibilities are covered. So listen to me, while running this campaign I cannot be worrying about you, it is that simple. I have enough to think about without being concerned that my bond mate is off trying to get herself killed over phantoms and dreams."

His last sentence caught me off guard and I looked up at him sharply.

His eyebrow arched. "Do you really think me so blind that I cannot see what is really at the heart of this?" When I didn't answer he continued. "You have nightmares about my death. This is not a secret as you've told me about it at least twice now but what you don't tell me is how often you see this same vision and quite frankly I don't need to know that. What I do need you to know is that I can look after myself, I have been doing it for a very long time and despite your feelings to the contrary I have managed to evade death many times."

I didn't say anything and looked away but he wasn't going to let this matter drop so easily. He took my chin between thumb and forefinger to lift my face up so we stared at each other squarely in the eyes.

"Merlyn there are safeguards in place already to assure my safety," he repeated, "You cannot save me or the entire galaxy from evil and that is not your job."

"Then what the hell is my job?"

"To stay alive," he said gently. "And to remind me that there is more to life than simply leading an armada against the New Republic, to remind me about the possibilities of life beyond the bridge of an Imperial Star Destroyer and to remind me of what is good and sweet in this galaxy."

"That's a sappy reason," I eventually conceded.

He smiled. "It's the only reason worth mentioning, my dear," he said, "Your work may be on Nirauan and while it is important, your place in my life is not about that work so please stop meddling."

I lay against his warmth silent for what felt like a long time. It had not ever been my plan to fall in love and bind myself to a man such as him either. I had known from an early age what men with stars in their blood were like and had sworn up and down never to get involved with one. They were too much of a heartache, too much of a headache. Yet, here I was cuddled in the arms of just such a man, a man who had the potential to become the most powerful person in the entire galaxy. It made me think back to a conversation my uncle and I had once had.

I twisted around to look at him. "If you win against the New Republic and succeed in re-establishing the Empire will you become emperor?"

"Would you wish to be empress and rule at my side?" he asked with a slight smile.

"No, not really." I replied, surprised by the absolute conviction of the word, surprised to discover it was the truth.

Thrawn made a satisfied sound. "It is not my wish to rule as Emperor, it is only my wish to re-establish law and order. I am not certain that I would make a very good Emperor and you are far too wild a creature to be the consort to the ruler of a galaxy. To tie you down in such a role would be to break your spirit," he said and before I could launch into a protest he explained, "You would feel responsible for everyone under your rule. You would wish to help each and every being and that burden alone would tear you to pieces. Palpatine made such a good leader because he did not personally care for his subjects he cared about the whole and about power. The problem was his love of power made him blind to those who wanted more for their own peoples, more freedoms and rights. Instead of giving some of these things up to placate a growing dissent he clung even more tightly to them. That is why he eventually died he lost sight of the bigger

picture. I do not wish this role for you or for myself, for that matter. I am content to lead the navy; I do not need to rule the galaxy as well."

"Do you worry about becoming like him? My Bunduki master used to tell me that to fear a thing is to become it," I said, puzzled by his apparent hesitation in the matter of ruling the galaxy. It almost sounded as if he had someone in mind already but I didn't ask.

His answer was sharp. "No. I do not fear that. Becoming Emperor simply is not my destiny nor was it never a job I wanted and," he added thoughtfully, "I hope that it will be one I should not have to do. I am not Palpatine, my dear and I do not aspire to be as he was either."

"If that were the case I would have left you long ago. As you have no desire to be as Palpatine I have no desire to bed him," I said tartly suppressing a shudder.

Thrawn chuckled and stroked my skin with the tips of his fingers, "The truth is that I am first and foremost a strategist, a tactician. Being ruler of the Galaxy is about politics and while I enjoy the occasional foray into this world for the most part it gets tedious rather quickly. Being Emperor is all about being a master politician and that is not something I aspire to, at least not yet. I am quite certain that the right person for that job will come along."

"You'd miss space."

He smiled. "I would."

I nodded and glanced at the chrono by the bed and sighed. "Speaking of space, you should get ready and your ride will be here soon unless you plan on heading back to your ship in the nude. While I don't mind seeing you in this state I do think your men might find it uncomfortable"

"The only person who sees me completely undressed is you," He replied airily. "And please stop making it sound as though I am leaving you forever. I'll be returning in two months."

"And will I get to see you naked then?"

He moved to get out of the bed, "If you behave." There was mischief behind his words.

I lay on my stomach, watching as he wrapped a robe around his body. "Good behaviour is overrated," I told him.

"I know, you keep telling me," He leaned over to kiss the top of my head. "You should also consider getting dressed. Or do you wish to shower with me and save water?"

I smirked and rolled off the bed. "That's the best thing you've said in the last hour," I said and went to join him because usually our conversations in the shower were a little less tense and a whole lot more fun. When he pulled me tightly to his body under the streaming water I understood that, while he had fenced with words and been stern about his wishes, my presence would fail in his world and this was his way of saying goodbye. This passionate side of him, which only I ever saw, was his way of telling me how he felt and my body's answer was my way of reminding him what he would miss. I loved it when we showered together and I made quite certain he would not forget what it was like to be with me for the next two months.

As he dried himself off he grinned at me. "You are a menace," he said.



"And you would not have it any other way." I retorted.

I didn't say anything else and we got dressed in silence. My uncle was up and pottering about the kitchen when we appeared. He gave Thrawn a nod and me a smile. "I made some 'caf, spiced," he said, gesturing to the carafe on the stove.

I didn't ask, I just poured two cups and handed one to Thrawn who was dressed from head to toe in his Dantassi gear. He took the offered cup and smiled his thanks. None of us spoke, there were no words to be said and none of us were people who needed to fill in the silences. When the shuttle arrived, we heard the engines.

"I will say my good-byes here. Do not follow me outside, Tekari," Thrawn said as he set the empty cup on the table.

I nodded.

"Tze'yusha'Jin, I thank you for your hospitality." Thrawn turned to my uncle and bowed slightly as was Dantassi custom.

My uncle mirrored the action and the two men clasped each other by the wrists. "You are always welcome in my home Nikätza'arth'pavjäska."

I watched the formality with feigned disinterest which made Thrawn smile. He turned to me, cupping my face with both of his hands. "Stay safe and remember what I said to you," he said softly and kissed me tenderly. Then he placed his mask over his face, drew up the hood of his cloak and left the kitchen, moving down the hall, through the front door and then stepped out into the desert. My uncle said nothing and we both waited, straining to hear the sounds of the shuttle, and sighed as the ship lifted off. Thrawn's departure left behind a void.

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It was the small hours of the night when I woke up bathed in cold sweat with a scream on my lips. My heart pounded in my chest as though I had just been chased through Beggar's Canyon by Tusksens. For a long terrible moment the nightmare, which had me shaking, sank its claws deep into my brain refusing to let me go but the raspy tongue of a jax licking my hand brought me back into the real world. I sighed and sat up, reaching to scratch Khavi between the ears and smiled as she purred softly, rubbing her head against my hand. She always seemed to know when I was in distress and it was always she who was first at my side when I woke from a bad dream.

I got out of bed stiffly dislodging the other jaxes who had curled up around my body. I was still tired but I knew there would be no going back to sleep so I decided to go make a cup of tea instead. Khavi and Sja followed me up the stairs, their tails high, making little chirping sounds which meant they hoped to be fed.

"It's two am," I told them as I wandered into the kitchen, surprised to see my uncle there.

He smiled, "Jaxes know nothing of time, Lei'lei they know only love and food. You can give them a little as a treat."

I nodded stifling another yawn and dropped a handful of food in their bowls.

"Bad dreams?" Uncle Vahlek asked as he poured me what looked like a brandy.

I nodded again as I sat at the table across from him and cupped the glass in my hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

With a shrug I said, "It won't help."

"Are they about Jyrki?"

"No. I don't dream about him anymore, at least not that I remember," I said, "No, now my dreams are about the Emperor and sometimes about Za'ar."

"The Emperor?"

"I see him sometimes, but he's not the same man, I mean he is but he's different as well. I know it's Palpatine the aura is unmistakable but the face and the body are younger, changed." I sighed and downed a mouthful of the brandy.

Uncle Vahlek watched me for a moment then nodded. "Cloned?"

"Maybe, I don't really know. It's possible. Using the force the way he did destroyed his physical body. There were rumours that he used to change bodies, transferring his consciousness into a new cloned body but that always sounded so very farfetched to me." I shrugged and toyed with the glass, "The dreams are fragmented and when I wake I don't actually recall a lot of the details. I just know that he's as powerful as ever and he keeps telling me he will find me and finish what he started."

"I can see why that would keep you up." He nodded.

"Why are you up? You should be resting, Zte'sa."

"Can't sleep," he said, "Time in the bacta tank has messed up my internal clock and I keep thinking about Kit."

I watched his face for a moment. It seemed to me as though he had aged and he looked every bit as tired as I felt, "I miss him too," I said after a long moment of silence had passed. "I keep thinking about how I could have changed the outcome, about how I could have..."

He put up a hand and silenced the run of thoughts. "It wasn't your..."

"...Fault." I finished for him, "I know that, really I do, but I still go over and over it all in my head. Wondering if there was anything different I could have done."

He sighed. "Lei'lei sometimes very bad things happen. It's just the way it is. I hope that this will end the string of bad things that have happened to you. You need to let this go before you become obsessed with the past and turn into Jyrki. You cannot turn back time and no amount of 'what ifs' will change things."

I scrubbed my face with my hands. I was so tired and the mention of Jyrki's name brought a flash of anger which scared me a little. I took a deep breath to get that under control. Jyrki was dead. I had killed him but it didn't lessen my fury at him any.

"How are you feeling?" I asked switching the subject.

"The wound has healed well enough but my body isn't what it used to be you know. It takes longer to get back to where I was. I'm not twenty anymore."

"Are you in any pain?"

He shook his head, "Not really. I am mostly just stiff."

I made a face, "I'm grateful for what you did but it was stupid."

"Well, we all do stupid things," he said with a wry smile.

"Why didn't you wear armour?"

The question surprised him. "Armour?"

I nodded. "Navaari was wearing armour weave under his clothes. Why weren't you?"

He frowned, "I never use armour, Lei'lei. It hampers my movement and I don't, as a rule, need it."

I frowned, "Well that's a silly reason. It would have saved you the dip in the bacta tank."

"Perhaps but I don't wear it, I never have. Part of the Bunduki training is to not rely on such things, you should know that. The Tze'yusha'Jin do not rely on armour, they rely on craft and training. We are supposed to move like shadows and be faster than those who would do us harm." The expression on his face told me he meant those words with a touch of irony.

"Navaari wore armour weave and he's part of your brotherhood," I said crossly.

"Yes, he is." My uncle agreed, "But he came to Nar Shadda looking and prepared for a fight. I did not. I came to Nar Shadda to eliminate Jyrki Andando by means of stealth. I had hoped to get to him before you arrived."

I gave him a look which said *I don't believe you*.

He sighed. "The truth of the matter is I have never needed body armour, I have never used it and to be perfectly honest it didn't occur to me to do so."

"So pride almost got you killed?" I grumbled.

"If that's how you wish to see it, I suppose so but I don't see you wearing any either."

"Well, do me a favour next time wear armour. I almost lost you and I don't want to go through that again."

My uncle laughed. "I hope to hell there will never be a next time for something like this. And if there is I am certain your Ta'kasta'cariad will throttle you long before I have anything to do with it."

I let out a noisy sigh. "I'm sure he would and if he didn't Navaari would."

"Yes, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii did mention something about keeping you safe on Hjal." There was a catch in his voice when he spoke Navaari's name.

There was a long pause and then I asked, "How do you know him? From before I mean, because you do know Navaari from before, right?"

"It's a long story, Lei'lei," he said quietly as if that would end the conversation right then and there.

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly as if that would ease the frustration I felt, "You know what I have learned Zte'sa? Saying an explanation is a long story is another way of avoiding having to explain it. You understand Cheunh, you know of the Dantassi and their ways and you know Navaari from before. Thrawn greeted you like a member of the clan, something he has never done before, he said things had changed but he also said it was your story to tell. I never actually told you about Navaari, only mentioned his name once or twice and I haven't said that much about my time with the Dantassi yet you know things about them no one else outside their kind does including some of the more obscure bonding rituals. Stop keeping secrets from me, especially about my friends and family, it's what got us all into this mess in the first place." This wasn't exactly true but close enough that he winced when the words tumbled out of my mouth.

"We kept these secrets to protect you."

"And a fine job it's been doing at that," I snapped at him. I was tired. "Did you know Thrawn from before as well?"

He shook his head. "No.

"So tell me how you met Navaari." I pressed.

I didn't think that he would answer me because he was silent for a very long time. "It was a very long time ago," he said quietly.

"Why did you never tell me you two knew each other?"

He sat back against the chair and drew a deep breath, "Because I swore never to reveal to anyone what I knew about the Bone Traders and up until I actually laid eyes on the man I was not sure your Navaari and the man I knew were one in the same."

"Sworn to secrecy? How come?"

"Because it would have endangered Kirja'navaar'inkjerii's life if anyone ever found out what he had done."

I frowned, "What do you mean by that?"

Uncle Vahlek's stare bored into me and when I didn't budge or look away he sighed. "If we are going to speak of this then let's move to the living room where it is a tad more comfortable," he said with a frown. He poured brandy into both glasses and with a move that dislodged Maddy from his lap he got up and headed for the comfort of the next room.

I settled on my favourite chair and before I had finished dragging the spare blanket over my lap Khavi had made herself quite comfortable as if she too wanted to hear the story my uncle was about to tell. Uncle Vahlek sat adjacent to me and propped his legs on the table in front of the couch. He sat still for a long time, contemplating his drink. I had learned enough to know it was best not to say anything while he gathered his thoughts.

"By telling you this story I am breaking a promise to Navaari, you understand this yes?"

I nodded, meeting his pale green eyes with mine, "I need to know, he's family for me and I don't think he'll mind."

For a very long moment my uncle held my gaze and then he nodded. "I know," he said, "He dotes upon you as though you were his own. You are as precious to him as you are to me but I don't think you understand that do you."

"I have some idea." I replied a little crossly. "But he is important to me too, as are you. Now you are all connected and I need to know how, I need to try and understand it because it is just too weird of a coincidence."

"The Dantassi say nothing ever happens by chance."

"I know, but still... it's a huge galaxy and still somehow, in spite of the odds, you know Navaari."

"Well, it seems to me that your life is full of such strange coincidences," He replied with a shrug, "The galaxy works in odd ways, I stopped questioning it a very long time ago. Now do you want to hear this story or not?"

"I want to hear it."

He smiled and then began, "When I met the man you know as Navaari we were very young, in our teens, and what happened, what took place did so long before I met your father, long before I met the woman who would give birth to Jyrki Andando and

long before Darth Vader became the second most feared man in the galaxy," he said, "I was in training, on my way to becoming an apprentice to the Brotherhood of the Tze'yusha'Jin and part of their initiation rites was survival training. Initiates in the brotherhood were taken individually to a planet that was harsh and unforgiving, essentially dumped on the surface with nothing and told to survive for a given time period and if they accomplish this then they will be picked up at the end of the trial. There are no rules just a lot of frustration. So, there I was, alone on a planet whose name I didn't know with nothing except the clothes on my back and the knowledge in my head."

"That sounds a bit....cruel," I told him, frowning.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Perhaps but this fraternity is selective and exclusive. Only the very best are ever accepted into its fold. I wanted to be the best of the best. After what my father had done, how he had treated me I desired to become the one thing I knew would hurt him, which was an assassin for the most secretive organization in the galaxy." He paused for a moment, considering his words with great care. "I had witnessed the death of the man I had loved as a child, the man who had taught me the foundation of the Bunduki arts and had become in many ways a father figure for me where my own father remained a stranger." He shrugged ever so slightly, "I came from a wealthy family and as the eldest legitimate son I was expected to follow in my father's footsteps and learn the family trade, to become like him. So you can imagine the outcry when I walked away from it all." He smiled slightly at the memory, "I don't tell you this to gain sympathy. Everyone has hardships in their lives Lei'lei and their childhoods mark them, scar them forever. In my case mine made me hard, made me learn to hate everyone and everything for a very long time and it was because of that desire that I wished to join the brotherhood. What better way to get back at the galaxy than to sign on with the most notorious killers around?"

I had a hard time seeing the man I adored so much in the role of a cold hearted killer and I began to understand a little better why he had never wanted to speak to me of his past, of his profession. I nodded to let him know I had gotten the point.

"The Tze'yusha'Jin tend to find those who truly wish to become one of their kind. Word of mouth, the right questions asked in the right places eventually reach the right ears. One day they found me in a tavern on Malastare betting on pod racing. I never saw them coming and no one noticed when they removed me from the tavern right in the middle of a crowd. They were and are that good. I found myself in an interrogation room, where I sat for what felt like days. I saw no other person, was given no food and no instructions. I understood that I was being watched and it became a battle of wills. Eventually I suppose I passed this test, though by the time I was released I would have welcomed death. This was the beginning of what would turn out to be the hardest training I had ever done in my life. I loved every moment of it because through the pain and the punishment I understood I was becoming the very thing my father hated."

"Why did you hate him so much?" I asked unable to stop from interrupting.

Uncle Vahlek sighed. "That is also a long story, Lei'lei and one I don't much wish to talk about. Will it suffice to say that he was a cruel man and that what he did in the name of power and profit disgusted me to the core? What he did to his family was inexcusable and when my mother killed herself to get away from him because he had

sworn he would never let her go I understood that even though this man had fathered me, I wanted nothing to do with him. I left home and I never looked back." He stopped to glance at my face for a moment and when I didn't say anything he continued. "I drifted around for a while, got into some things better left unsaid and eventually was found by the brotherhood. The training I had undergone as a boy served me in good stead, word got around I suppose and before I understood what had happened I found myself marooned on a planet with just the clothes on my back."

"And that's where you met Navaari?" I pressed.

"Yes."

"So what, he saved your life?" I asked.

He chuckled, "No, quite the contrary, Lei'lei. I saved his when I was supposed to kill him."

"What?" I could not keep the shock out of my voice and my exclamation made Khavi jump and dig her claws into my thighs. I hissed in pain and gritted my teeth until she settled back down, glaring at me in the process.

He smiled, "We were supposed to survive when I found Navaari he was wounded. I should have just killed him but instead I saved his life."

"That doesn't sound like a cold hearted killer to me."

He laughed, "No not really but partially it was a reaction against my own father's xenophobia which was rampant and destructive. I knew it would have annoyed him greatly if I, his son, saved the life of an alien rather than took it simply because he was at a disadvantage." He made a face, "I know how silly this sounds and believe me, looking back it feels just as ridiculous but then I was passionate, stupid and determined to be as different from my father as I possibly could."

"And becoming an assassin was different how?"

"Ah, well my father hired members of the brotherhood on occasion to eliminate some of his competition. I remember one time after a meeting with one of these men how he had scorned them, ridiculed them even saying they were scum and worse than bounty hunters. Paid thugs with no brains were his exact words. It was something I did not understand. He hated them but he hired them to do the work he would not touch. When I asked him about this he told me *never let your own hands get dirty, boy, if you don't need to*. I was puzzled by this so the next time he hired one of these men I made it my goal to speak with the man and find out if they really were as my father had said. The man, a Zabrak named Sohli seemed amused at my clumsy attempt to follow him and had granted me an audience. After answering my questions honestly and intelligently I had come to the conclusion that my father was very wrong and that the reason he had scorned members of this assassin's guild was that in fact he was scared to death of men like them. The conversation I had with Sohli lasted no more than five minutes, ten at the most but it was enough. He saw in me potential and I understood that my father, as ruthless and as brutal as he was, was also a coward completely without any honour. He hired these men to eliminate his competition because he feared losing to them. He brutalised my mother to terrorize her into staying at his side, she was the daughter of a wealthy shipping magnate and she brought status to my father who was common born. When it was discovered that she would be unable to bear him any more children after me he was unspeakably cruel to her, all the while having affair after affair with various

influential women who bore him children willingly. I was his legitimate son and heir but I wasn't the only child to carry his bloodline. When I ran off he had me disowned me and I was happy for it."

"No offence, Zte'sa but this sounds like a really bad Holloway story."

To my surprise, he laughed, "Yes I suppose it does at that. I am so grateful you never knew a home that was like mine which was part of the reason when we found you I wanted to take on the role as guardian." He sighed. "My father, he was a bad man in every sense of the word, it happens sometimes. I don't get too broken up about it but it is what it is. I did not want to be like him so I decided to become like that which he hated and feared. When I asked Sohli about the brotherhood all he said was they watched out for potential candidates and I would know if I was worthy."

"So they watched you?"

He nodded, "It would appear so."

"And you saved Navaari's life?"

"Yes," he said, "Although we didn't know it at the time, he and I were tracking the same animal and unluckily for him he missed his first shot at it. The beast came after him and was in the process of mauling him. He would have died had I not killed it first. Seems somewhat anticlimactic to speak of it in this way but trust me at the age of seventeen it was a big deal."

"You were only seventeen?"

He nodded. "As I told you, I was young and stupid."

"And Navaari?"

"Not much older I don't think but he never told me his exact age and it's hard to tell with his kind, they age differently from humans but he, too, was quite young." He sighed and sipped his brandy thoughtfully. "The beast we had been hunting had raked him pretty good and he lost a lot of blood. I should have killed him right then and there, eliminating the competition, making it easier to survive but I didn't."

"Why not?"

He drew a deep breath. "Because when I looked into his eyes I saw myself in more ways than I could count. I swore I would not kill just to get ahead, that was what my father had done and I had sworn I would not be like him, so instead of taking Navaari's life I dragged him to my camp, treated his wounds and took care of him. And," He added, "I wanted someone to talk to."

"I find it hard to picture Navaari getting mauled by any creature," I said quietly.

That made my uncle smile. "You've seen him undressed, yes?"

I nodded.

"Have you ever asked him about the scars on his chest?" He dragged his fingers in a claw like fashion across his chest above his heart.

"I never asked but I always wondered." I murmured. The first time Navaari had stripped off his clothes in front of me I had stared in shock at the vivid scars which were almost white across his pale blue skin. The look on his face had told me not to ask so I hadn't, I assumed an animal of some sort had done it but the story remained a mystery. He wasn't the only one with scars on his body he didn't want to talk about so I had let the matter lie.

"He was lucky his heart wasn't torn out." My uncle said.

I sat back in the couch and stroked Khavi absently. "So you saved his life, why all the secrecy?"

"He is Dantassi and is supposed to be masked to strangers. I saw his face. He thought he was alone on the planet so he stopped wearing his mask. By being seen he risked being shunned by his tribe or worse being put to death should it ever be known that he had not only shown his face but had shared his clan's knowledge," he said, not telling me the entire truth. There was something more behind this but I didn't press because I suspected it had more to do with the Tze'yusha'Jin's rules than Dantassi law.

"Navaari likes to bend the rules when he can," I said, "You saved his life, which meant he would have felt you were now responsible for him in some way."

"Yes but I waved that right," he said, "I didn't want that responsibility or what it meant. So he taught me his language and some of his people's customs in return for my silence. That was our deal. He teach me as much about his kind as he could and I kept it a secret. I had always known about the Bone Traders, who does not know of their kind, and had always been fascinated by them so to learn from one meant a great deal to me."

"How is it that he was even in this brotherhood trial thingy anyway? I thought he was in training from an early age to be Jhal'kai."

"That is his story to tell you, Lei'lei but as you pointed out; he does not always obey the rules."

"So this all happened before Thrawn ever went to Hjal?"

"Yes, the invasion of his home world was some years later and we had mostly forgotten about one another. It was only when I saw your mask did I think of him but even then I didn't know it was the same man, I wasn't sure of that until I met him in person on board the *Judicator*."

"How did you recognize him? I mean it's been years right?"

He chuckled, "Yes it has indeed been many, many years still one does not forget. We spent almost seven months on that damned planet together and an awful lot of things happened to us. There are some things about a person you never forget, no matter how much time has passed."

"So how is it that Za'ar can greet you as one of the clan warriors now, he never did that before?"

"You," my uncle said with a smile, "Apparently you bind everyone together."

"Huh?" I said making a face. "How do you figure that?"

"I don't know Lei'lei but somehow you manage to bring people together. If I understood it correctly this is because you and your Ta'kasta'cariad are bound and Navaari is part of that because he fostered Thrawn and then you. I believe some of the rules are relaxed because Thrawn is actually tied to a different clan, one on Csilla if I am not mistaken. I, by virtue of being your guardian and having saved your life, am now included in that circle as well because I am responsible for you, peripherally at least. Dantassi rules are complicated as is their clan structure. I always wanted to be a part of it and now, to some extent I am. I owe that to you."

"Now this really does sound like a bad Holloway novel," I grumbled.

"Perhaps it does at that," he nodded with a smile, "But it isn't as if your life, till now, has been dull and quiet either."

I only shrugged in response, "So do you get to wear a mask?"



"That has not been discussed as of yet but it does allow Navaari to bear his face in front of me and for me, should I ever go to Hjal to be allowed to see as well as be seen within the confines of the enclave once it has been approved by an elder. As I said, Dantassi laws are complex but between you and that Admiral of yours you have managed to bend them in some interesting ways."

"Yeah, I get told that frequently," I said with a sigh. "Do you think Navaari told Za'ar this story?"

My uncle shook his head. "No, I know he has not nor would your mate ask, unlike you, he understands that some things must be kept hidden. I have a place in your tribe, in your other world because of what happened very recently not because of what I did all those years ago and should that particular tale ever make it to the wrong ears then the fallout for Navaari would be messy."

I nodded. "Then your secret will stay safe with me."

"I appreciate that."

"So how did you learn Cheunh because the Dantassi version of that language is different yet you understood Thrawn and me when we spoke with each other when you brought him the Mandalorian Armour?"

My uncle gave me a slow smile. "You think you are the only one who has ways of getting such information?" he asked. "Part of my later training was to infiltrate the Unknown Regions and spend time learning the ways and customs of the peoples who lived out in that area of space. I knew enough Dantassi to understand the Chiss, as you well know the two languages are very similar, so learning Cheunh was not that hard."

"Can you speak it?"

"Not as well as you but I would get by."

I sighed, "That's a hell of a story, Zte'sa."

He gave a short laugh. "I am quite certain when your children ask about your life and you tell them all that has happened to you they will reply in much the same way."

"Maybe, though right now it doesn't seem as fantastic as it does insane." I nodded thoughtfully. "So what will you do now? I mean now that the hunt for Jyrki is over? Did you ever find out if he was your son or not?"

Uncle Vahlek looked at me for a moment. "Even if he was born of my seed he was never my son and no I don't know but I also no longer wish to either." He sipped at his drink, "As for what I will do next, well I have work. In fact work that will take me away fairly soon so if you plan on staying here until that art auction Bedi was mentioning, I'd be happy if you'd look after the kids for me."

"What sort of a job?" I asked.

"The sort of job I do not discuss with nosey young women no matter how much I may love them."

"Are you working for Thrawn?" I pressed.

He sighed. "I will say no but you will know I am lying so you have your answer."

I stared at him for a second while pieces of a puzzle suddenly clicked into place. "He's asked you to go to Wayland for him hasn't he?"

There was a very long moment of silence and then my uncle downed the last of his brandy. "It's late, I'm tired and I am not discussing this with you."

"Wayland is dangerous."

This statement earned me a hard stare. "You never answered my question about looking after the jaxes."

I heaved a very large sigh and gritted my teeth then nodded. "Yes, I will take care of them."

"Thank you."

"We're not going to talk about this at all?"

He got up and cupped my face with his hand. "No," he said as he kissed the top of my head. "I have divulged enough secrets for one night. Go to bed and get some sleep, child."

I watched as he left the living room but I stayed where I was. My head was buzzing with everything he had told me and this last little piece of information was like a knife dragged through my chest. Wayland was a bad place, it had been cropping up in my dreams and I didn't want my uncle going there. I didn't want anyone I loved going there but I didn't think that what I wanted played any part in what was going to happen and I didn't know what to do about it.

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*I knew I was dreaming but I couldn't stop it from unfolding. I found myself in the facility in Mount Tantiss in the waiting room where the painting called Palpatine Triumphant hung. The sand jiggers in the pit of my belly were worse than ever and I was scared but I didn't know why. The Emperor was dead, Lord Vader had killed him, thrown him down a shaft on the second death star. I didn't know how I had come to this place or why I was here. Suddenly, out of nowhere one of the Emperor's advisors appeared, sour faced and sallow skinned. I jumped when he spoke.*

*"Come with me Miss," he said in a voice that was like sandpaper on metal.*

*Without word or protest I followed the man and marvelled at how his feet made no sound on the polished stone floor. We walked for what seemed like forever through a maze of hallways and winding stairwells. I knew this could not be right because the Emperor would never have bothered with stairs, he only ever used turbo lifts. We descended further and further going deeper and deeper into the belly of the mountain until I was sure we would reach the core. I could feel the pressure change on my ears and my heart pounded in my chest. I was frightened but also curious.*

*We reached our destination, a set of doors at the end of a long dim corridor, the advisor whose name I didn't know stopped and pulled open the great set of double doors, gesturing for me to walk through them. I stepped hesitantly out on to the large platform and gasped. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting but what I saw was not it. As far as my eye could see the walls were lined with large tubes of transparasteel, each one held a body, a clone. The sight made my stomach turn. I closed my eyes because the images that flooded through my head were painful and made me dizzy. When I turned around to tell the person who brought me to this place that I wanted to return home I came face to face with the Emperor. His face was a wrinkled wreck and his laughter felt like claws down my back.*

*"I told you if you wanted to learn more you would have to come to me," he said reaching out to caress my face with gnarled fingertips. "And here you are, too curious to stay away. I knew you would return to me. It is your destiny."*

*I took a step back from him. "You're dead." I whispered, shaking my head in denial at what I saw.*

*He laughed. "I am never dead, child," he said and for a moment he seemed to blur out of existence and then shifted back, changing his appearance from that of decrepit and old to that of a handsome, virulent man. He was powerful and young but in his eyes I saw him as he really was, malevolent and ancient."*

*"How is this possible?" I whispered taking another step back.*

*"The dark side is a path to many abilities, child. You have no idea but I could show you. I could teach you so much. You have talents that could be of use," he said, "I told you that you cannot escape me."*

*"Why are you doing this?" I asked gesturing to the clones below me.*

*"I want my Empire back." He hissed.*

*"Grand Admiral Thrawn is working on that." I burst out.*

*His smile was cruel and terrifying. "Yes, he does my bidding well, does he not?"*

*"Your bidding?"*

*"Do you think, child, that he starts this war on a whim? Nothing in this galaxy happens without my knowing about it."*

*I shook my head. "No. He never does anything on a whim." I murmured softly. Wondering if Thrawn really did know about that the Emperor was alive.*

*The Emperor cackled, "Except for you, child," he said snidely. "You were unexpected. His attachment to you was very unexpected, but useful." He took a step towards me. His face kept shifting from old to youthful and back again as though he could not decide which phase he should stay in.*

*I stepped back one more step and felt the railing of the platform at my back. "Unexpected?"*

*Palpatine's grin was full of teeth and malice. "Such a pretty distraction, no wonder he doesn't want you to come here. My guardian would have such fun with you."*

*"What guardian? Why are you hiding here anyway, why are you not helping him win back your empire?"*

*"I will return when the time is right and Mitth'raw'nuruodo will pave the way." He snarled. "You will be the incentive to make sure he succeeds!" He added and reached to grab me but I pushed him away. "You cannot hide, little one, I can feel you through the force, did you think I could not?" He snickered.*

*"No," I said shaking my head, suddenly terrified. I thought that I was free of him; I thought that with his death I no longer had to worry about the Emperor and his terrible plans. I took one more step away before he could touch me. The railing at my back gave way and I fell backwards into the abyss of cloning tubes, screaming as I went.*

*My screams echoed about the room as I woke, soaked from sweat shivering from fear. I wept then, something I hadn't done because of a nightmare in a very long time*

but these dreams scared me even more than the ones in which I saw Thrawn die. For three days the tension in the house had been uncomfortable and the dreams had been far more vivid than normal. My uncle had been distant and I had been cranky. The subject of Wayland lay between us, a rift that made being in the same room difficult because I wanted to ask and he refused to speak of it. Since our late night conversation I had woken each night from the same terrible dream stifling my screams with my fists. I sighed and got out of bed and went to shower. By the time I was dressed my uncle was awake and making 'caf. It was just past five in the morning.

"You're up early." I mumbled.

"You are a hell of an alarm clock, child," he said looking at me with worry.

I sighed as stood leaning against the wall in the archway between the kitchen and the living room, "I'm going to Mos Eisley today," I said after an uncomfortable silence.

He nodded, "Bedi will be glad to see you and it will be good for you to stop putting off dealing with the task at hand. The sooner you get all of Kit's things sorted out the better I think. Maybe your nightmares will stop then."

"I've told you, my nightmares have nothing to do with going through papa's things," I said sulkily.

"I hear you screaming, Lei'lei," he said softly, "If the dreams are not about what happened to Kit or what took place on Ando Prime then just what are they about? Are you dreaming of Palpatine again?" He poured the 'caf, and placed two cups on the kitchen table. He fed the jaxes and sliced some fruit which he set in a bowl on the table. I remained silent and sulky, my resentment and anger exacerbated by the terrible images that haunted me in my sleep.

"Sit, eat and listen to me," he said in a tone of voice he rarely used. He was fed up with my moods and a little worried although he didn't come out and say it.

Too tired to argue I did as he asked and picked a piece of fruit out of the bowl to nibble on.

"I know you are cross with me but my business with Admiral Thrawn has nothing to do with you. You are his bond mate not his second in command, no matter how much you might like to think so. He keeps his work separate from his private life and that is exactly how it should be. He told me you would get yourself all worked up if I told you what I was contracted to do for him so I didn't but you are getting better at putting the pieces together and I wonder if even he's figured that out yet," he said as he sat down and pushed a cup of stim'caf towards me. "What is it about this place, Wayland that has you looking like death warmed over every time the name gets mentioned?"

I eyed him with a scowl and sipped the 'caf. It was very strong and unusually bitter. "It's a bad place." I mumbled as if that explained everything.

He gave me a small smile. "Yes, I gathered that, which is why you have been asked to stay away from it. Now tell me everything you know about it and why you are so obsessed with it."

I chewed my piece of fruit slowly, trying to organise my thoughts. "It was the Emperor's private store house, his personal fortress for all the things he wanted kept private. I only saw a very small part of it."

"It was obviously enough to make you go a little crazy." He retorted.

"I see it in my dreams sometimes." I replied carefully.

"The ones that have you screaming awake in the early hours of the morning?"

I nodded.

"I thought you did not recall what they were about?"

I made a face. "I lied; sometimes I do remember although I wish that wasn't the case."

"Ah," he said happy to finally be getting to the heart of the matter. "And that's reason enough for you to want to go tearing across the galaxy into almost certain danger in spite of being asked not to?"

I shrugged. "It's a terrible place. Being there was like having bees burning in my brain but these dreams, they mean something; they are trying to tell me something, and whatever that is, it's important."

He shook his head, puzzled, "What exactly do you mean?"

"I feel as though I am forgetting something, a detail that is part of a larger picture, like the last piece of a puzzle," I said with a sigh, "It's always this way with these types of dreams. It's a message but this time I don't understand it. He's dead, the Emperor, he's dead. The empire fell apart, it's been over eight years and the New Republic has control over nearly two thirds of the Empire so if he has the ability to clone himself with all his power and all of his memories intact then why would he wait so long to come back and re-establish his right as ruler? Why?"

Uncle Vahlek looked at me for a second as though he were trying to decipher a new code. "Honestly, Lei'lei I'm making allowances because it's so early but you're really not making much sense. Tell me everything you remember about the facility, everything and do not leave a single detail out," he said.

"Wayland's in the Ojsoster Sector but I don't know exactly where. Lord Vader punched in the coordinates himself. The actual fortress is deep in a mountain and it's some sort of a store house, I think, for all of his treasures that he didn't have at the Imperial palace," I said evasively.

"Treasures?" He asked.

I shrugged. "I was stuck in a waiting room and it was full of rare and precious arts works. I got the impression this place was where he kept all the things he coveted and didn't want to share with anyone else. I was forbidden to move outside the room under pain of death and when I was called before the Emperor, I was taken directly to his audience chamber. I didn't see much else. But I can tell you this even Lord Vader was afraid of that place. He would never say it or even show it but I felt it. We were tied by something, a bond, which allowed me to know things about him occasionally and I could sense his fear. Wayland held secrets that worried him, made him nervous. I haven't thought about the place I a long time but now it's the only thing on my mind and I don't know why." I was rambling.

For a long moment my uncle just regarded me and then he said, "Stop avoiding the real issue. Tell me about these dreams."

I took a large gulp of 'caf and thought about how to unravel the weirdness of the nightmares which had been plaguing me. Even bringing the memory of them back made my stomach turn. It must have shown on my face because Uncle Vahlek's expression softened as he reached over and placed his hand over mine, saying; "Lei'lei, you're sitting my kitchen and you're perfectly safe. What do you see in these night terrors?"

I drew a deep breath and began to describe my nightmares as best I could. He sat, listening without interrupting and frowned when I finished.

"What do you think it all means?" He asked.

I shook my head, "Nothing, maybe everything. I don't know." It was the truth. I was missing something and it was driving me crazy.

"You've mentioned this idea of him cloning before. Do you think that the cloning facility is real?"

I shrugged. "I don't know that either, Zte'sa, maybe. There was a rumour around the palace that the Emperor had the ability to clone, but I don't know if it's real. I told Thrawn about it because he was searching for answers, for ways to increase his numbers. It was just a possibility; I saw something when I was running around Coruscant, you know before all hell broke loose, and I thought it may be what he was looking for, but it is all just bits and pieces and what-ifs, nothing concrete. Whatever it is that is there is bad and I am dreaming about it, drawn to it. The answer to something is there I just don't know what exactly."

"Maybe the place is not the key, maybe it is something else. You just dream of this particular place because you associate it with Palpatine, you associate it with a bad experience."

"Maybe. It was the first time he used my talent for reading the memories off objects." I shuddered.

"Then step away from it for a while and maybe the answer will come to you sideways."

"I am so tired of this. I thought the Emperor was gone for good and now I can't get him out of my head." I spat. "He died at Endor, I felt it and now he haunts me in my dreams as though nothing ever happened." I shook my head. "What the hell does this ghost want from me?" I yelled, thumping the table crossly with my fist.

Uncle Vahlek stared at me and then at his cup for a very long time. "How much time do you think you will spend in Mos Eisley?" He asked abruptly changing the subject.

"I don't want to overnight at the docking bay if that's what you are asking," I said quietly. "There are too many memories, I don't want to shock the hell out of Bedi by waking the entire house up with my screams, and...", I shrugged, "...and I don't feel at home there anymore."

"So just for the day?"

I nodded. "If we can get what has to be done in that time frame yeah."

"I will let Bedi know to expect us then."

"Us?"

"Yes, us. Given your current state of mind I don't think I am letting you out of my sight. I, too, made a promise," he said with a sigh, getting up to refill our cups. "I intend to keep it. So there will be no arguments about this from you, besides Bedi has been wanting us both to come to dinner ever since she heard I returned home safe and sound."

I just nodded. I had been dreading going back to the docking bay because it meant having to help Bedi go through my father's things and his papers. I didn't want to deal with it; I didn't want to deal with any of it.

"If you hurry up and get ready we can catch the early shuttle out and be in Mos Eisley by eight," he said, a not so subtle hint to get up off my behind and get moving.

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The trip to Mos Eisley was quiet and uneventful. The shuttle was full of the usual commuters but we had arrived early enough to get a seat. The walk from the shuttle port to the docking bay was a painful reminder every step of the way that I was going back to a home that no longer had my father. The sudden ache of loss was painful. I sighed and Uncle Vahlek wrapped his arm around my shoulder as we jostled our way through the morning crowds. It felt as though I had not been in Mos Eisley for centuries, as though everything had changed even though it was exactly the same as it had been a few days ago.

Bedi was waiting for us and her hug was warm and loving. "Bel will be so sorry she missed you all, she went to visit her sister for the week," she said, "She needed to get out of the house and ...well...you know how it is."

I nodded. I knew and understood. Bel had been a part of the family for almost as long as I could remember, in many ways she was like a sister to me. She had loved and looked up to my father and his death had torn her apart. Though she would never voice it I got the feeling that a little part of her blamed me for what had happened and I wasn't sure that she was wrong either. I turned down Bedi's offer of tea in favour of getting straight to work and headed to papa's office. I had not reckoned on the flood of memories which assaulted me when I walked into his room, nor had I been ready for the sudden tears which sprang to my eyes unwanted and unstoppable. I was grateful that Uncle Vahlek and Bedi were still in the kitchen, giving me some time alone. Grief had a terrible way of slapping me in the face and I never got used to it. Once I got over the crying jag I went to work and began the task of dismantling my father's life.

When Bedi knocked on the door to tell me lunch was ready I was a little surprised that so much time had passed and even more surprised to find out that I was hungry. Over lunch we all spoke of inconsequential things and then once there was no more to eat and no more small talk to make I went back to sorting out the paperwork in my father's office, this time Bedi came with me to help and I was grateful.

"Why did papa keep all of this junk?" I asked looking at the piles we had sorted out.

Bedi sat back against the desk and smiled sadly. "He was such a pack-rat. He never threw anything out," she said, "He kept receipts for things that were destroyed or lost ages ago."

"Well most of this rubbish can get thrown out or taken to the recycle plant," I said gesturing around the room. "I found the deeds and I'll get the changes done so the properties are all in yours and Bel's names."

"I'll agree with this only if your name stays on the leases as well," she said with a sigh. "You will not shut us out. I know you want to, I know you think if you do it will help heal the hole in your heart but trust me it won't. I need you and so does Bel."

I stared at her for a second and then nodded. "I think I'd like a cup of tea," I said quietly. "I'll send the additions to the paperwork tomorrow. I can do that from Uncle Vahlek's house."

"You won't stay here? I've kept fresh linens on the bed for you."

I shook my head. "It's too soon, Bedi."

"I understand," she said quietly but she was disappointed and sad.

"I will, I promise, but..." I stopped as more tears welled up in my eyes. I sighed angrily as I brushed them away.

"But it's too soon, I understand." She nodded. "When you are ready, it will be waiting for you," she said, "You can always return here, it's your home Merly, no matter what you think." She patted my knee and got up from the floor. "I'll go make tea shall I?"

"Please, I'll be there in a moment," I said and watched as she left the office quietly.

I stood up and walked around my father's desk, brushing my fingers across its smooth surface. Memories of my father bubbling into my head, making me miss him all the more, images of him sitting at his desk, sorting through papers, reading, and doing ordinary every day things. These memories hurt and I sat down hard in the chair. If I closed my eyes I could almost see him, bring his presence into focus but the ache of loss overrode my desire to remember and I opened my eyes again quickly. I had loved this room as a child; the walls were lined with shelves full of books and strange souvenirs from all over the galaxy. Each item had a story to tell and my father had loved to tell them. I didn't need to touch them to remember. I sighed as I stared at the shelves, my thoughts drifting to the small library that the Emperor had given me access to in the palace on Coruscant. He had emptied the room out so that when I had returned only a few items had remained including the memory of him. Unwanted, his voice whispered in my mind;

*"If you wish to further your education about the force and its intricacies you must come to me little one."*

I shivered at the echo of his voice. He had known I would come back to Coruscant, come back to the library and he had planted this memory for me to find. You must come to find me... he had said but where? Coruscant was in the hands of the New Republic now and I had promised I would not go to Wayland. Thrawn's insistence and the fear underneath his words scared me enough to want to honour my promise, for now, which meant that if I wanted an answer to my question then I had to find another way, another place to look, but where?

"Merly, tea's ready!" Bedi called, breaking my train of thought.

I sighed as I got up and went to leave but as I did a small, holo capture tucked between two books in the bookshelf by the door caught my eye. I picked it up and stared at it. It was of my parents sitting by water on a beach but I had never seen it before. I took it with me to the kitchen and showed it to Bedi as I sat down to join both her and my uncle at the table. She smiled as she took the picture from my hands.

"They went to Naboo for their honeymoon," she said, "This picture was taken by the beach at the resort. She taught your father to swim there."

"Swim?" I asked.



Bedi nodded, "Your father was Tatooine born and bred and he couldn't swim so she taught him on their honeymoon."

Uncle Vahlek chuckled, "I remember her talking about that. She said that teaching Kit to swim was a little like trying to teach a bantha to fly."

I laughed but my mind was buzzing. I had been so focused on Wayland that I had forgotten about one of the Emperor's most important retreats. It was a place that I knew well enough but that had most likely been forgotten by almost everyone else, the Imperial retreat on Naboo. Palpatine had left a trail for me to follow, he had enjoyed games and he was playing one with me now. Even after his death at Endor his touch, cold and cruel remained. As I sat in the kitchen drinking tea with what was left of my family I realized that if I wanted some answers to the questions flying around my head then I would have to go and look for them. I had promised Thrawn I would stay away from Wayland and I would honour that promise if I could, but I had not given my word to stay away from Coruscant or Naboo.

Two days after we had returned from Mos Eisley, when I told my Uncle I wanted to go to Naboo he didn't have much to say about it. Naboo was not on the list of dangerous places I was not allowed to visit. I had used the excuse of wanting to get away for a small holiday and that seemed to appease his worries a little.

"I'll be back before you leave so I can look after the jaxes. I need to be here before the art auction anyway, I promised Za'ar I'd have information ready for him about it before he makes planet side." I had said as I had packed.

Uncle Vahlek had nodded. "Where will you be staying so I can reach you if I need to?"

"I booked a room in the main hotel in Dee'ja Peak. I'm told the waterfall there is something everyone should see at least once in their lives. Bedi said it's where my parents spent the first week of their honeymoon."

He had smiled. "Yes it is worth seeing and it was something your mother was bound and determined to show your father. She loved Naboo a lot, I think she spent a fair amount of time there as a child with her own family."

"I'll have my comm with me." I had added as I finished my packing. "I just need to get away for a while and Bedi put the idea in my head to go to Naboo. I liked the planet the last time I was there; I felt a sense of peace. I need to get away and think and I can't do that here." I had said as if that explained it all and had hoped that he would accept this without digging further.

He had walked with me to the shuttle port in Wayfar and had kissed me on the forehead as I had hugged him before departing.

"Whatever it is you are looking for," He had said softly in my ear, "I hope you find it with the minimum of bloodshed."

"Me too," Had been my reply and I had boarded the small shuttle to the Mos Espa Space Port without looking back.

The transport to Naboo was quiet. This did not surprise me because it was, I had been told by the travel agent I had booked the flights through, the off season for holidaying on Naboo. It felt odd to be using a public transport but my ship was on Nirauan and I had not wanted to take my father's old cargo runner even though Bedi had offered it. It was easier to blend in and be anonymous by taking public

transportation and I had wanted to attract as little attention as possible. I had booked a small cabin for the trip which would take longer on the transport ship than had I flown in my own but I didn't mind, it gave me time to think. I had not really been joking when I had told Uncle Vahlek I needed to get away, that part had been true and surprisingly enough my first night on board the *Narmle Pearl II* I slept all the way through with no nightmares at all. When we landed at the Theed spaceport, several days later, I felt better rested than I had in ages. It was early morning and raining when I disembarked.

The shuttle to Dee'ja peak was busy with people commuting to work. It felt surreal to be on this world after so many years away from it. I had forgotten how lush and how green it was, especially when compared to the barren deserts of the planet I had just left. I was surprised to find myself shivering because I felt so cold and was glad I had brought along a long, warm coat. It was too easy for me to get used to Tatooine's shimmering heat.

The town of Dee'ja Peak was stunningly beautiful and I gasped at the sight of it when I stepped off the shuttle stopping mid stride to stand in awe at what I was looking at. My awe was short lived as the person behind me shoved into me cursing while trying to get past. Early morning rush traffic and I was in the way, holding things up. With a sigh I moved forward with the rest of the people pouring into the town from the small shuttle port and went in search of the hotel. It wasn't hard to find and it was not busy. The droid who was working at the check in counter gave me a package with tourist information as well as my key card once I had signed in.

"I'm afraid the official tours only run once every two days Miss Gabriel, this is the off season and it is quite quiet this year." He explained almost apologetically.

I smiled. "That's fine, I'd rather explore on my own. Is there anywhere to rent a speeder around here?" I asked.

"Oh yes, you may rent one from the hotel if you like. We have a nice selection of vehicles for you to choose from, if you would... and I can charge that to the room bill."

"Great," I said and picked out the smallest, least expensive two seat vehicle, an AB-one land-speeder. It would do for what I wanted even though it wasn't the fastest one offered. I thanked the droid again as he handed me the key to the vehicle and wished me a pleasant stay. I took my bags and went in search of my room. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the room I had been given was not only airy and spacious but also had a stunning view of the Dee'ja Peak waterfall.

Dee'ja Peak was nestled in the Gallo Mountains of Naboo which mean the town had great views and incredibly beautiful scenery surrounding it. The main attraction was the waterfall which was considered a very large point of interest for visitors. It was impressive to look at although not quite as impressive as the waterfall in Theed. Dee'ja Peak had been one of the earliest human settled places on the planet but unlike Theed or Kaadara it had never managed to obtain the growth or stature and had remained small and unobtrusive. During the Emperor's rule it was the center of all things imperial and most of the civilians who worked at the retreat but who did not want to live there had found apartments in Dee'ja Peak.

I sat on one of the small comfortable chairs in the room and sighed noisily. I was tired from the long trip although I had slept well on board the transport. After a small one sided debate with myself I decided on having a bath, a luxury I had sorely missed on

Tatooine and then maybe some breakfast that didn't all taste the same, after that I would start the real reason I came out here. By mid afternoon it was sufficiently warm for me not to be huddled in a thick sweater. I had eaten lunch in my room while browsing the HoloNet but I didn't find anything of use and if Thrawn was out there creating havoc for the New Republic the HoloNews nets were not talking about it. I changed into traveling clothes and packed a small satchel with things I might need then went down stairs to go and find my speeder. It had been many years since I was here and I hoped that my memory of the location for the Imperial Retreat was accurate otherwise I'd be driving around the planet for no good reason at all.

I wasn't sure what I would find out at the Retreat, I wasn't sure if it was even still there so I was very grateful when I came up over the hill to see the main building still standing. I slowed the speeder and manoeuvred it around the trails which had overgrown until I came to the small house that I had once stayed in. La'yalla creeper had taken over one of the walls completely and I didn't have to use any force sense to know it was deserted. When I tried the front door it was locked so I left it alone. My memories of this place were happy ones; I didn't feel the need to see the decay which had set in. I sighed as I started the speeder's engine up and headed towards the main Retreat building. At the height of the Emperor's reign this had been a busy place but towards the latter years he had frequented it less and less leaving the bulk of the imperial administrative work to his advisers especially Sate Pestage. When I had last been here the compound had been full of workers and navy personnel now the place was deserted and ghost like.

I parked the speeder a little ways away, half hidden by trees and scrub bushes which had long been left to over grow the once cultivated gardens and made my way around to the back of the building to the lake side where I knew of a small set of stairs which would lead me to the balcony and hopefully a way in. I stopped on the wide sweeping balcony and stared out over the lake. It was every bit as beautiful as I remembered it to be and a wash of memories, mostly concerning Thrawn, made me smile. If I closed my eyes I could picture him standing next to me, whispering his seductive words in my ear, a thought which sent a wave of warmth shoot through my body. It seemed like an age since that moment and I sighed as I turned away from the view of the lake to try and find a way into the building without setting off any alarms. I considered using the lightsaber, the one that had once belonged to my mother, that I had brought with me on a whim but then I decided to try one of my imperial personal codes instead and much to my shock this actually worked. The side door snicked opened softly and I slipped in quietly like one of my uncle's jaxes.

The retreat was dark, silent and smelled of disuse. It seemed strange that the building was completely intact and abandoned but then again maybe it had been overlooked and forgotten by the New Republic who had better things to do than look after an old Imperial hideaway. I made my way through the quiet hall until I reached the main foyer. The building had been built in Old Nubian style, with high, ornate ceilings and polished stone floors had been beautiful but now signs of neglect were creeping in. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust and decorated with lacy cobwebs. No one had been here in a very long time.

First I made my way to the library; it seemed the best place to begin a search especially since I wasn't even sure what it was I was looking for exactly. The large door slid open silently for me and I stepped through it cautiously. The huge room was full of shadows and floor to ceiling stacks which had once been full of data-books and chips but which now stood empty. The scent of decay was stronger in here than anywhere else I had been so far, probably due to the damaged electronics which lay strewn about carelessly. I looked at the shelves which had been stripped bare, this had once been one of the best information centers in the Empire, now, the data-files which had been left behind had been destroyed beyond repair and everything else was gone, wiped clean. I bit my lip as I found an access terminal, hoping that the main computer system was still online even though I doubted the databanks would be intact. It would have been fool hardy for any imperial to leave a place such as this accessible to the Rebels, especially the data. I tapped into the computer and was not surprised to find nothing remained on the public data core. No matter what code I typed I got the same response. I was certain the data core had been wiped. There wasn't much else in the library that I would find useful so I left. For a moment I hesitated and then headed down the long hallways to the turbo lift which would take me down to the subbasements and the hidden suite of rooms which had been Lord Vader's.

The turbo lift doors opened onto darkness and for a moment I felt a wave of panic sweep through me but I squashed it quickly. There was nothing here and no one had been here in a long time. I dug out the small hand held light from my satchel and made my way to the small set of doors at the end of the corridor. The door was locked but I had access codes which Lord Vader himself had given me and they overrode the universal lock out. I stepped into the dark room holding my breath and only let it out when the door closed behind me. I fumbled for the light switch and was pleasantly surprised when one of the small side lights flickered on. Using the keypad I locked the door so that even if someone else was here they couldn't get in.

It felt odd to be in his rooms because even though he had never spent much time here a sliver of his presence remained and suddenly I missed him sharply. That terrible sense of loss rode up and made me sad in a way I could never seem to quite understand. Lord Vader had never liked being on Naboo, it reminded him too sharply of his long dead wife, Padmé Amidala. These memories made his already legendary temper even more volatile and violent so he had usually sequestered himself down in these isolated rooms when he was here, it was the safest thing for all concerned. The Emperor had taken a perverse delight in making sure that Lord Vader had spent time on the planet, knowing it made him edgy and peevish. Palpatine liked to unbalance people and this had been a sure fire way to rattle Lord Vader's cage. I went to the desk on the far side of the wall which had once been mine to use and sat down. I probably should not have been surprised when the screen came up blank regardless of what access code I typed in but I was. I sat back in the chair and sighed because this meant there was only one more place to go to find information here and it was the last place I wanted to visit.

I made my way back through the hallway to the narrow corridor at the end and stepped into the turbo lift. The Emperor's private chambers were on the highest floor as usual. He had had a penchant for being above everyone else and here at the retreat had been no different. I half expected the lift to be on lock-down but it responded to my

touch, my fingers tingling as I brushed against the control panel. There were no real memories but an after image of Sate Pestage came to mind and absently my fingers retraced the pattern he had made over the keypad. When the turbo lift lurched upward my stomach lurched with it.

I stepped out of the lift when the doors opened, half expecting to be challenged by members of the Royal guard but the hall was as empty as the rest of the building. It was eerie and disorienting. I walked silently down the dark empty hall, unsure of where I was headed exactly. Unlike the Imperial palace, I did not know the lay out of the Retreat that well and I didn't have a set of blue prints to help me along. I tried each and every door I came across but either the door was locked or the rooms were empty. It seemed that while the retreat had been left standing intact who ever had been in charge of it last had not been asleep and had made sure the place had been stripped of all that was important. I suspected that Sate Pestage had taken care of this. If this were the case, it would not have surprised me; he had been Palpatine's right hand, Palpatine's shadow he had been called, taking care of all the day to day aspects of running the empire and essentially acting as Palpatine personal assistant. Everyone thought that Pestage would take over leadership of the Empire after the Emperor's death but Isard had not allowed that to happen. If Pestage had been a force user I had never felt it but he had been clever and the Emperor had trusted him. I sighed loudly out of frustration because I felt as though I was getting nowhere.

Palpatine's audience chamber was on the top floor of the complex. The aura of power that had surrounded him in life had not diminished any in this place and I shuddered as I stepped out of the turbo lift. The chamber was vast, darkly lit and sparsely furnished, designed this way to instill a sense of awe and fear. I walked to the throne and stared at it for a moment before laying my hand on one of the arm rests. If I had been expecting a barrage of images and memoirs of the man who had once sat in this chair I was sadly disappointed.

All I felt was a cold caress of a papery hand across the back of my neck. *"Not here, child."* I shivered and sat down on the cold stone floor in frustration. I had been here for hours and found nothing, yet I had felt pulled to the Retreat and usually these feelings held some truth so the fact that there was nothing here puzzled and annoyed me. I looked at my chrono, it was late and the last thing I wanted to do was take the speeder back to Dee'ja Peak in the dark, driving along unfamiliar paths through wooded areas of Naboo but I didn't particularly want to spend the rest of the night in this complex either. I made my way back down to the main rotunda and slipped behind the concierge's counter. I smiled when I found what I was looking for, the entrance key for the small house I had once lived in tucked at the very back of the drawer where no one could find it.

The small residence was dark and still as I opened the door. No one had been here in a long time, in fact I doubted anyone had used this place since I had been here. No one liked this particular building because they believed it was haunted and because it was so far away from the main Retreat complex. I had been given it as a place to stay while working here because there had been no other housing available but I had not been unhappy about it. It had been a blessing to live so far away from the main complex and the little house which had been designed for two people had been completely mine,

I had not had to share it. It was in a quiet area, surrounded by trees with a nice view of the lake.

Without turning on the lights, and being as quiet as I could I moved through the place quickly. Once I had done a cursory sweep through to make sure I was really alone and not sharing the house with any creatures that might have found a way in I breathed a small sigh of relief. Everything was exactly as I had left it, at least that is what my cursory first glance told me and touching furniture confirmed that no one else had come here since I had lived in it, at least not to stay for any extended period of time. Once I felt secure that there really was no one else here, I turned on the lights and began to dig through the kitchen cupboards hoping to find the half bottle of brandy I had left behind by mistake. I was not disappointed. Grabbing it and a glass I made my way to the living room and plunked down on the small couch. It was only then that I noticed a book on the small table in front of the couch and it sent a shiver down my spine. The book was old, ancient in fact and I had not left it here which meant someone else had. I knew without touching who that person had been and the knowledge turned my stomach. *Let's get this over with shall we*, I thought to myself and reached over to pick the heavy book up. The memory was short and to the point. Palpatine's voice shot through my mind like a slap and it was painful.

*I have not forgotten you child. I have not forgotten any of those who have served me. You came here to seek out knowledge but nothing remains. There are no vast libraries of information save that which I choose to create and in order to find them you will have to come to me. When the time is right you will know where and then you will be ready to begin your internship under my guiding hand.*

I shuddered as I let the book fall back on the table. Even from beyond the grave he could still scare the hell out of me. I sighed as I poured a generous glass of brandy and sat back against the couch. The drink's bite and burn was a welcome distraction against the internal cold that Palpatine's touch created. Is this why I had come here, to find this book with its cryptic message from a man now eight years dead? As I rested my head on the back of the couch and closed my eyes Thrawn's words about ascribing Palpatine too much credit came back to haunt me. Was I, I wondered. Palpatine had been the most powerful force user in the Galaxy for as long as I had been alive and for as long as he had known of me he had been a subtle and occasionally a not so subtle guiding hand, pushing me towards a place in his coterie of force users but that had been interrupted when Lord Vader and his son, Luke, had destroyed Palpatine at the battle of Endor. How much had Palpatine really foreseen? I was certain the Emperor had taken steps to protect himself and his empire but had he really been able to come back from the grave?

I took a large gulp of brandy and let out the breath I had been holding noisily. Exhaustion was slowly creeping over my body the way the brandy's warmth crept down my insides. What would Palpatine want with me anyway? My talents, such as they were, were limited and small. Even the gift of reading memory from objects would have been a parlour trick in comparison to his skills and abilities. If he had managed to somehow survive and now lived then why had he not returned to claim his empire? Why had he not at least shown himself to Thrawn and sent him aid on the task which now lay ahead of the last of his Grand Admirals? I was certain that if Palpatine had made plans to come

back from the dead he would not be doing so without military might to back him up, so where was it? None of this made sense to me, least of all these not so subtle clues left behind for me to find, suggesting I go off on some mad search across the galaxy so I could find and be trained by the man I feared the most, a man who was dead or supposed to be. Yet, he had removed all the libraries, his libraries of knowledge. Every place I went in search of answers had been stripped of them, only a single memory left behind for me to find. It was jarring and annoying.

I kicked at the book on the table with my foot, sending it flying to the floor where it landed opened paged, like a wounded bird. Something small and shiny tumbled out of the spine, which had cracked, and rolled under the table. Curious, I picked it up examining it carefully. It was an identity chip, something often used to tag and bind objects to a particular place, person or building. Somewhere in the chip was a code which gave the location of the origin of the object so that it could be returned to the owner but this one was old, a lot older than I had ever seen used within the Imperial Palace and it lacked the typical palace markings. I clutched it in my fist and willed it to give me a clue, give up some memory of where it had come from and when it did I was beyond surprised because it had nothing to do with the Emperor at all and everything to do with finding information. This book had been stolen by the Imperials from the great library on Obroa Skai, a world I had forgotten about but one my mother had mentioned often enough because it was purported to be the largest and most complete repository of knowledge in the entire galaxy.

I picked up the book, an old copy of fantastic takes about force users in the time before the Empire, and set it back on the table. I flipped through it carefully looking for other clues but found nothing of interest, not even the stories it contained held any sway. Whatever he had been thinking Palpatine had underestimated my hatred of him as well as my own disinterest in becoming one of his dark adepts. I smiled at this thought, because Palpatine had underestimated many things including Lord Vader's love for his son and that had been the Emperor's undoing.

I finished my brandy and lay down on the couch. When sleep came it was dreamless and when I woke up in the morning with the sunlight streaming through the windows making the dust in the air sparkle and dance I smiled. In a backwards way the Emperor's attempt to sway me had actually helped me find a part of what I was looking for and now all I had to do was get the information to my uncle and Thrawn because, while it wasn't an exact pinpointing of Wayland's location, I was sure that somewhere in the vast data collection of the galaxy's largest library of information the co-ordinates where there, somewhere, and all one had to do was find them. I was pretty certain that this would be an easy task.

I left the house as quietly as I had come, taking the speeder back to the Dee'ja Peak hotel. After I showered and packed I was anxious to leave I had no reason to stay here anymore. The desk droid was annoyed when I checked out two days early but didn't complain when I paid in full. I managed to make it to Theed in time to book a passage on a fast shuttle to Tatooine and was grateful to be leaving Naboo and its memories behind. The Retreat and the small house had been places I had enjoyed while I had been there but, like the Empire I had once known, they were now just shadows of memory and I was tired of memories haunting me. It was time to move forward and look to the

future, which for now meant preparing for the up and coming art auction, because if Thrawn had been right and the major attraction, a moss painting was really going to be on the auction block then things were going to get interesting.

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I was in the middle of my morning 'caf when my uncle returned home. He had decided to try and get some more detailed information about the upcoming auction and had gone to see his Ithorian friend, Bareq at the local archives in Mos Espa. I poured him a large cup of 'caf while he shed his coat, shaking the last of the sand off before sitting at the table and handing me a data pad.

"Thanks," He said wrapping his hands around the cup gratefully. "Bloody big storm coming in. That's the second one in the last two weeks, unusual for this time of year." He took a sip of 'caf, made a face and then reached for the honey. I always made it too strong for his tastes.

Bareq asked after you, sends his condolences about Kit."

I smiled. Bareq had helped me find information on Anakin Skywalker many years prior and it always surprised me that he actually remembered who I was but really, it shouldn't have, Ithorians had long memories and Bareq was no exception. "That's kind of him."

Uncle Vahlek smiled. "He took a shine to you, it seems."

I nodded absently while I scanned the datapad's contents. "Wow, there's going to be a lot of people at this auction." I commented, "And Killik Twilight is definitely the star piece."

"Yes, Bareq said he has been inundated with information requests about both the painting and the auction."

"Has the painting been verified?"

"Apparently it is the genuine article; your mother would be saddened to see it auctioned off like this." Uncle Vahlek replied. "You know it used to hang in the palace on Alderaan? It was on loan for an exhibition on Coruscant when Alderaan was destroyed and then it vanished from sight now it's reappeared only to be auctioned off in Mos Espa. The painting is priceless really since the techniques for growing moss paintings of this kind were lost along with Alderaan."

"Mmm," I said as I took a mouthful of 'caf. I had seen images of the painting in some of my mother's art books and it had given me the willies for some strange reason. I didn't like it very much but I could never have said why. Although, as I thought about it, my reaction to Killik Twilight had been much the same as to the very odd painting that Thrawn had once shown me in his flat on Coruscant. I wondered what had become of that because it had never been hung in the flat and we had never spoken of it again.

As if he could read my mind and know who I was thinking about my uncle said, "By the way, I received a message last night from Thrawn while you were asleep, he said not to wake you; he wanted to let you know that he will be returning to Tatooine four days prior to the auction. He had some pretty choice words about your running off to Naboo by the way."

I looked up at my uncle crossly, "You told him about that?"



"He said he'd been trying to reach you on your comm. I merely explained why you might not have been answering as I recall you said it had accidentally been turned off?"

"Naboo was not on the list of planets I am forbidden to explore list." I retorted a little too hotly.

My uncle chuckled. "No, but he is not stupid Lei'lei, he knows you just too well and he also knows that you never seem to do anything without some sort of risk involved, danger follows you around like a hungry jax ."

"Yeah, because visiting Naboo is so darn risky," I said flatly.

That remark earned me a stare from my uncle which usually froze his prey in their tracks, I wasn't impressed and just went back to staring at the data pad.

When I didn't answer him he pressed, "And where was it you decided to go sightseeing while on the lovely, safe home world of our late emperor?"

I blew out a noisy breath. I had told him after I had returned home where exactly I had been but not what I had found there, I didn't want to run the risk of him up and vanishing to go Wayland hunting before I got a chance to tell Thrawn as well. "I told you, the Retreat was completely deserted."

"Uh huh. Well I will let you explain that to your Ta'kasta'cariad when he returns. I am quite sure he will be equally as understanding as I was."

That remark made me sigh and roll my eyes. Uncle Vahlek had hit the roof when I had told him what I had done and where I had been. All of the jaxes had gone running for cover because he had yelled at me so loudly.

"I doubt it, Thrawn doesn't shout at me." I mumbled.

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. "Maybe he should start; it might get some sense through to that thick headed skull of yours. You still have not told me what you found there, if anything, which was worth the risk you took."

I shrugged. "It can wait until Thrawn gets here."

"It won't soften his anger you know."

I shrugged, "I'm used to that," I said with a little smirk; while the fights were unpleasant the making up part was always fun. "Do you want breakfast?" I asked quickly changing to topic.

"Only if I cook it, the last time I let you near the stove you damn near burned the kitchen down."

I laughed. "Navaari always says the exact same thing!"

He shook his head at me, making his long silver hair ripple about his face. "How is it, child, that you can fight like a crazed rancor, pilot like a maniac smuggler and survive working with the most feared men in the galaxy but you never learned to cook?"

"Talent can only stretch so far...?" I suggested.

"Maybe if you spent less of your talent getting into trouble and more time learning how to work a stove..."

I just shrugged I didn't have an answer for that and I was quite content to let others, much better at cooking than I would ever be, do the job and eat well. I went back to reading about the auction while my uncle potted about making my favourite breakfast. The jaxes mewed loudly as they wound their way around his legs in figure of eight patterns until utterly distracted he looked at me.

"Did you feed them?"

"Yep." I nodded. "But it seems they have learnt the art of deception well."

"Well, give them a handful each then."

"That only encourages them to beg, you know." I retorted but got up to do as he asked. With their tails high the jaxes stopped pestering Uncle Vahlek and sat happily in front of their bowls munching on the small treats.

"This thing is being held at Mawbo's Performance hall?" I said with some surprise.

"Only place large enough for the crowds this particular auction is going to draw and she has the best security if you discount Imperial Stormtroopers but Bareq thinks it's got more to do with Mawbo doing a favour for one of her old flames." He shrugged slightly. "I take it you are planning on attending?"

It was my turn to shrug then, "I guess that depends on Za'ar but I'd like to see it. I am betting it will be interesting to people watch, if nothing else."

That earned me raised eyebrows from my uncle as he put food filled plates on the table and sat down to eat. "As I said...you and trouble seem to go hand in hand."

"Well we'll find out soon enough, won't we?" I remarked happily, munching my breakfast in contentment.

Thrawn, true to his word, arrived on the planet four days before the art auction was scheduled. He showed up at my uncle's house in the middle of the night dressed in his Dantassi clothes which hid his identity as an Imperial Officer. He had sent a cryptic comm in Cheunh so we knew to expect him and we were both waiting in the kitchen for him to show up.

In the confines of the base on Nirauan or onboard an Imperial ship I had always been restrained in showing my joy at seeing Thrawn after a separation, we had made it a point to keep our displays of affection very, very private but in the quiet of my Uncle's kitchen I had no such inhibitions. Once Thrawn had come in, taken off his long coat and mask I made it quite plain just how happy I was to see him again. He suffered my squeal of delight with a smile returning my kiss unabashedly before he untangled himself from my arms in order to greet my uncle.

"Tea or something stronger?" My uncle asked not quite able to wipe the smirk from his face in time.

"If you have brandy that would be most welcome." Thrawn said, "I take it you won't mind if I change out of these clothes before we sit?"

"You know where the bedroom is." I told him with a grin.

"Indeed," He replied with a bemused smile, picking up his backpack and leaving the kitchen to regain some of his composure.

Once he had washed and changed, then come up to join us in the living room the conversation began in earnest. The first topic on the table was my foray into the Imperial Retreat. I had half expected Thrawn to be angry but instead he listened with his usual quiet calm. I told him everything I could remember including the part about finding the strange book in the little house at which point he frowned and sipped at his brandy thoughtfully.

"So there was nothing on the Retreat Databanks at all?"

I shook my head, "No, even Lord Vader's secret files were all wiped out. My guess is that Pestage took care of it because he needed to concentrate all of his efforts working

from Coruscant. He had consolidated his power and abandoned the smaller, lesser imperial command centers," I said, "The Retreat was Palpatine's personal play ground because he loved Naboo and wanted to spend time there. It would have been a terrible blow if the rebels had found it and managed to raid the computer core for information."

Thrawn nodded slowly. "For all his faults Pestage thought a lot of things through and he was closer to Palpatine than anyone else, closer perhaps than even Lord Vader." He paused to take a sip of his drink, "What about this mysterious book you found?"

I shrugged, "I left it there but I have the small ident chip and that came from Obroa-Skai."

That earned me an arched eyebrow.

I nodded at the unasked question. "I know that Palpatine had the great libraries raided for all materials concerning sith and jedi subjects. It's my guess that this book was part of that. And before you say anything I didn't want it. I don't want anything that has Palpatine's touch on it. He may be dead but he still scares the hell out of me."

"So you think that the Obroa-Skai facility will have the location of Wayland?" It wasn't so much a question as it was a confirmation of something he had already considered.

"Don't you think that's possible?" I asked, "Palpatine had the power to have the star maps changed and all information pertaining to the location of planets he didn't want people to know about removed but Obroa-Skai was never part of the Imperial rule, they remained neutral, he actually had no real power over the Obroans no matter what he liked to think. He only managed to take the jedi related stuff by force but the repositories of information on the planet are vast and even he was smart enough to let well alone. Attacking the Obroans flat out would have been a very big political mistake."

"Yes, I think I will find what I need there," He replied thoughtfully then turned to look at my uncle, "So, you mentioned getting more information about the auction?"

My uncle smiled and handed Thrawn the same datapad he had given me to read and the conversation switched to the topic of the art auction. About an hour into the discussion about the dance hall's lay out I fell asleep, my head resting against Thrawn's shoulder. When I woke up I was in bed and he was asleep beside me.

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I watched the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in and out, resisting the temptation to stroke the graceful lines of his body. 'Caf first I thought and got out of bed to slip upstairs along with the jaxes, who always knew when someone was up. They gathered around me mewing and purring their undying affection in the hopes of food. I started the process of making 'caf and then shoved food in their bowls, watching with a sleepy smile as they all ran to their dishes, chirping their appreciation. When the caf was done I poured two cups and made my way back down to my bedroom to wake Thrawn up. I didn't really care what time he had finally gone to bed or gotten to sleep, if he complained about it I would simply remind him about his famous Chiss stamina. I didn't really have to worry though; he was already awake and waiting for me.

He cupped his hands around the warm mug I offered and sipped the steaming hot drink carefully. "Before you ask, you have me to yourself until after dark tonight then I have to return to the Chimaera and prepare."

"Do you think that someone from the New Republic will show up for this painting?" I asked, sighing at the shortness of his visit but not saying anything about it.

"Don't you?"

I shrugged, "I think it would be a pretty risky thing to do."

"And if I were to tell you that this piece hung in the Palace of Alderaan?"

"I know that already."

"And who grew up in that palace and saw that painting every day?" He prompted without a trace of sleepiness in his voice.

I yawned, "Ah... you think that Leia Organa will come."

"Leia Organa Solo." He corrected.

"Oh yeah...right"

He smiled, "She married Han Solo and not the Hapan prince remember?"

"The galaxy's most famous bachelor got hitched. How could I forget?" I rolled my eyes. I had never understood what people saw in Han Solo, he was a scruffy smuggler not a holonet star.

Thrawn chuckled. "How indeed, any way I suspect they will show up in one disguise or another and I wish to be ready for that."

"They'll probably come in the Falcon then. Solo doesn't trust any other ship, at least he didn't the last time I saw him which was a very long time ago, and that Wookiee he travels with won't fit in anything else, the Falcon was specially outfitted for him. He'll have a dozen false transponder codes for sure," I said thoughtfully.

Thrawn nodded, "Yes, I have already taken care of that possibility."

"You plan on blowing them out of the sky?"

"Hardly my dear," he said tartly, "I plan on allowing them to pay for that painting and then I shall apprehend them."

"Oh." I frowned.

"The painting is priceless and it would look very nice in my private war room," he said with a shrug letting me know he wasn't telling me the whole story, but I didn't much care.

"So do you want me there?" I asked looking up at him from over the rim of my cup.

"Yes, I will have my people there and I have no doubts that they will be made easily enough, in fact I am counting on that but they will not suspect you. Do you have any contacts in the organisational group?"

"No but my uncle might. He spends way more time in Mos Espa than I ever have." I replied. "Do you want another cup?" I asked pointing to the empty cup he held in his hand. He nodded as he handed it to me. When I returned with refills he took his cup from my hands and stared at it thoughtfully for a moment.

"After the auction I'd like you to return to Nirauan, unless of course you wish to remain here," he said.

"No, I'm just hanging out here because of this stupid auction. Most of the time I feel as though I am in Uncle Vahl's way or worse. I need to get back to work before boredom makes me do something crazy."

"Crazy?"

I nodded, "Yes crazy like try to find Wayland, try to find out if the Emperor really has come back to life, that sort of crazy."

That annoying eyebrow of his arched about as high as it could. "And you think that me putting you to work on Nirauan or under Ged Larsen's watchful eye will counteract this destructive behaviour?"

I gave him the sweetest smile I could muster and nodded.

"I wish I could believe that," he said with a shake of his head. "You seem to delight in taking risks at every turn why should that change now?"

"Because there are no more people trying to hunt me down and turn me into some sort of elite jedi producing baby factory?" I retorted.

"So you decided to head off to the Imperial Retreat to change that?"

I rolled my eyes and made a face. "It was perfectly safe."

"Lucky for you."

"You didn't seem too worried about it when I told you last night?"

"You were expecting fireworks?" He asked coolly. "It seemed a bit pointless to display my displeasure, the deed was already done and, as you so smugly pointed out, Naboo was not forbidden to you. I did, however, think you might have a little more common sense than to go charging off to a place that could have been very unsafe on a whim."

Suddenly I found my nails very interesting to look at. "It wasn't a whim."

"Oh?"

I sighed. "I can't explain it, I can't."

"Try." He insisted.

So, as best I could, I told him about all of the dreams I had been having concerning the Emperor, some of the details he already knew and some of them I had never spoken of before. When I was done he was quiet for what felt like too long and I shifted uneasily in the bed, picking at invisible lint from the blanket.

"If, and I stress this part greatly, if Palpatine is alive why in Da'haj'n's name would you want to seek him out?"

"I don't but it doesn't seem to matter what I want, I get sucked into it anyway."

"That's the worst excuse I have ever ...." He began but I cut him off.

"No, it isn't." I countered crossly.

His mouth tightened into a thin line of displeasure but he refrained from arguing with me on a point he knew I would not concede instead he switched tack somewhat and asked. "Very well then what do you suppose will happen should you happen to have the misfortune to discover you are right, he has returned from the dead?"

I shrugged miserably. "I don't know, I hadn't thought that far ahead and anyway if he is alive and he really did want to gather up all the force users around the galaxy to twist them into his dark little minions there wouldn't be much I could do about it would there?"

For some reason this made him laugh. "You have the most vivid imagination of anyone I have ever met. Do you want to know what I think?"

I nodded reluctantly.

"I think you're avoiding the real issue which is for the first time in a very long time no one is chasing you, trying to kill you, abuse you or use you in some underhanded way and you have no idea what to do with yourself."

I opened my mouth but he placed his forefinger on my lips to silence the string of protests he knew would tumble out.

"From the moment you left your home and started to work at Jabba's palace until you eliminated Jyrki Andando, it's been one crisis after another and you haven't had time to breathe, let alone find some measure of peace. Working with Vader put you on a blade's edge you have not yet managed to step off, so now you go looking for danger because for the last ten or so years it's all you've really known with maybe the exception of the time you spent on Hjal and you were far too messed up to realise what peace and quiet meant at the time." He paused and studied my expression for a second. "I don't say this to hurt you or to anger you but honestly, Tekari, you have to stop hunting danger down, given enough time I am quite sure it will find you but for the love of what ever deity you regard as important stop looking for it at every turn." He emphasised this speech by caressing the side of my face gently.

I sat back against the headboard of the bed noisily, feigning annoyance and anger but really I was stung by the deep truth in his words. He was right but I had absolutely not seen it. I swallowed hard against the tears that wanted to come, as if crying was a release for the anger and fear I had been hold inside of me since forever. Instead of allowing that to show I snapped at him, petulant and scared.

"And working for you isn't dangerous?"

"Perhaps it has some level of risk but not to the extent you have been placing yourself in as of late."

"What about having me attend this stupid art auction then, isn't that risky?"

His smile was disarming. "It's an art auction, Sjiu Tekari, what could go wrong, a disgruntled buyer running amok and rampaging through the hall? I hardly think so and even if that were to happen as I understand it the local security will be tight and I am sure there will be an Imperial presence as well. So, in all seriousness, just how dangerous do you think it will be?"

How indeed, I thought. "This is Tatooine, remember...anything can happen," I said, jabbing him in the ribs.

"Then perhaps," he said with a smirk I wasn't sure I liked, "I should have you confined to a cell and make Rukh stand guard."

I just gave him a dirty look and finished my 'caf. "So, tell me what you want me to do at the auction."

"Attend and observe," he replied casually.

"That's it?"

"What did you think I wanted you to do, my dear? Steal the painting?"

I rolled my eyes. "That's not very exciting you know, you can get one of your minions to do that for you."

"Yes but one of my minions, as you so amusingly put it, will be spotted by the rebels within a few moments as they will no doubt stick out like a hutt at an ewok convention. You will not. You are to observe what happens and those who are attending, nothing more."

"I see." I wasn't impressed but Thrawn wasn't going to let me get around him on this either.

"Would you rather I forbade you to attend at all?" He asked, arching one eyebrow.

"Well if you put it that way...."

"I do." He cut me off before I could finish then reached over to take my empty cup out of my hands and place it beside his. "Now, are you going to waste the short amount of free time I have with you on an argument you won't win or would you like me to show you some of the more pleasurable aspects of a non combative conversation."

He stroked my bare shoulder and smiled as I shivered. "I would not call these types of conversations non combative, you know, sometimes they get very... uh... physical."

"That's because you insist on fighting against me." He murmured in my ear.

I didn't really have much to say in my defence and what he was doing with his hands and his mouth had more or less rendered me speechless anyway. I decided that he was right and the easiest thing was to let him have his way, this time, it was certainly more enjoyable than arguing. Who knew what would happen at the auction and if he wasn't actually going to be there then he would not be able to control what happened either.

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The day of the auction arrived along with crappy weather. Uncle Vahlek has insisted on walking out to Wayfar as it wasn't that far from the house much to my annoyance. Fine sand-grit whipped up by strong winds stung any surface of skin not protected and somehow managed to find its way underneath all protective clothing to scratch and irritate. I hated it most of all when it got in my mouth. Fine grit that crunched on my teeth whenever I bit down or spoke sent unpleasant shivers up and down my spine so that by the time we had reached the shuttle-port at Wayfar I was more than ready to turn around and go home. I was happy when the shuttle arrived and we could get out of the misery of the sandstorm.

"You've gotten spoiled, Lei'lei." Uncle Vahlek said with a grin. "Living away from Tatooine has made you soft."

I just glowered at him as I tried to discretely brush sand off myself.

The shuttle ride was bumpy and unpleasantly full. The air smelled of sweat and sand mingled with all the other odours from all the various beings which permeated the air. Usually I enjoyed shuttle runs but this was an exception and by the time we landed in Mos Espa I was quite nauseous. I had to cup my hand over my mouth and practically ran off the shuttle.

"What's wrong?" my uncle asked. "You look positively green; you don't usually get travel sick. You're not pregnant are you?"

I gave him another fifthly look. "No," I said shaking my head, trying to breathe slowly, willing the queasiness in my stomach to settle down.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I am quite sure." I snapped, grateful when the waves of nausea passed. "I just don't do well in crowded spaces, especially when they stink like that." I explained. "It reminds me of Mattri and of Nar Shadda too much."

"I see," Said my uncle sadly. "Even though he's dead Jyrki's actions still have their effect."

I nodded. "So, where are we going?" I asked, changing the subject, "And will we have time to stop for something to drink? I could use a cup of tea, my mouth is full of grit."

My uncle slung his arm around my shoulders and we headed in the direction of auction following a group of laughing Rodians who seemed to be headed the same way.

Mawbo's Performance Hall was not nearly as glamorous on the inside as its name made it sound. Once we had been allowed to pass by the Weequay who was guarding the door, making sure people checked their sand covered wraps and weapons we wandered into a large spacious hall.

Scattered throughout the huge room were several stages where I assumed dancers generally performed on while customers sat and drank, enjoying their evening. Clean circles on the dark floor gave away that usually the place was littered with tables and chairs surrounding the stages. Currently these stages were occupied by food and beverage stalls selling all manner of things to eat and drink, filling the air with an assortment of aromas.

"How's your stomach?" My uncle asked as we rounded on a stall that was selling pastries and cha'rae, a sort of milky spiced tea.

"Hungry." I answered, "When does this stupid auction start anyway?"

"Probably after everyone has had a chance to view the painting and validate it. Do you want to see it?"

I nodded. That was one of the reasons Thrawn had wanted me to come, he had felt I should look at this work of art seeing as how the method and materials to make more were long gone and never coming back. It was considered a priceless one of a kind and seeing in person was a chance that might not come around again. He had other reasons for me getting a firsthand viewing as well but I didn't want to think about them at the moment.

"Food first and we can see what else if up for auction then go stand in line." Uncle Vahlek said as he ordered two zucca fruit pastries and two cups of cha'rae, one of each he handed to me.

We wandered around the hall looking at the booths that were situated along the walls. I was surprised at the variety of stuff people were auctioning off, most of it was junk. We idled past a stall selling glitter-glass panes that were supposed to have been owned by Jabba the Hutt. I giggled. "Usually Jabba likes his art a tad more realistic, by realistic I mean way more uhm....crude and erotic." I told my uncle, "This is a bit more abstract than he would understand. He has a thing for twi'leks not this."

Uncle Vahlek just made a face. "I won't ask how you know these things."



I just grinned and we continued to look at the wares up for auction. I stopped briefly to look at some sort of sand-sculpts cast in abstract shapes which reminded me a lot of some of the eerie rock formations that could be found in the North West of Beggar's Canyon. Next to the stall with the sand sculpts was a stall being run by squibs, small furry beings who were as annoying as they were persistent. My uncle tugged at my arm making sure I didn't go near them. I looked over my shoulder and watched as they sucked in a Devaronian and a twi'lek to look at their stuff, making them pay to do so.

"Oh Lei'lei, you will want to see these!" With his hand around my wrist, my uncle led me over to a stall run by a Barabel. What he was showing took my breath away. Colourful bowls made from some sort of material so delicate that light showed through them.

"Alasl bowls found in the Judland wastes, made by Tuskens." The Barabel said, "Very rare." They were beautiful and they took my breath away.

"If you really want one I can bid for you." My uncle said quietly.

I nodded, "I would love at least one, and I am certain that Za'ar would also like one as well. It's the sort of thing he likes to collect."

"No one will bid against the Tze'yusha'Jin if they are being smart." A voice said from behind me.

I turned around to come face to chest with Bareq, the Ithorian archivist from Mos Espa. Without thinking about it I threw my arms around him and much to his surprise gave him a hug which made my uncle laugh.

"Bareq what are you doing here?" My uncle asked, "I thought you could not come."

The Ithorian shrugged, "And be missing a chance to see a galactic treasure as well as my good friend, Akosh, here? For today the archives can be closed."

"We were about to go and view it, want to join us?" I asked.

Bareq shook his head. "I have already seen it. It is a thing of wonder. You would be liking it I think," he said, "But you should be lining up now, already it is taking almost an hour for a viewing."

At Bareq's advice we set off, meandering around the rest of the auction stalls before standing in line to view *Killik Twilight*. Halfway around the hall I spotted the Imperial officer that Thrawn had sent, quite literally, to do his bidding. I didn't recognize the man's face but the air of contempt he had for us as we passed him was unmistakable. I smirked a little knowing that he would have been more than polite had he known who I was, who I had worked for and who my mate was but wisely I kept my thoughts to myself.

"Where there's one there are more." Uncle Vahlek said softly making me look around to play spot the Imperials in disguise. It was pretty straightforward. They were the people who looked very obvious because they were trying so hard not to look obvious.

"Guess he's expecting things to get interesting." I mumbled as we waited in line for our turn to view the painting.

It took over forty minutes before we were allowed to step through the mirrfield straight into a gaggle of Mawbo's thugs dressed in the ugliest clothes I had ever seen all pointing blasters at us.

"Security," Said a Rodian as blindfolds were placed over our eyes and we were led on a somewhat convoluted trip to a room that stank from thaq smoke which made me sneeze. Once our blindfolds were removed we were directed to the wall where the painting hung, flanked by two Gamorreans. It was smaller than I had imagined it would be but also more vibrant.

"You can verify it if you want, but only brush samples. No clipping. You got two minutes, don't waste 'em." A voice said from out of the dimness.

The technique of moss painting creation had been lost when Alderaan had been destroyed. There weren't many of these paintings left in the galaxy and as far as I knew the ones that had survived were mainly in private collections. It was eerie and beautiful but it left me feeling cold with a slight sense of dread for no good reason at all. The strange stormy sky and the insectoids turning to stare into the storm was melancholy.

Killiks had been the inhabitants of Alderaan but had vanished long before humans had colonized for no reason anyone could ever figure out. They were one of the great unsolved mysteries of the galaxy

I glanced at my uncle who nodded slightly, this was what I was here for, and then I reached up and brushed my fingertips ever so slightly over the mossy surface of the painting. It felt like a lifetime as the images from the painting's memories shot through me even though it was only seconds. Images like that of the artist painstakingly creating the image, the memory of his hands lovingly cultivating each piece of moss in exactly the right place. There were lingering images of the many people who had touched the painting's frame while it hung in the palace in Alderaan including the princess as a small girl and much to my surprise my mother as well. But the images that stunned me the most had nothing to do with the painting and everything to do with the Rebellion. I sucked in a breath involuntarily and staggered back slightly. My uncle stood behind me placing his hand on my shoulder, an anchor back into reality.

"I know..." I began in an urgent whisper.

"Shhhh." Uncle Vahlek put a finger to his lips and shook his head ever so slightly. "Not here."

A sense of urgency washed through me. "I have to tell..." I pressed.

My uncle gave me a tight smile and repeated his previous statement.

I was about to argue when the same gruff voice told us our two minutes were up and that we were holding up the ever growing queue.

"Let's go and get something to drink shall we?" Uncle Vahlek said, taking my arm and leading me out of the room.

The main hall was more crowded when we stepped back into it and the line up to see *Killik Twilight* had more than doubled since we had stood in it. We left the performance hall and I trailed behind my uncle as led me to a small café which was far enough away from the main strip that it wasn't hopelessly crowded. A tired looking waitress took our order and then returned a few moments later with drinks.

"Do you want to hear or not?" I asked crossly after a long silence had passed.

He shook his head. "Yes but not here, not in any language, too many people around and there is no telling who can speak what. Besides if our friend wins the auction you can tell him then. It will be an added bonus to the prize."

I scowled. "And if he doesn't win it?"

"Do you think that is likely with all the resources he has at his hand?"

I shrugged. "No one thought the Emperor would be killed or that the death star battle station would be destroyed but the rebellion has had remarkable luck in turning disadvantages to their advantage. At this point I would say anything is possible and I never take anything for granted any more, not when it comes to the rebels anyway."

My uncle nodded and conceded the point. "Well the auction is supposed to start in an hour so I guess we'll see how it all turns out then, won't we?" He sighed and looked at his chrono, "Do you still want those bowls you were looking at earlier?"

I nodded remembering the eerie beauty of the delicate bowls the barabel was displaying.

"I'll bid for you; just let me know your limit. Most of what was on display is junk, but you know that anyway. The main attraction is the moss painting. I wonder is actually auctioning it off."

I replied without thinking, "Some guy named Threkin Horm."

My uncle blinked at me in surprise and then made a face, remembering my talent. "That guy happens to be the president of the Alderaanian Council."

I raised my eyebrows, "And he's auctioning off this priceless work of Alderaan art here?"

Uncle Vahlek nodded over his drink.

"Bet that will go over well with the New Republic types," I said quietly.

"Probably not."

I just shook my head. "Guess he better hope that no one finds out," I said as I finished my drink.

"It's not something I would advertise out loud Lei'lei. The last thing you need is to make a new enemy; your mate would never forgive me if that happened while I was supposed to be keeping an eye on you."

I made a face even though he was right and in the end it wasn't any of my concern anyway.

"Come on, we should be headed back. If you want me to bid on some of those bowls the barabel was auctioning for you then we need to get a decent spot on the floor."

I finished my drink and nodded, lost in thought about how I would get a hold of Thrawn to tell him what I now knew. He wasn't going to like it much.

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The tension in the hall had ramped up to the point where the air seemed to shimmer. The last lot up for auction had finally finished and when Mawbo had announced the winner a collective sigh had run through the hall. Most of the lots had gone for nominal prices, mostly junk which many of the off worlders were not interested in but one item had fetched a surprising price and that had been a holograph of Anakin Skywalker. We had seen it on the table and it had made me smile. The image had been taken of him just after he had won the Boonta Eve Classic. Bareq had spoken softly about that day, he had watched the race. I had stared at the holo image of the smiling young boy, with bright blue eyes full of joy and bright innocence. It still amazed me that

this young boy had twisted and turned into one of the galaxies most feared and cruel leaders.

I had wavered for a moment about bidding on the holo but in the end I decided not to. I had memories of Lord Vader and many of them were also of him before the suit, before the mask. I didn't need a holo to remind me of my time working for him the memories were more than enough. The holo had made me sad, dredging up an ache of loss which I thought I had buried. The only thing that countered this was the fact that here, on Tatooine, Anakin was still regarded as a hero. I had watched that auction with interest and had smiled when the holo had fetched a hefty price, thirteen hundred credits to a very pleased looking Gotal.

As he had promised, my uncle bid on several of the glass bowls for me and just as Bareaq had predicted as soon as people saw who it was they were bidding against the bidding dropped off a bit. In the end Uncle Vahlek managed to win three at a reasonable price. I am not sure the Barabel was too pleased but in the end I thought the prices I ended up paying were fair because without any expert there to verify the Barabel's claims it was hard to say if the bowls were authentic Tusken artefacts or not. I just liked them because they were extraordinarily beautiful and would look good in my rooms on Nirauan. I stayed put to keep our places while my Uncle went to finalise payments and pick up the bowls he had won.

When the last auction was cleared from the main stage and Mawbo announced the auction for *Killik Twilight* would now begin a subtle change fell over the hall. With a gesture that struck me as overly majestic she waved her hand and the crew of Gamorreans who had been doing guard duty earlier marched onto the stage surrounding the Codru-ji who carried the painting in carefully in all four arms, setting it down carefully on an easel that had been set up just for this purpose. It looked much smaller and more fragile than I remembered from the viewing but of course on a large stage the painting which was only fifty centimetres wide was tiny. All heads tilted to look at the giant holo projection of it that was now being displayed. We were standing further back in the hall because we were not bidding and I wanted to see the crowd as well as the painting.

Mawbo got the bidding underway by asking the Imperial officer who identified himself as Commander Quenton if he was willing to start it. He did so at a quarter of a million credits. There was a moment's pause and then a squib over bid him and the whole show was off and running.

It was like watching some weird sport and even couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement being generated between the squib, Commander Quenton and a few other bidders. The bidding war seemed to last forever until suddenly the price shot up to five million credits and things got a bit tense when people were asked for funds verification. It looked as though quite a few people had suddenly lost their fund transfer chips. There were some scuffles and some protests but soon enough the bidding began again and the price jacked up to Thirteen million. I gasped at the sum, which was a lot of money. When the bidding climbed to fourteen-nine I glanced at my uncle who was watching the entire thing with a bemused look on his face.

"Your mate said it might get expensive but I doubt he was expecting this," He murmured.

I nodded. "Well I am not surprised. The rebels want this painting pretty badly." I whispered back smugly.

Just as the bidding reached the ridiculous price of fifteen million credits Mawbo appeared in the stage. I watched the Imperial officer closely, he had begun to suspect that something wasn't right and things were not going to go his way. I could see him communicate with his people and then he upped the bid to fifteen-five but Mawbo ignored him. I glanced at my uncle who was slowly backing us away from the majority of the crowd.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

"The Commander just called for backup. My guess is it's about to get ugly in here and I don't want to have to explain to your Ta'kasta'cariad why you were in the middle of it all."

I made a face and was about to argue when Mawbo who had continued to ignore Commander Quenton's bids began to speak. "The owner has decided it would be an outrage to sell the painting to the same empire that destroyed Alderaan," she said loudly enough for all to hear.

I opened my mouth in surprise and then all hell broke loose, just as Uncle Vahlek had predicted. He was in the process of trying to pull me further away from the crowd which had gone nuts to someplace a little safer when blaster fire sheared through the noise.

"Oh crap!" I hissed. "This is really going to piss Za'ar off."

"Come on, time to go."

I didn't resist when Uncle Vahlek yanked on my arm to get me to safety just as someone set off a thermal detonator. The explosion was loud and violent but had taken place right up front by the stage where the painting was. The shock from the blast ripped past me but there was no serious harm done. Still holding onto my arm my uncle managed to navigate us through the chaos and get us outside to someplace fairly quiet as well as safe.

"Did someone just blow the painting up?" I asked in utter disbelief.

"They tried to," He nodded looking around.

"So much for Thrawn's theories that the auction would be safe," I said a little crossly.

"Why is it that where ever you go something insane happens?"

"Not my fault, I swear." I retorted. "Are my bowls still in one piece?"

Uncle Vahlek grinned and pulled the wrapped bowls from under his coat. "Yes," he said as he handed the bowls all wrapped up in some sort of soft paper to me to hold on to.

I grinned at him. "I'll have the credits transferred when we get home which I hope we are doing now, or is there more excitement still to come?"

Uncle Vahlek just shrugged as we headed in the direction of the spaceport to try and catch a transport back home.

The Spaceport in Mos Espa is busy and usually full of people. Mos Espa was a large city and today was no exception; if anything it seemed even more busy than usual. My guess was the auction had brought a lot of off worlders and even more of Tatooine's inhabitants. Now that it was over, everyone was trying to go home or on to their next

destination. I sighed as we nudged our way through the crowds to the ticket vendor. My uncle had just started to punch in the destination code when a stormtrooper approached and clapped his hand on my shoulder.

"Miss Gabriel?"

I nodded.

"Would you please come with me?" The trooper said calmly.

My uncle gave the stormtrooper a look which said 'why?' but before he could utter this thought the trooper added, "The Admiral wishes to speak with you, it is a matter of urgency."

For a moment no one moved. I wondered if my uncle would try to fight this but something about the trooper's manner calmed me. I nodded, "I'll be fine, Zte'sa."

My uncle didn't really like it but in the end relented. "I will expect her back in one piece," he said as he took the package from my hands again.

The stormtrooper nodded curtly. "Yes sir, those were my orders."

Without further argument I followed the stormtrooper to a private dock and a waiting shuttle. Without waiting for a sign from the trooper I entered the shuttle and waited until the door had shut before I asked for an explanation.

"If you would take a seat Miss Gabriel, I am certain the Admiral will explain everything once we reach our destination," Was all the reply I got.

"And that would be?"

"Sir," The trooper said into his comlink, ignoring me and my question, "We are a go."

"Where are we headed?" I asked again, phrasing it a little differently this time.

"I am not at liberty to say," he replied.

I made a face, sighed and did the only thing left to do, strap in and wait to see where I ended up. The stormtrooper strapped himself in opposite me and in silence we stared at each other as the shuttle lifted up from the ground, freeing itself from the grip of Tatooine's gravity. I smiled to myself as the shuddering came to an abrupt halt once we left the last vestiges of the atmosphere behind us. If the stormtrooper seated across from me noticed he gave no indication.

I was tired and the sudden turn of events at the auction had done nothing to improve that. I sighed and closed my eyes allowing the sensation of motion from the ship to flow through me. Time always seemed to slow down when I left a planet's surface and headed into the space. There was something magical about being in the black and despite the ship's artificial gravity I still felt the lack of a planet's pull, especially my home world. Without meaning to I fell asleep.

The journey took roughly forty minutes and the shuttle landed with enough of a bump to wake me up. Without being asked I unbuckled and got up, waited for the ramp to unlock and release before following the Stormtrooper onto the deck of a Star Destroyer. I looked around for the waiting Deck Officer but there was none.

"This way, Miss." The trooper said as he walked across the unusually quiet deck to the turbo lift.

I did as he asked and followed him without saying anything else until we arrived at guest quarters in a quiet end of a deserted hallway. When the door closed and folded

my arms across my chest. "Can we dispense with all the cloak and saber stuff now?" I asked.

The trooper waited a split second and then removed his helmet, revealing blue skin, blue-black hair and glowing red eyes that held just a hint of amusement in them.

"You knew." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I said.

"How, your force powers?"

I shook my head. "Your voice gave it away for me. No one else speaks Basic quite like you do."

"The Tze'yusha'Jin did not appear to know."

"Maybe not, hard to say with Uncle Vahlek sometimes, and I think he was more interested in just getting out of Mos Espa since he just saved us from a thermal detonator and a stampeding crowd. I don't think he was expecting you to be running around the place dressed as a lowly stormtrooper. The comm unit in the helmet disguises your actual voice well but it's how you say certain things and the cadence of your speech that gave it away. And really, Za'ar, I knew it was you how could I not?"

"Thermal detonator?" He asked removing his gloves and gesturing for me to sit down on the couch in the living area of the quarters.

"Someone blew up the painting," I said, remaining standing.

"Well, they tried." Thrawn nodded, setting his helmet down on the table and pouring two cups of something hot and steaming from the carafe that had been set out. I had been expected.

"Tried?"

"Actually the painting was stolen before the detonator could do any damage. A man named Kitster Banai, if my information was correct." Thrawn handed me a cup of tea and motioned for me to sit and this time I did smiling a little as he sat beside me awkwardly in the armour he was wearing. It looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"So my dear, what is it about that painting that has someone trying to destroy it rather than let it fall into Imperial hands?"

"It carries a shadowcast code key, what ever that is," I said simply. "An old one by the memory of it."

Thrawn's eyebrow arched as he smiled slowly. "Ah, well now that explains many things. I had suspected as much but it is always nice to have these things confirmed. Shadowcast is a code one we suspect the rebels have been using for years but without the keys to slice it is virtually impossible to break. Even an older one would allow my slicers insight into how it works and breaking it would be a huge step into discovering where the Rebels have spies."

"Well I guess that explains why they'd rather destroy it than have it fall into Imperial hands," I nodded.

What else did you learn?"

"Nothing unusual aside from the code key. It hung in the palace on Alderaan until it had been taken off world for an exhibition, on the return journey it was stolen by a guy named Threkin Horm who hung on to it until he thought it was safe to unload it. I saw lots of little flashes but nothing extraordinary."

Thrawn nodded and then said, "And what is it you're not telling me about the painting?"

I sighed. "You mean aside from the fact that I didn't like it one bit and touching it made my skin crawl, or that the artist took months to create it at the expense of his health, or that Princess Leia was fascinated by it or that my mother had touched it once because she had wanted to see what the mossy surface really felt like?" I sipped at the tea. "I am not keeping anything back." I added crossly.

"Well hopefully we can retrieve the painting before the Rebels manage to remove the code key, if not then I hope to still obtain the painting, it would go well with my collection."

I made a face, "Sometimes I think you do these sorts of things out of spite, just so that Princess Leia can't have it."

He raised his eyebrow at me again, disdainfully, "Tekari, really...."

I just rolled my eyes. "Why the big show to get me here. I could have told you all of this stuff on a secure line."

"I need you to do a job for me," he said casually.

"What about the painting?"

"Don't worry about that, it is all being dealt with."

I sighed noisily. "You hauled me off planet just to tell me this?"

"I wanted some privacy," he said studying his fingernails for a moment. "I need you to courier information to Ged Larsen. I did not want to risk anyone on the ground hearing his name."

"Oh?" I said flatly letting him know I had sensed the lie.

"Just as no one knows who I am at the moment outside of a very small circle, neither do many know that Admiral Larsen is still alive and building up his own Imperial fleet. I have vital information for him concerning the upcoming campaign I will embark on and I do not wish to trust it to just anyone, not even my own people." He took a small sip of tea. "You will be flying a non Imperial ship, you have underworld connections and you have certain skills that ...."

I held up my hand. "I get the idea. You want unofficial and harmless."

"You may be unofficial, my dear, but you are anything but harmless." He quipped. "And perhaps I just wanted to make sure that you were still in one piece after that somewhat unusual auction."

"You were there." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, though not actually in the main hall, the weequay was quite firm about allowing no troopers inside. Very shortly I will return to the planet so let me brief you on what I need done."

"You make it sound as though playing courier will be dangerous."

He smiled and reached over to caress my face. "Anything you seem to be involved in turns somewhat dangerous. Now shall we get to work? I do not have much time."

I nodded and then listened as he briefly outlined what he needed from me. By the time he was finished I wasn't sure who was nuttier, him for the plan or me for agreeing to follow through with it.



When he was done I sat back and stared at him. I wasn't overly happy with the idea he had presented to me. "Why am I not using my own ship?" I asked, "It would save time."

"Because I am not sure you'd forgive me if it was damaged during this mission," he replied, "And it is possible that your ship is known to the rebels, on this I am taking no chances. You will travel on board the frigate Tornado. No arguments."

"A frigate?" I made a face. "How much time do I have to make sure she actually flies then?"

"You don't need to do that, you will not be piloting you will be a liaison on board. I'd like you to be ready to leave as soon as I am done with Tatooine and this ridiculous art chase. In the mean time I want you to stay here, study the plans and the information on this." he handed me a data disk.

"Why do I need to stay here? You can use my skills on Tatooine." I asked staring at the datadisk in my hand.

"I will have all the help I need, my dear. The Tze'yusha'Jin is more than willing to aid in the search for *Killik Twilight*."

I gave him a look. "You are keeping me here to keep me safe?"

His smile was slight and not overly friendly. "I need you to be very clear on what I am asking you to do. You need to study the information on the disk and I doubt very much that you will concentrate on Tatooine. Knowing you, you will find some excuse to come running after me and the painting and maybe get yourself killed in the process."

"You don't trust me?"

"No," He smirked. "Not in this instance, no and your uncle more than agrees with me. When I have the painting secured I will return, it shouldn't take that long and then we can discuss in more detail what this job entails."

"I don't have clothes here for an extended stay! I don't have anything here that I need!"

He pointed to a large bag that was sitting on the floor, "That has been taken care of."

I opened my mouth then closed it again. "You know...," I began but he held up his hand.

"I do, but you won't win this argument," He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, the armour clacked as he did so. "Do not make this complicated. You went to the auction at my request and if I had known they would be trying to blow the painting up I would not have made that request. It is part of my job to keep you out of harm's way which is what I am doing now."

"What's on this disk that you don't want it going off the ship?" I asked sensing another lie underneath his truth.

"Very sensitive data on Ged Larsen for one thing and some details about the upcoming campaign which I think you will need to know in order to pull off the ruse."

"Ruse? What ruse?"

He did not answer my question, "The Tornado is currently in orbit around Chenini on a survey mission. Captain Daurma knows to expect you. The official story is that you are there as a liaison from Captain Pellaeon to make sure the courier drop off to Larsen goes smoothly."

"And the unofficial story?"

"You are working for me, top level security."

I frowned, "And just how is this supposed to work?" I asked. "No one will believe that I am anything other than your mate."

"Actually you would be surprised at how few people on my fleet know about your more intimate relationship with me and those that do either think it is a rumour or know enough to remain silent about it," he said, "There is a reason why I have not allowed you to travel with me and keeping our relationship private is one of them."

"So I am not on the *Chimaera* then?"

"No you are currently on board the *Death's Head*."

"Can't you come up with better names for your ships?" I asked trying not to get more annoyed than I already was.

"I did not name her, for that you would have to discuss Imperial ship naming policies with Palpatine and that might be a tad difficult at this time. Merlyn, really it is just for a short while."

I made a face. "So just why will the captain and crew of the *Tornado* believe any of this story?"

"Because, my dear, they will all believe you are one of the dreaded Emperor's Hands. That knowledge alone will terrify them into believing what ever you tell them."

"But I'm not an...."

Thrawn held up his hand. "I know that and you know that but the official data which is available to those with high enough clearance will say otherwise."

"You're using Uncle Vahlek's ruse to get me in close to Ged Larsen so you can spy on him?"

He laughed. "Oh Sjiu Tekari you really do read too many Holloway novels. I don't need you to spy on him at all I need a liaison who is, shall we say, able to cut through the ...."

I interrupted, "Ged's force sensitive you know, he'll soon see through any games." I sighed, "And I don't want to lie to him. I won't lie to him."

"Perhaps if I were playing games that would be something I would worry about but I assure you, there are no games. I need his help as much as he requires mine. It is a mutually beneficial relationship which you will help facilitate. He liked you, he'll work with you, which will make my job easier, and because you will not be someone the rebels will immediately watch out for, you can move back and forth a lot easier than any imperial could. Plus, I don't trust anyone else with this." He regarded me for a moment, "You won't have any reason to lie to him from me."

I digested his words, sifting through them for any untruths but I found none. "The dispatches I will be carrying, will they be real?"

He nodded. "Very, so be mindful of this."

"Navaari will be so pissed about you using me like this."

"Yes, well I will deal with his wrath should it ever come up and you can say no. I am not forcing you to do this job. You have a home and work enough waiting for you on Nirauan if you want it but I got the impression that you were a little bored there as well as on Tatooine and when you get bored I start to worry, when you get bored...."

I sighed deeply and let the air out noisily. He was right and he knew it. I was curious about all of this and he knew that as well. "Okay, you win," I said cutting him off.

He smirked in a fashion which said, Yes, I usually do.

I waved at the Stormtrooper helmet, "This disguise...you're using this whole painting thing as a training exercise for the fresh meat on the *Chimaera* aren't you?" I said changing the subject while shaking my head slightly and finishing my tea.

"How well you know me my dear," he said with a tight smile and before I could comment back or make some sort of retort he shut me up with a kiss that was too short and left me wanting an awful lot more. I didn't like this, any of it and I let him know with a look. He just smiled and stroked my cheek with the back of his fingers.

I nodded, "How long do you think it will take? This painting thing I mean?"

He gave me a slight shrug as he pulled on the armour gloves and reached for the helmet. "I do not know, hopefully not long. While I do enjoy spending time on your planet, running around after known criminals in this uniform is not the most efficient use of my time but as you pointed out it is a good way to initiate some training and to evaluate the ground troops, something I do not often get the opportunity to do. They will have to be ready to face a hell of a lot in a short amount of time, many of the troops we have are far too young and inexperienced for my taste and even Pellaeon will not argue with me on this point. We'll just have to see how this plays out. Now that I know why the rebels want the painting so badly it gives me a better idea of what they'll do to get it."

"You don't think that this Kitster Banai was working with them?"

"No," he said but didn't elaborate. When his comm beeped he made a slight face. "Time to go," he said as he picked up the helmet and stood up. "In this armour I am simply a squad leader escorting you back to the planet. Try not to give the game away my dear."

"Have I ever given your games away?" I asked following him to the door.

He didn't answer my question instead he reached for me, cupping my chin with one hand. I didn't resist when he drew my face upward and gave me another kiss, this one a little more intimate than the last one had been. "Do not doubt your importance in my life, Tekari but do not doubt the importance of what I now must do and the campaign that lies ahead. I can just as easily shut you out and send you to Nirauan for the duration or perhaps Hjal which ever you'd prefer. I thought you might like to take a slightly more active role, but perhaps I was mistaken."

I shook my head. "You know me too well and I'm not sure how much I like that."

"It's part of being bound and you should know that by now." He chided gently "Now will you do as I have asked and stay here until I return, study the data and try to relax a little?"

There was a second of tension as he waited for my answer and then I nodded. "I will."

"If you get particularly restless I have assigned Rukh to spar with you and you'll find everything you need in the bag over there."

I shook my head, "I don't need a babysitter."

"No you don't but I was thinking you might enjoy some time in the training suite with my Noghri body guard. You might want a diversion from reading for a while and I have no use for Rukh on Tatooine."

"Bet he's just as happy about this as I am."

"Actually he said he was rather looking forward to teaching you some more Noghri moves."

I rolled my eyes; I knew what that meant, me spending a lot of time spent flat on my ass while he laughed in that husky creepy way of his. "Okay, have it your way, just come back in one piece and keep my uncle out of trouble while you are at it."

He kissed my forehead and smiled, "I shall endeavour to do so. Wish me luck," he said as he slipped the helmet over his head and then vanished without waiting to hear my reply.

The soft richness of his voice had been swiftly transformed behind the helmet's microphone. He sounded just like every other stormtrooper I had ever heard except for the ever so subtle and unusual cadence in his voice which I doubted many others would even notice. It made me smile, his penchant for dressing up in disguises. Thrawn was like no other Imperial leader I had ever known. As the door shut softly leaving me alone, I wondered if any of his men really knew just how lucky they were.

## Chapter Nine

I stifled a groan as the alarm klaxon shrieked through the air of my quarters waking me up from a deep and dreamless sleep. With a curse that would have made Thrawn blush I glanced at the chronometer and then grabbed my pillow bunching it around my head, trying to block out the noise. It was four am, Coruscant standard time. Even with my pillow shoved as hard as I could around my head the alarm still made its way into my brain, shredding any hope I had of getting back to sleep to bits. For the past six weeks Admiral Ged Larsen had been running battle drills on his ISD, to keep his men in top form he had told me. This was fine if one were a crew member on board and had a specific job to jump up and run to, all pumped up on adrenalin, but for me it was just an annoyance that kept waking me up at inopportune times. I was starting to hate him for his perfectionism and Thrawn for sending me here in the first place.

Ged ran a tight ship and his crew both respected and feared him, there was tension here that reminded a little of the tension on any ship that Lord Vader showed up on. I didn't think that Ged ran around force choking anyone who disobeyed him but I was betting the punishment for not following orders and screwing up were both swift and severe. This was the Imperial navy and failure was not an option, especially now with the stakes so high. He ran drills constantly, at odd hours for unpredictable events and attacks. I couldn't decide if the man was trying to impress Thrawn or if he was really just nuts either way it didn't make my time here fun.

Just as the klaxon stopped wailing a banging on the door of my quarters coaxed me out of bed. I grabbed my robe and had it wrapped around me as I opened the door.

"What?" I growled. I had long since given up being polite, especially as no one expected it of me anyway.

"Admiral Larsen requests your presence on the command deck in his briefing room," replied the young man without giving any thoughts away.

I rolled my eyes and stepped back, "Fine, I'll be there as soon as I've dressed."

"I was told that you were to come immediately, ma'am," he said calmly.

I made an impatient gesture with my hand. "Very well then, lead on." I sighed.

If anyone found it utterly unusual to see me having to trot, barefoot and in my night clothes, after the swiftly moving young officer they wisely kept their mouths shut. It was not the first time this had happened. By the time we arrived at Ged's briefing room, my feet were cold and my mood was about as foul as it could possibly be. I slipped into the dimly lit room and barely waited for the door to shut behind me before giving Ged a piece of my mind.

"Ged, what the hell is so important that it couldn't wait five minutes for me to get dressed?"

"I see the last few weeks have not curbed your temper any." A voice that was like dark brushed velvet and which always made my heart speed up spoke from the dark corner of the room. "I did tell you she does not like to be woken up or summoned in this manner," Thrawn said to Ged, who was watching my reaction with a smirk.

I looked from one man to the other then back again and shook my head and went to the side board to pour myself some stim'caf from the carafe that Ged always kept

there. I was thrilled to see Thrawn but I didn't dare show it, at least not how I really wanted to so I kept up the pretence of being annoyed even though really I was more delighted, as well as curious. I leaned back against the sideboard and sipped at the 'caf slowly.

"So," I said glancing at each man in turn over the rim of my cup, "I'll ask again what was so important that it couldn't wait for me to get dressed?"

"I think I will let the Grand Admiral brief you Miss Gabriel. In the meant time I'll be on the bridge if either of you require anything," he said, giving Thrawn a salute which was promptly returned. He brushed past me as he left the room and whispered in my ear, "Don't be too hard on him, Merlyn, it was actually my idea to get you up, I know how much you enjoy surprises." I just rolled my eyes and Ged chuckled as he went out of the room leaving silence in his wake.

The silence in the room settled into something both familiar and tense all at the same time. In the last six weeks I had come to think of Ged Larsen as a friend, despite the mutual mistrust we had held for each other at the start of my time on board his ship. I suppose part of it was the force gifts we each had. It wasn't easy to meet people who truly understood what being a force user meant, especially someone who understood what life must have been like working under the Emperor and for Lord Vader. I had found a sort of solace in Ged's friendship much to my surprise but due to the current non communication circumstances, I assumed Thrawn knew nothing about this. I sipped at the caf without tasting it and watched his face carefully.

An eyebrow arched as he walked towards me, "I see you've settled in well."

I smiled and shrugged. "I adapt to the circumstances handed me. You wanted me out of the way and safe which I am but you never said I had to be alone and miserable." I replied, "Besides, it makes my job easier when I actually get along with my superiors."

Thrawn smiled and stopped a few centimetres shy of where I was standing, stroking the side of my face with his fingertips. "Is he aware of the exact nature of our relationship?"

I followed the motion of his hand with my face, closing my eyes at the tenderness of his touch. "Not in so many words but he's not stupid. Outside of official business we don't actually discuss you all that much but I am certain he sees my reaction to your name. He's a force user who was trained by the Emperor. I don't need to tell him what is probably very obvious to his eyes."

"I see," he said shifting away from me slightly.

"If you're concerned about..." I started but an abrupt gesture from his hand quelled any more words from my mouth.

"I do not worry on that account, Tekari," he said.

I nodded slowly then after a moment's silence said, "I did not expect you for another two weeks."

"Yes, I know but something came up that required I speak to Larsen face to face."

"I see." I sighed and sipped the remains of the now cool 'caf. "Well that explains the battle drill then, but it doesn't explain why I got hauled out of bed at four am."

Thrawn smiled slowly. "Perhaps I just wished to see you. My time here is quite short, I requested your presence but it was a misinterpretation of the young man sent to

fetch you which led to you running around in your night clothes, though, my dear, you should be used to that by now from your time working under Lord Vader."

"Well, you've seen me," I said far more tartly than I meant to. There was something he wasn't telling me. "How long are you here for?"

"No more than forty-eight hours, I have ... issues of my own to deal with onboard the *Chimera*."

"Issues?"

He nodded slightly and suddenly I saw the weariness on his face which he had worked very hard to hide from both Ged and myself. "The *Chimera* has a young, fairly untried crew and I am having certain renovations done to parts of the ship. There are not many experienced officers on board to help teach the somewhat green crew how to do things in the appropriate Imperial manner. We run simulations and battle drills as well as some real engagements but training a crew of this magnitude in so short a time is a difficult process. Most of the bridge crew are younger than you and many have never seen real combat before. Pellaeon works them as hard as he can but it takes time and experience to make a seasoned crew. I, unfortunately, have neither."

I digested this bit of news and nodded. "So you and Ged are running simulations then, one fleet against the other."

He nodded, "It seemed a viable solution to one of the issues at hand."

"Ged's big on battle simulation drills," I said making a face. "This isn't the first time I've been woken up at some hellishly early hour of the day this week."

Thrawn laughed and the sound warmed my soul. I had missed him much more than I ever dared to allow myself to admit. I guess it showed on my face because he gathered me in his arms and just held me close. "Forgive me for getting you up then but I wanted to see you," he said quietly into my hair, "I wanted to make sure you were well."

I just nodded in to his chest. "You're forgiven," I said with a yawn.

"I have some work for you if you would be interested but we can discuss that later," he said, pushing back from me.

The moment between us passed and I nodded. "I figured as much. I will be happy to do something that doesn't involve office work."

"Office work?"

"Ged thought I should make myself useful while I was here and he asked if I would act as his personal assistant, so I've been doing office work for him. It's a lot less exciting here than it was with Lord Vader but it does keep me busy."

"It's also probably a lot less dangerous than working for Vader was," he said.

"So far no one has died." I retorted. "Are you planning on any more battle drills tonight or can I go back to bed?"

Thrawn arched his eyebrow and smirked. "As far as I know that was it for the evening but Admiral Larsen and I are running these drills concurrent to each other and we don't divulge when they take place so...." He gave me a slight shrug.

"So in other words chances are good that because both fleets are here there will be more than two a night?"

"He's done two in one night?"

"Seven is the record," I said, "He runs a tight ship."

Thrawn arched an eyebrow, "Indeed, seven?"

"Yes," I said.

"And did these drills accomplish anything?"

"You mean aside from making everyone tired and not boosting moral, yes the efficiency rate went up on the battle ready times. Ged made his point and achieved his goal," I said with a shrug, remembering the very heated discussion I had had with him about it all. "He's a perfectionist and his people both respect and fear him, but they love him too and they'd die for him if he asked."

"As it should be," he replied.

I glanced up at him, wondering how it was on the *Chimaera*, if the men and women serving on board that ship would lay down their lives for Thrawn or if there was still the issue of his being an alien to make things difficult. "So what is on your agenda for the rest of what's left of this watch?" I asked glancing at the chrono on the wall; it was nearly five in the morning.

"I have a debriefing session with Captains Pellaeon and Morrish about the *Virulent's* and the *Chimaera's* performance on this last drill and then I should get some rest, why?"

"When did you wish to talk about this job you have for me then?" I asked.

His smile was slow. "If you wish I can discuss it later, perhaps over an early breakfast?"

"Is that allowed?"

"I outrank Larsen and I am sure he won't object. After all, my dear, you are here at my discretion," He replied airily.

I sighed. "Fine, I will talk to you later then. I need to get some sleep."

He nodded. "Let Larsen know we're done in here. I should be finished in a few hours so expect me at around oh-seven hundred hours."

I left the ready room and made sure that Ged knew then headed back to my own quarters. I lay down hoping to get at least an hour or so sleep but it wasn't happening so instead I had a bath, got dressed and made a cup of tea. I was in the middle of reading a book when the door chime rang, making my heart leap as well as me nearly spilling what was left of my tea.

Thrawn smiled as he walked into my quarters, looked at the cup in my hand and said, "Is there any more of that?" Then he sat down on the small sofa and watched as I busied myself with making a new pot of tea.

Only after I had finished, brought over tea things to the table, poured him a cup and then sat down beside him did he break his silence.

"I want you to go to Obroa-Skai," he said quietly.

I just blinked at him for a second, digesting this and then said, "When and why?"

"As soon as possible. I need you to obtain access codes for the main frame so that we can sweep their data banks."

I sighed into my tea. "This is a make work project, you have slicers far more capable of this than I am."

"I do but I need them on board my ship and you, my dear, have a talent for slipping in and out of places without attracting too much attention. All I need is an access code into the system, after that the rest of the job will be easy."



"Still can't find Wayland, huh." I shot.

A flicker of annoyance danced briefly across his features, "No and you are not to go looking for it either."

"Why not?" I asked crossly, this argument now so familiar to me that I could dance it in my sleep.

Thrawn sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was tired and for the first time he did not give me the standard keeping me safe answer. "I have been led to believe that the facility is protected by a Dark Jedi Master."

"How did you...?"

Thrawn raised his hand slightly and I shut up, "I have been doing an inordinate amount of research on this mythical place, Tekari. Everything I have discovered so far, which isn't as much as I would like, has led me to believe that the Emperor had the place guarded by force users specifically trained in the darker nature of this power. You would be no match for such a creature would you?"

I bit my lip wanting to bravado through the answer and say yes but my experiences with the Emperor and Lord Vader had left me with enough wits to know Thrawn was right. "No, I couldn't beat a dark jedi master, an apprentice maybe but not a master."

He reached over and caressed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers. "So now do you understand why I would very much like you to stay away from Wayland? If a dark jedi master found you...."

"I get the picture," I said softly. "I have no wish to be trained in the dark arts, especially not by one of the Emperor's minions. How exactly are you planning on getting past such a creature? You don't have any defences against a force user."

Thrawn gave me a wry smile. "You have already long ago provided the answer to that, my dear."

I raised both eyebrows at him, "I have?"

"Yes," he said setting his cup down on the table.

"How am I supposed to go to Obroa-Skai? Ged doesn't have a civilian ship in his fleet and the Obroans did not side with the Empire, they will not trust someone arriving in an Imperial ship."

"I had your ship brought here. I brought it on board when I arrived," he said smugly. "It was part of the training event Ged and I planned."

"You used my ship in a training mission?"

"I did, she was unharmed I assure you. I am quite a decent pilot when I need to be." He teased, "It was necessary to get your ship on board without raising too many questions."

"And once I get there I am just supposed to ask for access codes to the mainframe?"

"No, just access to the archives, once we have one access code, even if it is a public one we'll be able to do the rest. It is a simple plan, Tekari. You are a civilian and there will be no reason to refuse you access especially if you are searching for something innocuous."

I made a face and went to pour more tea but he placed his hand over mine, stopping me. "My time here with you is limited; I think we have better things to do than sip tea."

I arched an eyebrow. "You're getting risqué in your old age." I teased, a little surprised. "You usually do not like to mix pleasure with work."

"True enough, but perhaps, my dear, I just miss you and chances such as this will be extremely far and few between," he said, "Admiral Larsen, it seems, is aware of the nature of your relationship with me and commented that perhaps it might make you a little less, how did he put it, difficult to work with if I spent some time with you."

"Ged doesn't really miss much although I haven't said anything to him about us, or even hinted at it."

"He likes you."

"Everybody likes me I'm harmless." I retorted, pinching his arm.

He smirked. "Only to those who do not share your bed or incur your wrath."

He was right and our time together, private like this was precious. As he removed his jacket and shirt I stroked the skin of his arm, my fingers tracing the fine wound metal of the binding bracelet he never took off. "So, for a few stolen moments you're mine?"

"Yes," He murmured in my ear, starting the process of undressing me.

"And we'll have time to discuss this little trip of mine afterwards?"

"Yes."

"Good," I said, satisfied with this answer I let the rest go and allowed him to remind me why I missed him so much as well as make sure he knew why he should miss me.

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The small, lesser used hanger bay where the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma* was docked was deserted and very quiet. I glanced at the chrono on the far wall and sighed. It was late and I hadn't even noticed the time slip away. Despite Thrawn's assurances that my ship had been well looked after on Nirauan I wasn't taking any chances and had spent much of the day into the early evening making certain she was in top condition. I was in the engine room when I felt a presence and heard a soft knock against the bulkhead by the hatchway.

"Permission to come aboard?" Ged asked stepping into the small space as I nodded. "I cannot believe you're willing to fly anywhere in that bucket of bolts."

"Don't be insulting my ship. This bucket of bolts has teeth." I replied wiping the grease off my hands with a rag.

"Really? I didn't think these things still flew, to be honest."

"When I was given her she was outfitted with all the best equipment. She may look like a wreck on the outside but she's got it where it counts." I smiled, "I'm not sure how many are still running but this one is in good shape, if it wasn't Thrawn would never let me fly it."

Ged raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? I was under the impression that telling you to do something was a lot like trying to herd wild kimas." He stepped over the open tool box to look down at the engine.

"Ha very ha." I replied. "Is there a reason for this visit or did you just come all the way down here to harass me about my ship?"

"Actually I came to invite you to have dinner with me, the Grand Admiral and the captains of both our flag ships but if you'd rather play with your toy here...", he let his sentence trail off, glancing around my ship.

"I thought Thrawn had returned to the Chimera," I said not masking my surprise or delight.

"Our debriefing session went on far longer than planned and we've decided to stage more drills rather than rush into anything. He, along with his fleet, will remain here for another two days, standard time."

I couldn't help my smile and it did not go unnoticed. For a second our eyes met and something sparked between us making my heart skip a little beat as though someone had sent a small jolt of electricity through me.

It puzzled me, this sensation because I was not in love with Ged Larsen and I certainly had no plans to change my current love life situation, but never the less....there was something there and I did my best to ignore it. I looked away, breaking the contact as well as the moment and made sure there was a little more distance between us. This also did not go unnoticed. The silence seemed suddenly heavy and oppressive.

"Merlyn," Ged said after a too long a pause, "May I ask you something personal?"

I nodded cautiously, not liking the sudden seriousness of his mood. "Sure, I guess."

"You're close to Thrawn. It's more than just a working relationship, I mean."

I nodded but didn't elaborate.

"Just so we're clear, you and he are lovers."

"Yes," I said quickly.

"Why did you never mention the exact nature of your relationship with him to me?"

I drew a deep breath and frowned. "You've never asked about it until now," I said honestly.

"Well, I'm asking about it now. Why have you never said anything before?"

I shrugged, "We got so used to keeping it very private that I never think about it any other way. Under the rule of Palpatine it was forbidden for an Imperial officer to fraternise with members of the Palace staff. Shouting about it from the palace rooftops would not have been a smart thing to do."

"That did not seem to stop you from having an affair with him though."

I frowned. "Well it was something Palpatine encouraged, actually, unofficially of course. I think he saw it as some sort of grand experiment, what would happen to his brilliant alien tactician if he fell for a lowly office girl from Tatooine."

"And what did happen?"

"Palpatine used the relationship as part of an excuse to have Thrawn exiled to the Unknown Regions. It was an ugly thing."

He nodded, letting me know that he had heard about that particular incident. "So, when I first met you at the reception for Thrawn's induction into the canted Circle, were you and he together then?"

I smiled at the memory of that day. "Yes."

"He was the reason you wouldn't go out to dinner with me?" He said slowly, also remembering that day.

Once again we stared at each other and the air between us shimmered. "Ye..e..es," I said slowly.

Ged shook his head. "I pride myself on being able to read people really well but I have to admit I never saw that you and the Grand Admiral were an item. I thought you were hung up on that blond haired palace fop you spent the rest of the event talking to."

"Shiv? You mean Siavaan?" I asked in disbelief relieved to talk about somebody other than Thrawn. "Good grief no! Shiv's just one of my best friends." I laughed at the very thought.

"He seemed very close to you." Ged pressed.

"Well, he is close to me. He was being protective," I said, nodding. "He thinks he's my big brother. I love him dearly but we're just friends, really."

"So, if I may ask, how long have you and the Grand Admiral been together?"

I stopped to think about this. "I've known him for about as long as I've worked for the Empire," I paused to do some mental math, "But actually together-together...probably around eight or so years I guess."

Ged did not bother to hide his surprise. "Really?"

"Mmm, really," I said, "To be honest it surprises me that you're so shocked; I mean the tabloids were full of stories about us, people knew or at least I think they did. I just assumed you knew especially after this morning."

"I don't read that nonsense and I don't pay much attention to the gossip mongers either." He shrugged. "I thought the rumours were false, especially since it seemed the entire Core was trying to find some sort of story to tell about the Emperor's pet alien." He paused, "And how would I know? I've seen you two together, what, twice and both times, while you appeared to have a decent working relationship I would never have said you were anything more than simply colleagues who got along. You both hide it very well."

There was an edge to his voice I wasn't sure how to decipher. "Why are you asking this Ged?"

"I like to know how things stand before I put my foot in it and say, ask you out on a real date... again."

I looked at him steadily for a moment. "Is that the sort of thing you are likely to do... again?"

He smiled in a decidedly feral manner. "You are a lovely young woman, smart, well read and incredibly talented. You are force sensitive which is something quite rare, you seem to understand me plus you are a civilian, so therefore not within the realm of business mixing with pleasure. Yes, asking you out had occurred to me many times, especially in the last few weeks."

"So what stopped you?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

He gave me another smile, "I couldn't put my finger on it exactly, even though it was quite obvious you find me attractive and you enjoy my company, there was always a bit of a distance. I thought it was because you were shy or perhaps intimidated but ....."

"Well now you have a more concrete answer." I shrugged ignoring his last statement.

"Ah well you did not exactly hide your feelings very well this morning when you burst into my ready room half dressed," he replied. "You saw the Grand Admiral and your entire face lit up like a star going Nova. That was my first clue."

I narrowed my eyes at him, "And the reason for me being half dressed in my night clothes was the command to come to your office right away." I hissed, ignoring his description of my expression.

"I enjoy watching you flit through my ship looking like some Nubian fey." He smirked, teasing me. Something he did more frequently than when I had first come on board. "And your delight at seeing the Grand Admiral did not go unnoticed but it was the first time I've really paid attention to it. I just assumed you and he were close friends. You seem to get along well with just about everyone."

I shrugged. "I try to keep my feelings private; usually I do a better job."

"Well I know you better now than I did before so I can read your expression and body language better as well," He replied softly. "As I said I just wanted to know the lay of the land so to speak and not embarrass myself in front of my superior officer during dinner this evening."

I laughed. "I hardly think you'd do that."

He shrugged with a boyish grin which I found charming, "There is always a first time," he said then added, "Does Pellaeon know about you two?"

"I doubt it. Thrawn has made sure to keep me well away from the *Chimera* and her crew. He'd never discuss his private life with junior officers unless he considered them very close personal friends and I don't think he's anywhere near that stage with Captain Pellaeon or his crew."

"Then I shall refrain from making obnoxious innuendos at dinner. Do you think you can be cleaned and ready to join us in say, an hour?" He asked, "While I find the pit monkey look endearing it's not exactly the appropriate dining at the Admiral's table wear."

"Well I am sure I can find something suitable as long as it's not too formal."

Ged shrugged, "Well, it will be as formal as it gets for spur of the moment."

"And here I thought engine grease was the height of fashion." I grinned and once again our eyes caught and another spear of something unwanted shot through my body. He stepped towards me and I edged back as nonchalantly as I could. "I need to finish here if you really want me to dine with you all," I said.

Ged smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "Merlyn, this mission he has you going on...."

I cut him off. "It isn't dangerous if that's what you're asking me." I drew a deep breath and looked at him.

He glanced around my ship and made a face, "If you need anything for this tub, the Quartermaster knows to give you what ever you ask for, within reason."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"Dinner is at twenty hundred hours, so try not to be late," he said turning to leave but then he paused. "I know you say you've been with the Grand Admiral for a while now but you might want to let him know he should not take you for granted, that he has competition for your affections."

I just stared at him for a moment not sure how to take this unexpected statement then nodded. "Maybe you should tell him that yourself, Ged," I said softly.

He seemed to consider this and then without warning he strode back to where I stood and before I could stop him he cupped my face with his hands and kissed me as though we were lovers starving for each other and without even thinking about it I kissed him back. Through the force I could feel his passion, his desire and something else I could not decipher, it left me breathless and shaken but before I could come to my senses and shove him away he stopped, pulling back to stare at me intently. There was a long heavy, silence broken only by the sound of my heart which pounded in my ears.

"No, sweetheart, I think that you should be the one to tell him. I am not the one with conflicted emotions. I know exactly what I want," he said very softly.

"My emotions are not conflicted!" I snapped.

Ged's only answer was a slight smile which tugged at the corner of his lips. For a moment I thought he was going to try and kiss me again so I put my hand up in a stop gesture then tucked it quickly behind my back when I noticed that it was shaking.

"Please do not ever do that again," I said very quietly.

"Why not? Are you afraid you might enjoy it too much? Because I know you enjoyed that, I could feel it. You think you can hide everything you feel from me but that simply isn't the case with many things. You're like an open book most days and believe me when I say this, you're interested. Why else would you want to spend so much of your spare time with me? So stop pretending otherwise." He leaned into me and whispered in my ear, his breath warm against the skin of my neck. He smelled good and the thought made me feel guilty.

I shut my eyes tightly, willing the world to get back to normal. Part of me wanted to slap him but I held back because a very tiny part of me wondered if he was right, as kisses went it had not been unpleasant. However, I was never going to let him know that. "No because if you do that again I will hurt you. Ask Thrawn about what happened to Grand Admiral Zaarin when he tried the same thing with me." I stepped back from him wondering what had brought this on because up until now we had been just friends, at least that is what I thought. I had completely missed any signals indicating otherwise. "You joked to Thrawn that his spending time with me would make me less difficult...I don't get why you suddenly...."

He held up his hand. "What I said was 'Perhaps if you spend some more time with her while you are here and discuss this job you have for her it will make her less difficult to work with as she seems to miss working for you and I have very little to offer such a smart young woman.'" He said, "I meant that you don't seem to be particularly challenged by any of the tasks I set you and that maybe he had found something for you to other than be here on my ship without a real reason to be other than to act as his spy."

I scowled at him. "I am not his spy!" I snapped resenting this. "The reason I am here is because he wanted me out of harm's way but at the same time thought I might be of use."

"So that's the truth. He sent you here because he wanted to keep you safe?" Ged asked in disbelief. "What does he think I am a glorified babysitter for his mistress?"

"I can actually look after myself!" I shot back, now fully angry, "How dare you...."

"What do you see in him Merlyn?" He asked suddenly, cutting me off mid-sentence. I held my breath waiting for him tell me Thrawn wasn't human so that I could bite his head off about being xenophobic but that was not the case. "Really, he's old enough to be your father, he's never around and he's about as emotional as a dead bantha." Ged's words came out angry, almost petulant.

"Age has nothing to do with it nor for that matter does race, colour or creed. You don't know him, you have no idea. All you see is the Imperial façade he's been putting on for years. Just because he doesn't show what he feels doesn't mean he doesn't have emotions or that he never shows them. You have no idea of what he is capable of!" I shot back, now that the shock had dwindled and the adrenalin had receded only anger and uncertainty were left in their place. I seemed to have a thing for older men but I didn't say this out loud.

Ged just stared at me. Then he leaned in to kiss me again and I seemed to watch it all unfold in slow motion. When his lips brushed against mine I felt as though my entire world had suddenly tilted sideways upending everything I knew to be good and true. This time instead of kissing him back, as my body wanted me to do. I moved my head aside and looked away from his face. "Why the hell did you do that? I told you to stop!"

"I wanted to see if I was right."

"About what?"

"About you," he said quietly, brushing a lock of hair away from my face with his forefinger.

I swallowed. "And your conclusion?" I asked pushing his hand away.

"I'll leave that up to you to figure out," he said stroking my face with his finger tips.

I pulled back from his touch, shaking. "Admiral, I think you should leave now."

He just smiled. "Dinner, my private dining room in half an hour, do not be late. That is an order," he said and then he left.

Shaking from the inside out, I slid down to sit on the floor wondering what the hell had prompted this turn of events. I wracked my brains trying to remember if I had done or said anything to allow Ged to believe I was free for the taking.

My first week on board his ship had been strange, tense especially after the dinner where he had all but interrogated me on my reasons for being there. He had been deeply suspicious of Thrawn's reasoning and had called me on the whole Emperor's hand thing.

"Miss Gabriel," He had said after a very lengthy silence, "You and I both know you were never one of Palpatine's agents so cut the crap will you and tell me what you are really doing here?"

I had given him the answer Thrawn had told me to, which was that I was there working as a liaison between the two fleets, nothing more and nothing less and that if he didn't like it he could take it up with the Grand Admiral. Needless to say it had been a

somewhat terse and awkward meal and I was more than happy to be shown to my quarters and leave Ged alone to his thoughts.

For the rest of the week he had completely ignored me and with nothing else to do, as well as no access to any place other than the public areas on his ship I had spent much of my time either in my quarters reading or in the small exercise room working out my demons. I didn't dare contact Thrawn and complain and since I didn't have my own ship I couldn't just leave. Things had changed, though, when he had found me, very late one night, running through my bunduki forms.

"I was not aware that you were trained, formally trained in this martial art form," he had said watching me from the doorway.

I had ignored his comment because I was angry with him and had kept on practicing as if he were not there at all.

"The Emperor once told me that you would have made a great candidate for his adept training programme had it not been for your stubborn, wilful nature which had you so bound up with Vader. I start to understand what he meant."

I had stopped what I was doing to stare at him. "You talked with the Emperor about me?" I had asked surprised.

"No, he mentioned you because he saw us speaking together at the Canted Circle ceremony." He had replied.

I had just nodded and begun a series of stretches to cool down.

"Merlyn, look, I'm sorry if I offended you but you must understand a man in my position cannot take chances on ...well you could very well be a rebel spy."

I had just glared at him then turned my back on him. "The last person who accused me of being a traitor died." I had said flatly.

"I am not accusing you of anything but I wanted to make certain you are who you say you are. It's been my experience that the rebels are very clever when it comes to infiltrating and information gathering."

"Well, Admiral, let me put you at ease I am not now nor was I ever aligned with the Rebel Alliance. I am exactly what Thrawn says I am, a civilian pilot who once worked as Lord Vader's personal assistant. I sometimes work as a mechanic when I am needed, I occasional do some translation work for him and fly on delivery runs for him when he wishes to go someplace in a non military capacity. Sometimes I act as a courier and occasionally, like now, I am asked to do some liaison work between fleets. You are quite right when you say I am not an Emperor's Hand, that is a lie but a necessary one to keep people who would normally ask questions from doing so. So if you would do me the kindness of contacting the Grand Admiral and letting him know the current situation so that either he or you can arrange passage off this ship for me I would be most grateful."

"Actually, I already have and he indicated to me that while my caution was admirable it was also not necessary and that I was being foolish to throw away your talents," he replied. "While he was polite about it the underlying command for me to deal with you and the situation was there. No matter what, he is my superior officer and his orders will be obeyed."

I had glanced up. "What talents would they be?" I had asked snarkily.

"He did not elaborate and I did not argue the point." He had replied. "Look, as I said before I wanted to make sure you were who you said you were and it seems that my



worries were unfounded. I apologise for the treatment you have received and would like to try and make it up to you, if I may?"

I knew a peace offering when I saw it and I had also known in this case it would only ever be given once and if I wanted to actually enjoy my time on board the *Virulent* then I had damned well better take it so I had nodded. "Apology accepted Admiral."

"Please, call me Ged, seeing as how you are not actually a member of the Imperial navy I see no reason why we cannot be informal at least in private."

And that had been the start of what slowly blossomed into a very pleasant friendship, or so I thought. Over the weeks that had followed we had spent a lot of time talking in private, sharing stories about our various experiences during the Emperor's rule and eventually talking about what it meant to be a force user, especially one that Palpatine had taken an interest in. It turned out that we actually had a lot in common, including a love of Jeb Holloway books.

I had been given a small office space and computer access. Ged had also allowed me to work in the mechanic's pit because I had begged for something other than mindless paperwork to do. I got used to meeting him for a 'caf in the mornings and then we began to share supper together more often than not when he had time. So when, I wondered, had this turned into more than just a decent working friendship without me noticing?

There had been an evening two weeks prior to Thrawn's arrival when after dinner we had moved to the living area of his quarters, sat on the couch and shared a particularly good brandy. The conversation had been funny and warm and above all comfortable but I could not recall there being any more to it. I had not gotten drunk and there had been no physical tell tale signs that I had actually noticed to say he was remotely interested in me, but when I thought back I saw I had been wrong. I shook my head in disbelief at how I could have missed these signs, the mimicking of body language, the slightly too long held gazes, his utter attentiveness and the occasional contact when he would touch my hand or shoulder to emphasis a point he was making. What was worse was I hadn't backed away from this, I had enjoyed his attention. It had been nice, almost normal.

I sighed and banged my head against the bulkhead of my ship in frustration. I had not thought about this because it had not occurred to me that any other man might find me attractive let alone act on the desire. In my head I was so utterly Thrawn's that I automatically expected the entire galaxy to know this, but that was not the case. As Ged had pointed out, it was something that had been kept well hidden. How could he or anyone else be expected to simply know? I had been an idiot.

All this time he had interpreted my actions as interest in him and there had been no reason for him to think otherwise. I drew a deep breath remembering the sheer thrill that had accompanied the anger and surprise of his sudden and not so subtle kiss. My experiences with men over the years had not been the best, when they were not trying to rape me they were trying to kill me. It wasn't as if I had ever had a lot of experience with male attention that was positive, with the exception of Thrawn. So few had ever really made any sort of positive play for my affections that I didn't actually recognize it for what it was and I had been with Thrawn for so long it had never occurred to me to even

consider anyone else but I had to admit I liked Ged. What I didn't want to admit was my body had also liked what he had done and I certainly didn't like the guilt that flooded me when I thought about this.

I sighed and looked at the chrono. I had fifteen minutes to get dressed so that I could sit through a dinner which I knew would be uncomfortable and awkward for me. Suddenly frustrated beyond all belief I threw the spanner in my hand across the room and swore loudly. Then because I didn't really have a choice I got up and headed to my quarters to get cleaned up so that I could sit between two men who both had the capacity, it seemed, to make my heart race.

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When I entered the small, private dining room all conversation stopped and all eyes turned to look at me, as well they should. I had taken extra care to pick out a dress that was both flattering and revealing yet tasteful at the same time. I had made sure my make up was perfect and styled my hair in a way that was coquettish and pretty. If I was going to be hunted I might as well look the part, I had thought angrily at the time but as I walked into the room I wondered if maybe it was simply to show Thrawn what he had and Ged what he could not.

"Miss Gabriel, here you are at last, we thought perhaps you had gotten lost." Ged said, "I was just about to send a search party out after you."

I tilted my head to one side and smiled. "Admiral, you should know by now that it takes time for a woman to change from grease pit monkey to presentable dinner companion."

Thrawn arched an eyebrow in my direction but said nothing.

"Well," said Ged, "The results were worth waiting for. That dress is quite ... stunning." He managed.

"Thank you." I replied failing not to blush. Thrawn didn't miss this either.

"Miss Gabriel had a very adept dress maker on Coruscant." Thrawn said.

I smiled at him and nodded. "It was one of the advantages of working for Lord Vader and being based in the Imperial palace. Dressing up was required by the Emperor so the appropriate clothing was provided." I explained.

"Well," said Ged, "Whatever the reason I am more than grateful that you are here to brighten things up."

I inclined my head and took his offered hand so he could show me to my seat. Grateful that Cati's dresses still served me well.

Once I had been seated everyone else took their places so that at the Head of the table was Ged, despite being a lower rank than Thrawn it was his ship, I sat to his left and Thrawn to his right. Next to me was seated Gilad Pellaeon, the *Chimaera's* captain and next to Thrawn sat Benjamin Morrish, the captain of the *Virulent*. Once the aperitif had been poured and beautiful plates of tastefully arranged appetizers set down on the table, Ged toasted to the Empire and the meal began.

One of the finer things about being asked to dine at the Admiral's table was the food. It was almost always excellent, especially when compared to the standard chow that was served in the regular mess. The meal was perfectly served by silent junior

officers who wore their finest uniform complete with white gloves. Over the actual meal the conversation was kept fairly light, mostly by Thrawn who deftly steered it in the direction he wanted despite Ged's attempts to pull it in other directions. It was like watching two alpha males vie for territory and it would have been amusing had it not been for what had occurred earlier. Instead it just made me feel uncomfortable and guilty. The two captains joined in when it was appropriate and when I was asked I offered my opinion. It was pleasant until desert when Corellian spice cake was served. I stared at the beautifully decorated slice of cake and glanced at Thrawn, then as politely as I could I ignored it. After about two minutes this aroused curiosity especially as everyone else at the table seemed delighted with the desert choice but were waiting for me to go first.

"Is there a problem with the desert?" Ged asked, "Our chef is trained to make it to the high standards I'm sure you have become accustomed to." There was reproach in his voice.

"I'm sure it's lovely but I can't eat Corellian Spice cake," I said, "I have an adverse reaction to it."

Ged cocked his head to one side, "Is that so? How unusual." He motioned for one of the servers to come and remove the offending plate and I could tell from his manner that he was unimpressed. He had thought I would be delighted by this rare treat and he was disappointed in my reaction.

"Miss Gabriel was very nearly killed when she ate from a Corellian Spiced cake that had been poisoned while on board Lord Jerec's ship working for me a few years ago," Thrawn said quietly, explaining what I had not wanted to.

Ged looked at Thrawn and then to me. I nodded to confirm what Thrawn had said, "It was not an experience I ever wish to relive," I said quietly, glancing under my lashes at Thrawn.

"No I dare say not. Was anyone else affected?" Ged asked, looking from Thrawn to me.

I shook my head, "The cake had been laced with glow-spice which doesn't have an adverse effect on most people. I am very allergic to glow-spice, I was the intended target."

"Why would anyone wish to harm you?" Captain Pellaeon asked gently, genuinely shocked.

I gave a slight shrug, I didn't wish to get into it.

"She was the unfortunate target of someone who wanted to attack me." Thrawn interjected, "It was hoped that by ending her life while on my watch I would come into disfavour with Lord Vader and the Emperor."

Gilad Pellaeon shook his head. "Such an act is the work of a coward," he said, "I hope that the person responsible was caught."

"He met with a suitable end Captain," I said quietly. "However, one of the unfortunate side effects of this is that I cannot face Corellian Spiced cake, no matter how well it is prepared. I apologise, meant no insult to your chef Admiral Larsen." I shuddered slightly at the memory of that incident which had very nearly claimed my life.

"No need to apologise my dear," Ged said, "Allow me to have the kitchen prepare something else for you? It would be rude for us to eat while you sit there without anything."

I knew if I refused it would be an insult so I nodded. "A small bowl of fruit would be most welcome, thank you."

Satisfied that he had somehow made everything better Ged nodded at the young man waiting by the wall and the request went out to the kitchen, five minutes later I was staring at one of the most beautiful displays of cut fruit I had ever seen.

"I must admit, Miss Gabriel, I am grateful that the attempt on your life was unsuccessful, you are delightful company for a group of men who have long forgotten what it is like to be in the presence of non military females." Gilad Pellaeon said with a smile, his eyes met mine and I felt the sudden and unexpected pang of tears in my eyes. His open kindness and acceptance of my strange place in this Imperial man's world was unusual and I was touched by it. He was a good deal older than Ged or Captain Morrish and his looks made him seem older than Thrawn as well. I had heard many good things about him but our paths had never actually crossed.

"Thank you Captain. Though to be honest it was one in a long series of moments where I wasn't sure I'd live."

Thrawn chuckled. "Miss Gabriel has a rather nasty habit of facing death on a regular basis, luckily for us she also seems to be blessed with as many lives as that of a bearded jax."

"I suppose that was a plus for someone working under Lord Vader." Captain Morrish said.

I grinned. "I guess you could say that."

Captain Pellaeon smiled, "So Miss Gabriel, I'm curious. What was it like working as a civilian under Lord Vader?"

"It was a very interesting experience, Captain," I said diplomatically.

Thrawn smiled enigmatically and Ged laughed.

"Well what do you expect me to say, Admiral Larsen?" I asked him point blank. "We all know what Lord Vader was like, his temper and his passion were... legendary. People still talk about him in whispers as if conjuring up his name will suddenly bring a bad case of force choke. He was a complicated man with a very complicated past that haunted him until the day he died. Bureaucrats hated him and the men who served under him both feared and loved him at the same time." I toyed with my napkin ring. "I, for my part, admired him however working for him was anything but easy."

"Yet you survived where so many didn't, how did you manage to avoid his wrath?" Morrish asked.

I shrugged. "I really don't know." I answered, "Though it wasn't so much that I survived his wrath but rather dodged it more often than not."

"Perhaps he simply enjoyed having you around." Ged suggested with a smile. "After all you are quite delightful company."

I glanced at Thrawn who held my gaze a moment too long with a stare that held questions in it I didn't feel like dealing with. I shook my head ever so slightly then I replied, "I did my job well. If there was more than that he never elaborated," I said, "What I do know is that he is missed and not just by me."

"That's true." Captain Morrish replied. "I often hear my men speak of him positively despite the fact that he could be an absolute monster."

I nodded, "He was often cruel and difficult. He could be very sarcastic and more often than not his temper ruled him. His reputation as difficult was well deserved. I do not defend him on that but he was also brilliant and brave. He would often personally lead his pilots in a battle and he never shied away from facing danger. He was very smart and he was also very good with his hands, building things and with general mechanics."

"Did he know he had children?" Captain Pellaeon asked.

"He knew he had a son, though not until after the battle Yavin but that he also had a daughter? No, I believe was unknown to him," I said.

"It must have been a terrible shock for him to discover he had a son and that his son was a traitor." Morrish said.

I drew a deep breath. "You know, I don't think he saw it that way." I replied.

"Oh?" Ged asked.

"He was proud of Luke," I said quietly.

"Really?" Morrish asked, "If that had been my boy I'd have skinned him alive."

I smiled. "Well Lord Vader would never have admitted this but sometimes when he spoke about his son, which was rare, there was a sense of pride in his voice. I mean, the boy was raised on Tatooine as a moisture farmer and ended up being one of the rebellion's biggest heroes, as a father how could he not be proud," I said remembering some of the conversations we had had about Luke. "I think that he felt it was one of the only worthwhile things he had accomplished as Anakin Skywalker and it was a link to the woman he had loved and lost."

Thrawn smiled at me and it warmed my heart. "One of the more unusual things about Miss Gabriel is her rather amazing ability to see the best in even the worst of people and situations."

I shrugged, dropping my gaze to the table. "You kind of have to be like that growing up on Tatooine," I said with a shrug.

"I heard that this Skywalker was a bit of a trouble maker." Morrish said after a moment, "And someone I knew who had been on Endor commented that he apparently whined a lot. That doesn't sound like you at all, my dear."

I laughed looking at Thrawn who could not prevent the smile that lit up his face, "I assure you captain I can do my fair share of whining when I have to. It's a pity Lord Vader is no longer around he would have given you a long list of my whines and rants."

Thrawn chuckled and Ged glanced sharply at the two of us. We had just shared a private joke and he hadn't liked it much. I sighed inwardly at the fragility of the male ego. Ged caught my eyes and held my gaze. "You must find working under the Grand Admiral here to be a refreshing change then."

"How so, Admiral?" I asked blushing without wanting to. If the other two men at the table caught his insinuation they made no sign of it. Thrawn's eyebrow twitched just a notch.

Ged smiled and with a nod to Thrawn said, "Well if Vader was passionate, unpredictable and cruel, Grand Admiral Thrawn must be the exact opposite if all I have

been led to believe by Palpatine about his favoured tactician is true, which means working for him must be quite... uneventful."

There was a barb hidden deep within the truth of Ged's words. I glanced at Thrawn whose features gave nothing away. He simply sat, his expression neutral, his manner attentive and like everyone else waited for me to answer.

"Well, I would not say that working for the Grand Admiral is uneventful, after all he is the leader of the Empire at the moment," I said sweetly, sending a little barb right back, "And to be honest, everyone I work for and with offers me new and interesting challenges, Admiral. Each have their own peculiarities and their own positive points. Working under the Grand Admiral is very different from my time spent working with Lord Vader. The two working relationships are nothing alike and comparing them would be like comparing living on Tatooine with living on Naboo. I would also not say that the Grand Admiral lacks passion or emotion, he simply has a much better control than Lord Vader ever did, you just need to know what topics to bring up to engage his ...enthusiasm. Working with and for these two men has given me experiences that are entirely different, one is neither better nor worse than the other, just different and each brings its own unique lessons to bear. However, I can tell you that working with the Grand Admiral is far less stressful than under Lord Vader's somewhat volatile command."

Captain Pellaeon smiled. "Bravo, Miss Gabriel, that was a very good answer."

I beamed at him, absolutely liking this man who seemed to have taken a liking to me.

"Well, it seems you have a fan Grand Admiral," Ged said lightly but his words were heavy, weighted.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow and smiled enigmatically, his face and expression remaining unreadable. "Indeed, Miss Gabriel is not shy about stating where her loyalties lie. Her openness is a trait I have very much come to appreciate," he said and I inwardly sighed. Whatever undercurrents Ged and I had brought to the table with us had not gone unnoticed by Thrawn.

"I have noticed that she is not shy about a great many things." Ged remarked. "She is a remarkable force of nature."

I glared at both men and said, "I am sitting right here. Stop talking about me as if I were not in the room."

"My apologies, my dear." Thrawn said, "Although Admiral Larsen is correct in his observation, you are indeed a force of nature."

I shook my head and let out a noisy sigh but before I could further the conversation in its very odd direction Ged raised his glass. "To interesting work environments and forces of nature then," he said and everyone sipped politely to the toast, hoping the moment and all its underlying awkwardness would pass quickly.

"So am I to gather that you actually liked working for Lord Vader then?" Morrish asked, coming back to a topic he assumed was safe.

I nodded, "Very much so. I mourned his passing greatly, I still do," I said honestly. "But I can't go back and change what has happened so now we all need to look forward and I cannot think of a better man to lead the Empire into a new age than the Grand Admiral here."

For a moment there was stillness as everyone turned to Thrawn, leaving me grateful to be out of the spotlight for the time being.

"How fortunate you are Grand Admiral to have such a loyal member of the Empire working for you." Ged added. "If only we were all so lucky to have such unadulterated admiration from such a beautiful woman."

Captain Pellaeon chuckled, "It would appear that you have an admirer my dear."

"It's a burden I think I can live with," I said with a grin.

Ged smiled, "I find that as a naval officer I must steal little pleasure where I can. Being in the company of beautiful woman is one such pleasure, would you gentlemen not agree?"

There was a consensus of nodding and I blushed again, unused to being the center of such scrutiny. Thrawn glanced at me and the second our eyes met, desire mingled with guilt shot through me. I had to fight the urge to look away in haste for fear he would see something was wrong, or see what had happened between Ged and me earlier written all over my face.

"You will have to forgive Miss Gabriel she is rather enthusiastic in her praise and very passionate in her ideals, both are admirable traits of the young and somewhat naive," Thrawn said with a smile, his eyes never leaving mine. I bit back any retort I might have had about him calling me young and naïve, we'd been down this road many times before. He waited a second then continued. "But the sentiment is not unappreciated." He held my gaze a second more then looked at each of the others seated at the table in turn. "I do not joke when I say that winning back the ground we have lost will be no easy feat. The New Republic has gained much respect since they took Coruscant from the Empire and while they are still experiencing teething problems, many worlds now choose to align with them rather than stay loyal to an Empire they see and feel is past its prime and filled with nothing more than power hungry petty crooks. Isard did not do us any favours with her decision to poison Coruscant with the virus that slaughtered millions. We will have to work hard to regain our standings but I believe it can be done."

Everyone nodded to this but Thrawn wasn't finished, "I understand that we both have untried crews and that with the destruction of the Executor at Endor we lost far too many mid level experienced naval officers and crew but as Miss Gabriel said, the past is the past and we must look forward. In doing so we must be patient but firm in our resolve and training of these green recruits. But this is not enough, we lack the numbers needed which is why I am hopeful that with Merlyn's help I will be able to local a cloning facility and boost our numbers quickly enough that the New Republic will not know what hit it."

There was a sudden, tense silence at the table as Thrawn's words sunk in. It was Ged who broke it.

"Clones?" He said carefully. "Do you really feel that is necessary?"

"I do," Thrawn replied coolly. "Do the math, we have neither this ships nor the manpower to retake the territories lost and while I think it is possible with stealth and guile to do a great deal of damage to the New Republic without the numbers to hold it, this will not be enough. Aside from press-ganging able body beings into naval service I know of no other suitable way to boost numbers without affecting moral severely. It has

been my experience that forced conscription does not make a better military might, it simply boosts numbers and adds to problems."

"And do you have a source for these clones?"

Thrawn's mouth twitched in a slight smile at Ged's question. "Not yet Admiral, but I am hopeful."

"And in the meantime I suppose that means I will get little to no sleep due to all these crazy drills you keep running." I muttered. My comment had the desired effect breaking the heavy tension that had built up between Ged and Thrawn, making everyone smile.

"Grand Admiral if I may, as we are speaking of passions, I have heard that you have a great interest in art." Captain Morrish asked, while the desert plates were removed, a bowl of fresh fruit was laid down and a very good stim'caf was served.

"That's an understatement." I blurted with a smile. "The Grand Admiral is probably one of the most knowledgeable art historians I have ever met."

"Really?" Ged asked looking at Thrawn with interest. "I would not have thought art to be something that would interest such a brilliant strategist as yourself."

"I study art as a means to an end, Admiral," Thrawn said giving me a smile. "I find that by learning about a race's art and culture one can learn a great deal about how they think and, by inference, how they will act."

"So you use art as a form of tactical espionage?" Ged asked. "As opposed to just enjoying it as the rest of us do?"

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly, "That is one way to put it, I suppose, though I would not have described it so crassly," he said, his tone now cool and distanced. "Loving art is nothing to be ashamed of but when one understands the nuances that go into creating the art, the architecture and so on of a particular culture then one has a far greater insight into that culture. I do not mean that by looking at a work of art from a particular peoples I can discern all there is to know but the insights I gain help me to form a larger picture of who and what I am up against and every bit of information goes in to helping with a strategic solution to a problem presented."

"The late emperor was also an art connoisseur," I said, "He had vast stores of priceless works tucked away where only he could enjoy them but I think he just liked having them."

"Palpatine was not terribly fond of sharing," Thrawn said evenly.

"That sounds as though you and our late Emperor did not get along," Ged said carefully.

"Palpatine and I often did not see eye to eye, Admiral, but that made our working relationship extremely interesting. He found me to be infuriating because I was one of the very few people who would tell him exactly what I thought of his plans when he asked for my opinion. When I felt he was wrong or making a mistake I did not try to pander to his ego I told him what I thought. It was, I believe, a sort of game for him but there were days when I sensed he did not enjoy it much. He did not like being told he was wrong and he disliked being shown he was wrong even more."

"So do you think he was a bad leader?" Morrish asked quietly.

"Not at all Captain, on the contrary. One only has to see the state of disrepair the Empire fell into after his unfortunate and untimely demise to see just how well he ruled.



He was a brilliant statesman and a consummate politician who not only had the love of the people on his side when he first took on the role as Emperor but also had an incredible power, one which I have no personal understanding of, but that helped him rule absolutely."

"You are not force sensitive then, sir?" Morrish asked.

"No." Thrawn said.

"What about the rest of your people?" Ged asked, genuinely curious.

Thrawn shrugged slightly. "To the best of my knowledge no Chiss has ever been a force user but that is not to say there has never been one who could use or sense it. Such powers would have been seen as weakness among my people and would have bred imbalance in our delicate ruling system. Therefore anyone possessing such powers would more likely have kept quiet about it."

"Weakness? How so?" Ged stared at Thrawn as if to challenge him. I wasn't sure if Ged knew that Thrawn was aware of Ged's own force sensitivity.

"The Chiss rely on their power to think logically and clearly. Our strengths come from this, not from some strange power that seems to be about as predictable as a Tatooine sandstorm," he said with an arrogant wave of his hand, "While I understand it can give the user a great strength, as well as some other unusual talents, I do not see it as a tactical advantage necessarily. I think it could easily be something that detracts from a person's ability to think on their feet or with a clear mind, especially if a person who held this power was untrained and used it wildly and without thought. It seems to me that when you rely on any one tool for long enough you become so dependent on that tool. You lose the ability to function without it. Palpatine had exactly that problem, he was so reliant on the force that he utterly failed to see how the simple power of love could over throw him."

"So you are saying that love is stronger than the force?" Ged pressed.

I glanced at Thrawn, catching his eye, wondering how he would answer this. He held my gaze a fraction of a second too long and smiled slightly. "Yes," He replied quite simply. "Love over came everything else when Vader killed the Emperor rather than watch his son die at his master's hands."

"I had no idea you were such a romantic," Ged said in a bemused manner, "I can only suspect that Miss Gabriel here is in part responsible."

All eyes turned to me and I tried to keep my expression as neutral as possible, unsure of who knew what and how much about my relationship with Thrawn but I could not prevent the soft blush that coloured my cheeks, all I could do was ignore it and hope that everyone else would as well.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. "I would not call it romantic to have the ability to see how a very human emotion influences and, more often than not, wins out over everything else time and time again." He countered, then glancing at me he said, "I also do not underestimate the power of love to corrupt and destroy either. I have seen firsthand what love turned into something else can do to people and the results are often devastating." He added casually. "Would you have me believe that you have never come under the influence of love and have been positively or even negatively swayed by it?" He asked neatly sidestepping Ged's underlying implication.

"I have indeed had my share of that particular folly, Grand Admiral." Ged smiled,

looking at me as if to say something more. "However some women are worth the effort, don't you think?" I looked away from Ged's gaze feeling a renewed flush of heat and guilt mingled into one. I bit my lip and that small tell tale sign did more damage than anything else. I felt the weight of Thrawn's curiosity rest on me, the unasked questions which no one else would notice flickered briefly through his eyes.

"I think," I said carefully, "That the biggest love of any Naval officer's life is his ship." I glanced at the two captains seated at the table and smiled when they nodded in agreement. "I think that any woman who falls for an Imperial Navy lifer is more of a mistress than a wife in any true sense of the words because space and duty will always come first, as it should." I allowed myself a smile, "It's a rare relationship that can survive the long separations, the constant fear of death and the never ending presence of that other, more demanding, space worthy, woman. I do not think it is an easy life but I do believe it is a rewarding one."

"You have a remarkable insight into the mind of military men." Pellaeon said with a smile. "We do indeed love our ships and both duty and space are often referred to as our mistresses by lonely wives and girlfriends."

"My father was a spacer, Captain. He flew transports and then when he settled down he owned a docking bay on Tatooine. I grew up with ships and pilots, I knew how to fix an engine before I was legally allowed to fly and I could fly before I was legally allowed to do so." I grinned, "I learned at an early age that a man with stars in his blood was about as tameable as the desert winds."

"That sounds like a rather lovely way to grow up" Pellaeon said with a smile.

I laughed. "You're one of the very few who have ever said that and yes I suppose it was though at the time I did not realise what I had." I paused for a second and then dared to ask a personal question of the man seated next to me. "Are you married captain?" I asked.

"Only to my ship but I certainly do enjoy the occasional foray into the world of female company often enough to be well aware that women are far more dangerous than any enemy I have ever faced and twice as devious to boot, yet we men do love you, we can't help ourselves, you are a delicious distraction and the lie we tell ourselves about how we don't actually need you is a delicate one to be sure," he said with a laugh that somehow managed to clear the tension which had slowly been gathering in the room.

After this the conversation turned to other, lighter subjects and once again I became an observer rather than a participant and was more than grateful to be out of the spotlight. When all the desert dishes had been cleared and no one wanted anything else to eat or drink from the servers, they were dismissed. I politely excused myself before the usual brandy and cigar moment came not wishing to be an intruder in what was traditionally a man's moment to talk shop without the flirty distractions of female company. Unlike some women I had known in my life I did not feel the need to be a part of every single thing in this Imperial world. Men needed their secrets just as women needed to have their mysteries. Thrawn, before anyone else could, got and politely pulled my chair for me, offering me his hand as he did so.

"I wish you a pleasant evening, my dear," he said and the others murmured the same sentiments. He escorted me to the door and very quietly whispered in my ear in Cheunh before I left the room, "I think you and I need to have a little chat before I head

back to the *Chimaera*." He wasn't angry, not yet but there was a tension in his words that let me know he wasn't overly impressed by this evening performance either and that he had questions. All I could do was nod, smile, wish everyone a good evening and then leave.

I was tired, tense and more than happy to escape the testosterone filled room. The conversational fencing and Ged's earlier sudden declaration of open hunting season on my affections had left me restless as well as on edge. Despite what Ged might think, Thrawn's instincts were well honed when it came to me and my moods and the strange tension which had manifested several times throughout the dinner had alerted him to something going on, the fact he felt we needed to talk only jammed this home further. He would eventually come and look for me to explain and that was a moment in time I hoped to avoid for as long as I could so I decided to try and relax with a nice hot bath, a glass of brandy from the bottle I kept with me. The hot water and the fine brandy helped to ease some of the tension that had settled in my shoulders. By the time I was done soaking I reckoned that the dinner must also be over and sooner rather than later Thrawn would show up.

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Waiting for an argument to happen wasn't much fun, I thought. I changed into a comfortable dress and settled on the couch with a book in hand but I didn't get much reading done. When the door chime sounded I nearly jumped out of my skin before waving my hand, using the force to open it. Thrawn walked in and removed his jacket; his way of letting me know that what ever went on, what ever would be discussed it was without the formality of his rank. I refilled my brandy glass and poured a second for Thrawn then got up and offered it to him. He took it from my hand without a word, touched his glass to mine and we drank in silence.

"Nice dress. Not quite as nice as the one you had on earlier but still..." he said after what felt like an eternity. His eyes swept up and down my body.

"I was told it was a formal dinner, that is the only real formal dress I have here, everything else I own is on Nirauan," I said defensively, avoiding his eyes and concentrating on my drink which had suddenly become incredibly interesting.

"Probably a good thing since I've seen some of those dresses and given the reaction the one you had on this evening caused I would have hated to see what would happen if you had worn one of those." His words were tart and annoyed me.

"So you'd prefer me to dress down and not look my best?" I asked sipping my drink, glancing at him from over the rim of my glass. I refrained from reminding him that I was here because of he had all but insisted I come here instead of returning to Nirauan or staying on Tatooine.

He reached over and caressed my face, "I'd prefer that other men did not look at you as though you were not wearing a dress at all."

I opened my mouth to reply then closed it again, then said with a shrug. "I can't help what men think." I replied. "This includes you."

He sighed and sat down, gesturing for me to sit next to him. He sipped his drink thoughtfully and I watched, noticing he looked more tired, perhaps more stressed now

than he had as I had left the dining room. I wondered what had transpired after I had gone. Both Ged and Thrawn could be incredibly bloody minded when they wanted and I didn't really want to be around when the two of them locked horns.

"I heard you spent most of the day working in your ship, is everything in order?" He asked after a few moments of quiet had passed between us.

"The ship is fine," I nodded. "You know me sometimes I just need to tinker."

"That's usually a sign that you're bored, troubled or unhappy though." He countered, contemplating his glass and its contents.

"Not this time," I said which was mostly true.

"I take it you heard I will be here for a day or so more."

"Yes, the Admiral mentioned that earlier."

There was another long silence between us and I glanced up to find him staring intently at me.

"What?" I asked with a frown.

"Is there something wrong, Tekari?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I detected a rather tense undercurrent at that dinner this evening and it hasn't dissipated any," he said carefully.

I nodded, "It's nothing." I lied. I had no idea how to tell him about what had happened in the docking bay and it was making me miserable. I swirled the brandy in my glass and took another gulp.

Thrawn watched me for a moment then asked, "Did you and Larsen have a fight about something?"

I glanced at him too quickly and then looked away, shaking my head. He frowned and reached to stroke my face but I pulled back from his touch. He watched me for a long, difficult moment then asked, "Have I done something to offend you Merlyn?"

This time I met his eyes. "No, of course not. It's just..." I began but I stopped unable to find the words to tell him what I knew I should. I didn't want to lie but I was confused and he had a jealous streak which I didn't want to bring forward.

"If it is not me then what is going on because I know that something is on your mind." He asked carefully, "You're acting as though you've been caught skulking around where you shouldn't have been. Did you do something you were not supposed to on board Larsen's ship? Is that why I detected such a peculiar tension going on this evening?"

"No!" I said crossly. "You know me better than that!"

"Yes," Thrawn said archly, "I do and that's why I am asking."

"No, I have not done anything!" I replied hotly.

He sat back on the couch and nodded, "So then what was going on at the dinner this evening? The strange innuendos, the furtive glances...."

I huffed out my breath, feeling the weight of my guilt as well as my anger at Ged for placing me in this situation, finished my brandy in a single gulp then reached for the bottle but Thrawn, placing his hand over mine, stopped me.

"Okay, now I know there is something going on because you only drink like this when there is something on your mind you don't want to talk about or deal with. Out

with it, Tekari, no more secrets, you know what happens when you bottle things up." He commanded.

I sighed and was about to pour out the whole story to him when the door-chime to my quarters rang. I frowned. It was far too late for casual visitors. I waited a second to see if whoever it was would go away but the chime rang again.

"If it was for me they would have reached me by comm." Thrawn said, "You'd better answer it, it may be important."

I made a face and got up, opened the door and sucked in my breath. "Admiral Larsen....," I started as I came face to face with Ged who was holding a bottle of wine in his hand.

"How many times must I tell you to call me Ged when we are alone?" He teased.

"Not enough, obviously," I mumbled, "What can I do for you Admiral?"

"I thought I would see if you felt like a night cap Merly," he said with a grin I was sure he meant to be both boyishly charming and seductive all at the same time, "Since dinner was a pretty stuffed shirt affair."

"Thank you but I'm afraid that's not a very good idea right now."

He frowned. "Why not, I thought we could continue where we left off earlier."

I bit my lip and closed my eyes knowing that Thrawn, who was seated just out of the line of sight, could hear every word. "No thank you," I said more firmly. I had his entry blocked to my quarters but he decided to ignore my body language which said please go away and moved past me to walk into the room. He was so focused on me that he did not see Thrawn at first.

"Ged, you need to go....," I tried to stop him but he just smiled and reached out to touch my face but then stopped half way when he saw Thrawn.

"Good evening Admiral Larsen." Thrawn said, his voice was frosty.

Ged's expression changed from playful to serious in an instant. "Sir!" He said in his crispest military manner. "Grand Admiral, I didn't realise you were still here. I was under the impression you had returned to the *Chimaera* with Captain Pellaeon." There was a rebuke under the formal tone and both men knew it.

"Indeed, though as you can see this is not the case." Thrawn replied.

"Yes sir. May I ask what kept you behind? Nothing serious I hope?"

"I have business to discuss with Miss Gabriel in private. Why are you here at such a late hour?" Thrawn said coolly and glanced at me in a way that let me know he was definitely starting to get the wrong idea.

Ged looked from Thrawn to me and then back to Thrawn again. The tension which had eased somewhat earlier on had returned and somehow managed to double. I wanted to crawl under my bed and hide there. "I wished to let Miss Gabriel know that the requisition she placed with the Quartermaster has been filled and set by her ship for pick up." It was a lie and I frowned as soon as I heard it, Thrawn who had been watching my face knew this and his own expression darkened slightly.

"I am sure this news will be of great relief," Thrawn said.

This was something that Ged could have told me by comm. and showing up at my quarters this late at night with a bottle of wine was not exactly proper procedure.

For a moment there was absolute stillness then uncharacteristically Thrawn looked at me and spoke in his native tongue. "Do you care to tell me what is going on

here?" That streak of jealousy he kept well hidden, well in check, the one I had really hoped to avoid was beginning to rear its ugly head.

"There's nothing going on and you're being rude." I chided back in Cheunh. I felt the spike of his surprise and anger like a slap and the tension in my quarters ramped up another notch.

For another ugly moment there was silence and when I looked at Ged, he understood this was not a good place to be. "Merlyn," he interrupted, "There are some unfinished reports that need to be dealt with before you depart on your mission. I would appreciate it if you would meet with me to deal with them at your earliest convenience."

"Yes sir," I said quietly. "I'll get to it first thing."

Again there was another lengthy silence and then Thrawn asked coldly, "Will there be anything else Admiral Larsen?"

Ged looked at Thrawn but kept his expression neutral. "No sir," he replied.

"Then that will be all." There was no mistaking the curt and not so polite dismissal in Thrawn's words and I watched as Ged's jaw clenched for a second. He had a lot of respect for Thrawn but this was his ship and he did not like his authority being usurped, especially over me. However, deciding that perhaps this was not the time or the place for any sort of showdown he gave both me and Thrawn a curt, polite nod then exited my quarters and left us to our own silence. It was a long and uncomfortable one which eventually Thrawn broke.

"Do I have a reason to be concerned now, Tekari?" He asked. "Because what I am sensing between you and that man wasn't present when you and I met this morning."

I felt a stab of desire at the memory of our love making from early in the morning. It had been a sweet and gentle reunion which had been, above all, uncomplicated.

"No!" I said fiercely then stammered, changing my answer, "Maybe...damn it... I don't know, I don't think so!" I stamped my foot and turned away from him, pacing towards the wall a few meters away. I heard him follow me but ignored him until, frustrated, he grabbed my arm and spun me around to face him.

"What in Da'han's name is going on here?" he hissed.

"Nothing!" I said far more loudly than I had intended. He didn't believe me even though it really was the truth.

His eyebrow arched sharply. "Oh really? Well it certainly does not feel like nothing." I wavered and he pushed. "That man shows up at your quarters unannounced at an inappropriate time, with a bottle of wine and wants to, how did he put it, finish what you started earlier and you tell me it's nothing?" He shook his head as if he couldn't quite get a grasp on the thoughts running through his head, "Out with it! Now! No more of this nonsense."

"It's nothing! He kissed me! That's all!" I blurted.

Thrawn let go of my arm as though it had burnt him and the sudden silence between us was like a kick in the gut.

"Za'ar?"

"Ged Larsen kissed you?" His words came out quiet and precise. "And you call this nothing."

I nodded.

"Is this another Zaarin incident?" He asked carefully.

I shook my head, "No, it was not like that at all."

Thrawn looked at me, his glowing, red eyes drilled into my soul like burning needles. "So this man kissed you but you don't feel threatened by him and it wasn't totally against your will, what does that mean exactly?"

"It doesn't mean anything," I said petulantly. "And before you totally get the wrong idea I certainly did not initiate it either."

"Before I get the wrong idea....? Oh my dear, I think it is a bit late for that."

"Then rethink your ideas because there is nothing going on."

"That's not what I am sensing. If it was so meaningless you would not be having this much difficulty talking about it."

I sighed, "He came to see me before diner. At first it was just conversation but then it got all strange, before I knew what was going on he was kissing me and then saying that I should tell you that you have competition for my affections."

"And do I?" He asked coldly.

I paused just a little too long before shaking my head. "No."

He frowned just a little, looking more hurt than angry. "Do you have feelings for this man?"

I drew a breath so deep it made my lungs shudder. "Maybe, no, I don't know," I said miserably. "I didn't think so but I've been stuck here on this tub for over six weeks and up until this morning not heard a single word from you, he's been kind to me, I thought we were just friends and...but...I don't know. I didn't think so until...." I stopped before I dug this miserable hole any bigger.

"He kissed you and it stirred you up," he said softly, more to himself than to me. "Do I no longer..."

"This has nothing to do with you Za'ar," I said wishing I didn't feel so confused. "I would think that after this morning you wouldn't have to ask this question!"

"Then explain to me why all of a sudden I feel as though I do," he said, "What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know what the hell is going on, I didn't expect this from him, and it came out of the blue. He must have misinterpreted signals from me because I sure as hell didn't intend for him to think I was free for the taking. But to be fair he didn't actually know about you and I and he wasn't lying when he told me that...I wanted to tell him but..."

An impatient wave of Thrawn's hand cut me off mid sentence. "He misinterpreted? I somehow find it hard to believe that a man as clever Ged Larsen would manage to misinterpret signals of that kind over a period of what, six weeks?" He snapped. "You must have been...."

"I must have been...?" I interrupted loudly, "I did nothing wrong!" I yelled, realising that the more I protested my innocence the worse it all sounded, but his accusation that I was somehow to blame annoyed me. "Stop insinuating that this is all my fault!"

"If that is the case then why are you acting as if you have something to be guilty about?" He asked, his cool logic infuriating me.

"I am not!" I shot back, knowing full well I was, "I had no idea what he was feeling and I certainly wasn't giving him mixed signals! I don't know why he had to make it so complicated!" I yelled.

Thrawn made a small gesture with his shoulder and looked away from me for a moment, as if were deciding something. "Well Tekari, he didn't make it complicated; you do that all by yourself. Perhaps he simply gave you a choice which you did not know you had before."

"It's not a choice I wanted or sought out," I snapped back sullenly.

"Then what do you want? Because if it is to settle down in a house on a nice planet someplace and lead a normal life with me as your mate by your side I will tell you right now that is not going to happen any time soon." Now he was angry. "I do not have to tell you how difficult things are going to get once this campaign begins in full. I give you as much of my free time as I can, if that is not enough then I don't know what else to do," He paused for a moment to study my face then said, "Do you see the possibility of that sort of a life with Ged Larsen?"

I looked at him with wide eyes, "I'm completely freaked out about a single kiss, I feel guilty because a little part of me enjoyed but you... you already have him and me living together?" I asked in disbelief, "Now who is making a big deal out of this? It was just a kiss not sex, not a pledge of marriage or anything else!" I was right and he knew it but it didn't matter and now once again we were fighting because of another man.

"Do you wish to sleep with him?" He asked calmly, as though he were asking if I wanted another drink.

I stared at him and wondered, just of a second if it was possible to love and hate all at the very same time. "I'm still trying to work through the fact that he is attracted to me, that he kissed me. I hadn't thought that far ahead but if you give me some time I might have an answer for you," I said nastily.

I watched the muscles of his jaw clench. Now I was winding him up, and some very small part of me was enjoying it as if I wanted him angry and jealous. Another part of me kept thinking that we were acting like idiots and this was all going to end very badly if someone didn't come to their sense very soon.

"You did not answer my original question; do you see the possibility of a life together with him?" He asked again, slowly, dangerously.

I shook my head, "No, the answer is no. In the space of five hours he's gone from being a simple friend to something I can't define. I like him, we get along and there are things about me he understands like what it means to use the force but he's not you and I never considered that this would happen. This was not something I planned."

"Planned!" He snorted, "You don't ever plan anything. You walk into situations and create chaos. If this was so unplanned then why do you act as though you have betrayed me."

"I am not acting as though I betrayed you! I am confused because I felt something other than fear and loathing. This wasn't like when Zaarin tried to rape me. It never occurred to me that another man would feel that way for me or could make me feel like that."

"Like what?"



"Like I was something more than just a glorified secretary, or a decorative feature to be bedded at one's convenience or someone's punching bag!" I snapped.

Thrawn looked at me sharply, "Is that how I make you feel? Because if that's the case you've had ample time to say something or walk away."

"No! Stop twisting my words!" I yelled at him. "He kissed me. I didn't ask him to, he just did it!" I said through clenched teeth. "Once. That was all. It took me by surprise and I reacted."

"I see," he said coldly. "One kiss is enough to change a world A'myshk'a, you and I both know that. How do I know that is not the case now?"

"I am bound to you." I protested, as if that was the answer to everything.

"Not in any official capacity," He replied coolly.

I looked into his eyes, grabbed his arm and pushed up the sleeve of his undershirt. "This says otherwise," I said, touching the bracelet around his wrist.

His head tilted to one side. "This has no meaning in the legal sense of the word."

His words stung even though I knew what he meant. "If it is so meaningless then why do you bother to wear it?" I spat.

"Merlyn, I pride myself on having almost infinite patience but you are eroding that swiftly," he said very quietly. "You know very well what I mean. You are not legally bound to me under any Dantassi laws which means you are still free to choose another mate should you wish to do so. The bracelet itself has great meaning for me otherwise I would not have accepted it from you, nor would I break regulations to wear it and you should know this."

"I see." I bit back. "Well I also bound myself to you in public with the blessing of the elder and you did not complain about it then but it was not legal or official because you won't ever allow this for whatever lame excuse I am still waiting to hear. While you made certain that you are unattainable to anyone else I am apparently still free for the taking and therefore an easy target to any predator that comes along!"

"There are valid reasons for this as you well know," he said coolly.

"No, I do not well know! You never give me a valid reason!" I snapped. "Always we do things your way; always you are the one dictating how everything between us goes. Everything is under your control all the time! We meet when you say, we have sex when it's convenient for you and our relationship is this huge secret I can't talk about! How is anyone else supposed to know I am off limits when I can't tell them I'm taken?" I yelled, "You've left me, by your own admission, free to pick and choose yet every time someone else gets close to me you totally freak out. You won't let me officially bind myself to you yet you act as though that is how I should behave. I'm not anything to you under any law anywhere. How the hell do you think that makes me feel? You cannot control me or who is attracted to me even though you try. You won't let me openly and legally bind to you so where does this leave me? You can't have it your way all the time."

I was right and my point was valid, I could see that in the expression on his face but he didn't give way, he was too angry. "So you are saying you welcomed the advances from Larsen?"

"No that is not what I am saying and you know this." I snarled. "How many times must I tell you there is no one else? How many ways can I say you are stuck with me

before you believe me? You need to get a grip on your jealousy? Stop twisting everything around, stop making this more confusing than it should be!"

"I am not the one who seems to be confused or uncertain about my feelings in the matter of our bond. It is you who seem to have some reservations. Jealousy has nothing to do with this."

Our eyes met and I held his stare. He was making me cross, "I do not have reservations." I told him. "And as for your feelings..." I shrugged, "You hide behind that Chiss cool and pretend nothing ever touches you but I know better, I've seen what happens when someone encroaches on your space. You are so jealous you can't even bear the thought of another man being interested in me let alone touch or kiss me so don't you dare tell me otherwise. You think you own me!"

"That is a lie." He growled, his voice low and angry as he walked towards me so that I had to back up until I came up against the wall. Leaning over me with one arm braced against the bulkhead at my back so that I could feel the warmth from his body and the heat of his bottled fury as he spoke. He was angry but for the first time since this whole discussion began I got the feeling he was not just angry with me but rather with something or someone else unrelated to the matter at hand, this was just an outlet for something bigger that had gotten under his skin.

"Is it?" I asked. "Then why do you accuse me of being unfaithful to you when you know it's not true, when I tell you everything that's going on?"

"Tell me everything? Since when? I practically have to use Imperial interrogation methods to get you to tell me what is on your mind!"

"Now you're just being mean," I said, "I was about to tell you what happened when the door chime rang, you were the one who told me to answer it remember?"

"Ah yes, well who knows what you were about to say," he said, "If you really did have nothing to hide, then you would not feel so reticent about telling me the truth about what the hell is going on between the two of you and you certainly would not be entertaining him so late at night in your private quarters."

"I did not invite him to come here tonight, in fact I was just as surprised as you were when he showed up and even had you not been here I still would have told him no!"

"Larsen does not strike me as a man who takes no for an answer."

I narrowed my eyes at him, "Then I would have dealt with him the same way I dealt with Zaarin but I am sure Ged would not have pushed things in that direction." I snapped, "Why are you so angry? Quit making this into an even bigger mess than it already seems to be. You're being a moron stop complicating everything." The moment the words were out of my mouth I knew I had pushed the wrong button and gone too far.

"Allow me to un-complicate it then," he said and without further warning, grasped my chin roughly with his forefinger and thumb and he kissed me. With his tongue and his lips he poured his anger into me and I fed off it as though I were starving. His jealousy and my guilt, along with our combined tempers, mingled to form a sort of madness that swept over the two of us in a way I had never experienced before. His kiss was brutal but I welcomed it, wanted it and he knew this by my reaction. When he drew back to stare at me I felt a subtle pause in time and space as though the galaxy

were waiting to see which side of some invisible crazy line that we were so dangerously close to crossing we would end up on. I stared into his face wishing he would stop this insanity, wanting him to wrap his arms around me and tell me all was forgiven that he understood and that it didn't matter but he did none of these things, he simply stared at me, his glowing red eyes burning with an emotion I wasn't sure I could read and certainly didn't like. For a moment we both wavered, then our eyes locked and he kissed me again with renewed savagery.

I should have stopped him but I didn't.

His kisses were possessive as well as unkind. There was a power to them and it took over everything else including common sense. I soaked it in, revelled in it, craved it and sent it back; showering him through the force with everything we were both feeling complicating the madness further still. It was terrible and I let it get completely out of control driving our actions until I had no idea what we were doing. It was as if all reason, all sense had flown out the airlock. Before I fully understood where this was headed, without words he hoisted me up and, with a deftness that comes only from practice, took me swiftly against the wall of my quarters claiming what he felt was his in the most cruel, powerful and passionate way he could and part of me welcomed it openly.

"A'mal'yn!" He snarled in my ear and pushed himself deeper into my body, "Mine!" he said in Cheunh.

I shut my eyes tightly. I wanted to tell him he was right and that I was his in every single sense of that word but he was too angry to listen to me. I knew him too well and he did not get this angry that often but when it did happen it was like a Hjal winter storm. It was unstoppable. There had to be more going on than just the flirtation with Ged to piss him off this much, I was sure this was not the only reason for Thrawn's mood but it was the easier to explain and the easiest for him to use. The only thing I could do was to hang on to him and ride it out.

Lifted up and supported by his arms in such a way that it gave him all the power, all of the say, I clung on tightly. I wrapped my legs around his hips and with one arm around his shoulders to hold on, snaked my other hand up behind his neck and threaded through his hair which I gripped far harder than necessary making him hiss in pain but he didn't pull away or stop what he was doing. In fact it only seemed to encourage him. Jealousy, anger and pain it was a terrible cocktail I knew all too well. I had seen the results before and they were never pretty, not ever.

This was not the first time we had been rough with each other, our combined passion seemed to bring out the worst in us both sometimes. It was almost as if we enjoyed it, though I am not sure either of us would have ever admitted it. We were so used to each other's bodies, we had made love so many times that even now in such an unkind and unloving manner I responded to him the only way I knew how, shivering with the desire he stirred up in me despite the brutality of the act. No one else could stir me up the way he could.

I silenced my voice by sinking my teeth into his shoulder, biting back any sounds that might have escaped to give away what was going on in this small space. When he was finished, his release a final thrust which slammed me back against the bulkhead wall, I felt my own body surrender and only then did I lift my head back to let my voice

cry out for him, for us, for all that we were but he covered my mouth with his hand, silencing me. For a moment, breathless, we stayed like that locked together but more further apart than I had ever known. I opened my eyes to stare into his face. When his eyes met mine I flinched from the hardness I saw in them and the moment hung between us precariously.

I should have said what was in my heart right then and there. I should have told him I loved him, that I was sorry about what I had said to him, that there was no one else in my life not now, not ever and that whatever had happened between Ged and me was only a fleeting, trivial thing, just a stolen kiss and nothing else. I should have told him these things out loud but instead, made dumb by the uncharacteristic rawness of his actions, I said nothing. I could only gaze into his eyes while he regarded me with the same stunned expression. What the hell had just happened? What the hell had we just done to each other?

As if he could read that question on my face he shook his head then abruptly lifted me away, separating us physically to set me on the ground. I leaned against the wall for support because my knees were shaking so badly I wasn't sure I could stand on my own. For a moment I watched a myriad of emotions flicker across his face, fear, self loathing and above all anger. He had let his emotions rule him and he had become a force of nature. His animal instincts had taken precedence over his logical common sense and he had become an alpha male predator protecting his territory and marking what was his when it had been threatened by a rival. That calm façade he always worked so hard to maintain had been shattered in an instant by me and I wondered if a part of him now hated me for it.

I also understood that while I had committed no real sin against our bond, I had simply, by my actions and my own sense of guilt, given him cause to question everything we were and he was a man who did not often have to deal with situations such as this. Never before had I done or said anything to make him so unsure of his place in my life in such an overt and obvious manner. And while he had often told me he did not think he was a jealous man by nature we both knew that where I was concerned this was not the case. I only had to recall the terrible fight we had had over Zaarin to know just how deep that particular emotion went. He did not like it and he did his best to deal with it but this time he had been pushed too far.

He had acted out of jealousy and anger but with his physical release those emotions had retreated allowing logic to come back to the forefront. A flash of self loathing shone briefly in his eyes then receded just as swiftly. I could see that he was furious with himself for this breach of decorum, this terrible loss of control, especially since I understood there had been something else driving him, some other reason for his uncharacteristic fury. He stepped away from me, sorted himself out, picked up his jacket and without a word performed a perfect military turn to walk away and leave me alone in my quarters, shaking, bewildered and aching with a myriad of emotions I did not know how to deal with.

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I don't know how long I sat on the floor of my room shaking from the aftermath of our insanity but eventually I got cold. To warm up again I showered, staying under the scalding water for a long time as if it could take away some of the sting of what had happened but it didn't. At some point during my shower I made up my mind what to do next, knowing no one would like it but I didn't much give a damn.

I dressed in comfortable, easy to move in clothes and then I sliced into the main system using old but still valid override codes from my time with Lord Vader. I was a little surprised that they still worked but didn't question my luck, and managed to download everything I would need without tripping any noticeable alarms. Then I packed everything I owned, which wasn't much, in a carry-all bag that was slung over my shoulder as I slipped out of my quarters. I thought I had managed to escape notice when I heard someone yell my name.

"Miss Gabriel!" A young voice shouted as I stalked down the corridor towards the small hanger where my ship was. "Miss Gabriel please...wait...I have a message for you from the Grand Admiral..."

I didn't stop and the young messenger had to run to catch up with me, waving what looked like an envelope in his hand. "Miss, he requested that I give ...." He started, holding out the envelope.

I flapped my hand abruptly at him in a Shut Up Right Now manner and he shut up instantly. "Let Admiral Larsen deal with it or better yet tell the Grand Admiral to shove it up his...." The young man's eyes widened significantly and I shook my head, biting off the comment on the tip of my tongue, "Oh never mind! Tell the Grand Admiral that what ever it is he has to say to me can wait until I return!" I snapped and kept on walking leaving a very flustered young man who could only stare at me still holding the hand written note in his hand. I was known for many things but being outright rude, up until now, had not been one of them. A tiny part of me felt bad, the rest of me just didn't care. No one else followed me, or came after me and by the time I had made it to the hanger bay where my ship was the *Virulent* was on battle alert. Another battle drill but this time I was not only awake for it, I welcomed it.

I wondered, as I sat in the pilot's seat of my ship and started the engine, if Thrawn and I would ever learn. I wondered if I would ever learn. As I watched all the onboard lights go green I shook my head, probably not, I thought. I seemed doomed to make the same mistakes over and over again. I punched in an access code and the hanger bay shield dropped. I styled the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma* out of the hanger and slipped out into space.

It took whoever was in charge of flight ops on the *Virulent* approximately three minutes to figure out what I was doing and alert the Admiral, a few seconds later I heard Ged's voice over the comm. asking me what the hell I thought I was up to. I ignored him. When Ged got tired of the radio silence he threatened to use a tractor beam, waiting to see if that would stir me out of my disobedience, it didn't. When I saw the telltale spike of the *Virulent's* tractor beam powering up I just smiled, set my co-ordinates and then I micro jumped just out of its range, one of the more useful tricks which I had learned from Thrawn. The comm. crackled to life again and a very annoyed sounding Ged Larsen threatened me with everything from court martial to execution if I didn't get my ass back on board this very minute. I ignored him some more because I just didn't want

to speak to him at all and since I blamed him for the current mess it seemed appropriate to lump him in with the same black hole of frustration I had stuck Thrawn. As far as I was concerned both men could go to all nine Corellian hells and stay there. I had work to do. I sighed and stared at the co-ordinates I had put into the nav computer, watching the countdown to the jump tick off too slowly. I let out the breath I had been holding when the stars elongated sweeping me into the hyperspace lane and as far away from both Ged and Thrawn as was possible.

As the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma* slipped into hyperspace I knew a subtle sense of relief and even though I understood I was running away from the problem at hand but I didn't care. I was, I thought to myself, quite good at running away, but then again so was Thrawn he just did it under the guise of having to save the galaxy. I sighed. There is nothing more powerful than wounded pride compounded by guilt and anger. No wonder, I thought as I unstrapped myself from the cockpit to go to the galley and make some tea, Lord Vader had turned to the Dark Side. Being in a relationship was enough to drive anyone around the bend.

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It took me nearly two days to travel to Obroa-Skai and as I requested landing permission from Planetary Flight Control I wondered why it was I kept ending up on planets that were mainly cold and snowy, it was as if the universe really hated me. From above I could see the white of the snows that covered a great deal of the planet and for a moment I was sharply reminded of Navaari and Hjal. Everything had seemed so peaceful there, so uncomplicated.

"*Ahnkeli'Su'udelma*, you are cleared for landing bay two-nine-aurek," A very bored sounding controller droned, breaking into my thoughts, "please observe the rules and see the dock-master upon arrival, OSPFC out."

"Roger that, flight." I answered and took my ship in to land.

There had been no trouble with getting a landing permit, I was a civilian with a civilian ship and Obroa-Skai was a neutral world and by all accounts quite beautiful. It was a mix of tundras, deserts, grasslands and mountains with a standard day of twenty-six hours. It was also home to what was probably the largest repository of galactic information known to all, with maybe the exception of what ever the Emperor had managed to squirrel away on Wayland. The planet had remained neutral throughout the entire Galactic Civil War, which was quite a feat given how valuable the information the great libraries held was. I had read that the New Republic had petitioned the Obroans heavily to get them to join them but so far the Obroans had not done so, preferring their neutral status for the time being.

I was grateful that the way from the large docking bay to the main library was all through covered walkways, and while I was certain that the planet was beautiful and worth exploring I didn't have the time to do so. I may have been angry with Thrawn but I could still do the job he had given me, besides it would satisfy my own curiosity as well.

The great library was stunning. Built to reflect the peaceful nature of the Obroan culture, it arched tall and serene above everything else. When I stepped through the main doors I was astonished at how the natural lighting of the world I was on played

around the grand hall. It was like watching light dance and for reasons I could never explain it reminded me sharply of home, though I wasn't exactly sure which home that was. I sighed and went to find the main desk. I had half expected to meet some sort of resistance when I went into the main building but there had been no visible security measures at all and after living for so long under strict security rules it felt weird to come and go freely.

With a sigh I stopped looking around and went to what looked like the main information area and spoke to the young female Obroan who was seated there.

"You'll need to fill out these forms and apply for an access card and code." She told me when I asked about getting into the main library for information. I took the forms she handed me and filled them out quickly. She scanned through them and nodded, added the information to the computer and then a few moments later handed me an access card. "This will grant you access to all open areas of the system," she said, "If you are looking for rare material then you will need a temporary pass."

I thanked her and took the slim duraplast card from her fingers. She must have seen something of the "how do I find what I need" look on my face because then she asked, "Are you looking for anything specific?" The librarian at the information desk asked.

I thought about it for a second and then smiled. "Yes, I am looking for information about a planet in the Ojoster Sector called Wayland."

The young Obroan typed something into her terminal and then a few seconds later handed me a small chit. "You'll need this access code to get the information you need, go to terminal Senth, in the planetary map hall. There isn't a great deal known about the world but we do have some information on store." She smiled and then as an afterthought added, "Is there something of interest on that planet?" she asked, "I have a note here which states the late emperor tried to get us to delete all information pertaining to Wayland from the data banks."

I raised both eyebrows, "Really, how strange. I am just doing a research project for some surveyors, you know how it goes, they don't tell me anything just want someone to get the information for them." I sighed and made out like an exasperated assistant.

"Typical, no one ever wants to do their own research." She commiserated, "Well good luck, if you need anything else, let me know, I am here until twenty-four hundred hours."

I thanked her and then went in search of terminal Senth in the planetary map hall.

She had been right there wasn't much information about Wayland except the most vital thing, its location. I stared at this for a long time and then, after copying what I needed onto a data-chip, I left the library feeling like a ghost and made my way back to my ship. Once I had paid the Dock Master and left the confines of the planet's gravity well, I locked in my next set of co-ordinates to the nav computer and watched as once again the stars exploded into the hyperspace-lane. Thrawn would probably be annoyed that I didn't return directly to give him the information he had asked me to gather but I didn't much care. I needed to go someplace quiet, some place where I could think. Not for the first time did I wish my father was still alive, I wanted his advice, his comfort but

he was gone and Tatooine no longer seemed like a place I belonged to so instead I found myself headed towards the only other place I had ever really called home and the one person I knew I could trust to hear me out without judging me and who could send the information I had gathered to Thrawn without any issues.

By the time I reached Hjal I was exhausted. The journey from the inner ring to the tingle arm took nearly four days and I did not sleep well all during that time. Nightmares plagued me, especially the ones which somehow managed to feature both Thrawn and Wayland together. I should have just returned to the fleet and handed over the information to Thrawn but I was still angry at him and I needed a way to send the data I had found securely without having to go back.

Navaari was waiting for me as he said he would be, and after a hug I thought would crush all my bones he gestured for me to straddle the sled so we could head back to the enclave. We didn't speak, it was far too cold, and by the time we arrived I was half asleep. He nudged me awake and told me to go inside, get changed and warm up, once he had finished with the hounds and the sled he'd come and join me.

By the time he was done I had showered, dressed in clean, warm, comfortable and was sitting on the couch holding a very large glass of the brandy I had brought with me. Thrawn was right; I drank when I didn't want to face whatever issues were in front of me. As I sat there waiting for Navaari I realised Thrawn was right about a lot of things but he was also wrong as well, he just didn't like this being pointed out to him. I watched Navaari come in, strip off his warm gear then sit beside me on the couch. There was a long silent pause while we summed each other up and then he spoke.

"So, little pup, you want to be telling me your side of it?" He asked, letting me know that he had already heard Thrawn's.

I made a face. "He knew I'd come here," I said flatly, wondering how Thrawn could have known what I was going to do even before I did.

Navaari shrugged. "He mentioned you might be showing up, though not for the reasons I was thinking."

"What exactly did he tell you?"

"That you had an argument and it was not very pretty. That it was having to do with another man." Navaari was careful to keep his voice neutral.

I sighed and then because there would be no peace until I had done so, I told him the whole story, every bit of it, without exaggeration, hysterics or tears and he listened without interruption.

There was a long silence after I had finished and then he asked, "Do you like this other man, this Larsen?"

"Yes, but not in the way Za'ar thinks," I said with a nod. "Ged is a good man, smart, funny and a loyal Imperial but I think we're like fire and oil. A little of both is wonderful but too much and it's utterly consuming. What would start out as a sweet little romance would end very badly, we're too much alike in too many ways. I'd rather keep him as a friend than have a short, torrid affair with him at the risk of ruining everything else. I think he would have also figured this out sooner or later, he's not a stupid man but like most men he has to push, you know, to see how far he can get." I shrugged a little, "And sex is sex no matter what name you slap on it, it's often the logical conclusion to a chase...."



"So you came here before that happened?"

I nodded, "It's tempting, you know, just a little." I sighed.

"So is walking out in a storm, but that is not making it a good idea." Navaari chided.

"I know, but just because I felt something, some spark doesn't mean I am willing to throw the last ten years away for a fling. I'm silly and impetuous but not utterly stupid. I needed time to think before things got out of hand. He kissed me and I liked it but...", " I shrugged not knowing how to finish. I had thought long and hard about everything that had happened while on the flight to Hjal and come to the conclusion that while a fling with Ged would probably be fun, exciting and sweet that he was also a career officer and he did not want a wife or a girlfriend, at least not in me at any rate. I was interesting to him but once he had bedded me that interest would grow cold pretty quickly.

"It is easy to let the physical take over." Navaari nodded. "I am understanding this perhaps better than you might be thinking."

I just smiled. "Well then you know why I needed time away. I don't want to have an affair with anyone other than Za'ar. It's nice to know that someone else finds me attractive but that doesn't mean I have to or will fall for him instantly does it?"

"And why did you not tell Nikätza'arth'pavjäska this?" Navaari asked with a nod.

"I tried," I made a face, "but you know how well he listens when his mind is already made up. He saw a bunch of misleading clues and put them all together to come up with the wrong conclusion. Za'ar...well he's sometimes just too damned smart for his own good or maybe it's just that I am terrible at hiding how I feel from him. He read my guilt and he thought he was right because he always thinks he's right. He did not give me much of a chance to explain anything and then when Ged showed up with a bottle of wine and high hopes, well that just made an even bigger mess." I sighed, "Why is it that men always assume the absolute worst?"

Navaari smiled, "Because underneath the bravado and arrogance we are all being terrified that females will see right through us and discover our every flaw, then leave us because of this. Nikätza'arth'pavjäska pushed because he was letting his fear of losing you get in the way of his ability to think clearly, you do seem to be having a way of doing that to him. No wonder he is never thinking clearly when it comes to you," he said.

"Well, you know what, that's his problem and not mine," I retorted tartly.

"Aye, so it is. He does have his hands full with you and he is not knowing what to do about this some days." Navaari teased and let the matter drop for the moment.

"I need you to send him this." I dug out the second data chip from my bag, the one I had made after my trip to Obroa-Skai.

"What is it?"

"Information he asked me to obtain for him."

"You should take it to him yourself, pup."

I shrugged. "I need some space, Navaari. He's so wound up about this campaign he's on that I feel as though I am either in his way or simply there on demand for him when he needs to let off steam. I'm tired of it. He doesn't want me to step foot onboard the *Chimaera* for some reason he won't explain. I was on Ged's ship in the first place because he wanted me safe, or so he said but now I wonder if he wasn't trying to set

something up so we could have this fight and he could end this relationship. I'm tired of the secrecy and everything else and maybe he was right, maybe I want too much from him and maybe things between us are just not going to work out."

"Rubbish child!" He snorted as he took the little chip from my fingers. "After all he has done to be able to have you as close to him as is possible, how can you be believing such a thing?"

I made a face. "It's easy when he acts like a complete idiot. There are moments when I think it would be so easy to just walk away...", I said with a sigh.

"Do you still love him?" Navaari asked suddenly.

I looked him straight in the eyes. "How can you even ask that?" I said sadly. "Some days I think if I could love him more than I already do I'll explode from the weight of it." I replied then added, "But sometimes that's not enough and sometimes it's just too much." I swirled my drink around my glass and sighed.

I wasn't sure I was making sense but Navaari nodded and looked at the data chip in his hand. "I'll send this now, that way if there's an answer it will arrive sooner rather than later. What is on this anyway?"

"An access code which will give him the ability to data mine for the whereabouts of a planet he's looking for." I didn't tell Navaari I already knew where this planet was, I didn't think he would like that all that much and I certainly didn't want him to tell Thrawn.

He nodded and vanished. He always knew how to get in touch with Thrawn, it was a Dantassi thing. I finished my drink and poured some more. For the first time in a long time I felt the terrible tension that had somehow managed to creep into my daily life dissipate. I leaned back and closed my eyes, and was almost asleep when Navaari returned.

"You are exhausted little one, you should get some rest."

I smiled. "Was there an answer?" I asked.

"He asked me to be telling you that he is grateful for your help and glad to hear you are safe," Navaari said sitting beside me. "He indicated that perhaps it would be good for you to remain here for a while."

I smiled and shook my head. "He wants me out of the way while he goes to find Wayland," I said a little crossly.

"Can you blame him?"

"No." I agreed. "I promised him I would stay away from that place."

"Yes, but he also knows you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"He knows that your curiosity often outweighs your common sense." Navaari said, "He also thought you should know that Ged Larsen is particularly angry with you for leaving his ship in the way you did. His words were 'she will be required to apologise for the breach of decorum when she returns to the *Virulent*.'"

I rolled my eyes. "Men and their wounded pride," I said, "Well I'm not going back for a while, so he will have to wait for his apology."

Navaari laughed. "Well, pup, you are welcome to stay here as long as you want, this is your home and I am more than happy to be having you to myself for a while."

I nodded. "I'd like that, Pa'tjad'cu-sja," I said leaning against his shoulder. "Things always seem so much clearer when I am here."

"That is because this is your home." He told me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. "Besides you will not be going any place for awhile anyway, there is a large storm laying in from the North so you will be grounded for a few days."

"I can live with that," I said with a yawn. "So tell me, how are things with you and An'jast'a."

"You have not yet heard?" He asked, surprised, "I sent word; you should have received it before you left."

"Heard what?" I grumbled wondering in that had something to do with the envelope the young officer was trying to give me before I fled the *Virulent*.

He chuckled, "Are you wishing to see us bound?"

I turned my head to look at him. "What?"

"I have asked her and she has said yes, this was last week. I sent you a message but then you arrived here without knowing so I am thinking the message missed you."

"You and An'jast'a will perform the Nai'da?" I asked not even bothering to hide my delight.

"Yes, in one month from tomorrow. If you are wanting to stay this long?"

I flung my arms around him. "Oh Navaari, of course I'll stay for that, are you crazy? Will An'jast'a mind?"

"Mind? No, Kycsi'i she will be delighted, you are as a child to me, you are family. If you would like to, you can stand for me."

I opened my mouth and then closed it again, "But...your daughter, will she not stand for you?"

He shook his head, "She is unable to attend," he said in a tone of voice that told me he did not want to speak about what ever had passed between them just yet.

"I will be honoured to stand for you Pa'tjad'cu-sja." I told him quietly, meaning every word.

He smiled, "Then it is Da'hajn's fortune that brings you here."

"No, it was a rather nasty argument with Za'ar that brings me here," I said wryly.

"Then Da'hajn is working in mysterious ways, Kycsi'i," he said.

I couldn't argue with that and I was happy to have a good reason to stay here. I snuggled into his warmth and let my exhaustion take over. He let me doze for a little while and then, before I completely fell asleep, he sent me to bed and for once I didn't dream, or if I did they were not unkind dreams. I had a month's grace to find some peace and I wasn't going to waste it.

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Standing for Navaari as he was bound to An'jast'a was one of the proudest, most wonderful moments of my life. As the enclave elder pronounced them joined I thought my heart would burst and the tears that welled up in my eyes were tears of pure joy. The great hall was so full it felt as though it would burst, Navaari had many friends, as did An'jast'a, and everyone wanted to be there for them when they finally wed. The celebration which took place after promised to be the largest the enclave had ever

known and I felt honoured to be a part of it but at the same time saddened that Thrawn was not here to share it with me.

During the feast I sat next to An'jast'a as was custom and she made certain I did not feel left out or lonely. She made sure that I was caught up on all the latest news and gossip that I had managed to somehow miss during the month I had been on Hjal. It was easy to avoid the gossip when Navaari was in charge of keeping me busy. Convinced that I was getting lax in my practice of tracking he had insisted on taking me out on long treks across the tundra to make sure my skills had not diminished any. I had been grateful for the distraction and happy to be under Navaari's watchful guidance, learning from him was a treat. He had sensed my need to escape from Thrawn, from Ged and everything that had been happened. When I needed to talk he listened, when I wanted advice he gave it and when I needed a distraction he provided it in the form of hard work.

Once the feasting was done the great hall was cleared for the dancing. It was a huge thing and the Dantassi loved to party at every opportunity. I was convinced it had something to do with the endless amount of time they seemed to spend cooped up due to bad weather. Whatever the reason for the celebration it was usually an amazing event and normally I enjoyed it greatly but this time I found myself missing Thrawn more than ever. His presence failed and it made my heart ache. At some point late in the celebrations, once I managed to escape being swept into the dancing again, I slipped quietly out of the hall, picked up my warm clothes and went to the South Gate to sit out on the hanging bench that had been made for me by Kerrjan, one of Navaari's closest friends. I had often come here when I wanted to be alone, when I had felt the walls of the enclave closing in on me or when Navaari and I had been fighting. It was Kerrjan's clever solution to stop me from doing crazy things and to give him some peace and quiet. Apparently, Navaari and I were very loud when we argued. I loved it here especially when it was such a beautiful night, still, cold with a crystal clear sky full of twinkling stars.

As I swung the bench back and forth with the tips of my feet I stared up at the sky I could not help but wonder where Thrawn was now and how his campaign was going. I had not heard from him in all the time I was here and now, after a month's time, I wondered why I had been so angry at him and if he was still furious with me or if he had just decided I was no longer worth the hassle. I missed him greatly and I was deeply saddened that he had not come to see Navaari joined with An'jast'a.

Bundled up in the warmth of my clothes, I was half dozing when I heard the outer door open. I let my senses talk to me and smiled, making room for Navaari to sit next to me.

"You should be celebrating," I said as he tapped his pipe against the side of the chair to empty it.

"I could be saying the same for you," He replied as he filled his pipe and lit it. "I just wanted to be sure you were not vanishing off into the night."

I made a face, "You will never let me forget that will you?"

"Probably not," He chuckled. "So what is on your mind that you had to be slipping away like a ghost?"

"Nothing really, I just needed some fresh air," I said evasively.

Navaari smiled and took a deep draw on his pipe, making the tobacco glow. "You've been gone nearly two hours, that's a lot of fresh air," he said gently, "What is it?"

"He should be here for you!" I said crossly.

"He is busy fighting a war, Kycsi'i," he said gently.

"I know but still...."

"I did not expect him to be here and neither should you. If you want to speak with him you should return to him and stop hiding here."

I nodded, Navaari was right and we both knew it. "I was planning on returning to Nirauan in a day or so," I said, "I thought it would be best if I was out of your hair when An'jast'a moved into your home."

"You are never, as you are putting it, in my hair and this is your home as well, but An'jast'a will appreciate the gesture. She is a little worried about taking over your place in my life."

I laughed, "She can't do that," I said, "We have different places in your heart and as long as I have a bed to sleep on when I come to see you I don't care really. In fact I think she'll do wonders for the place because while you may be the best tracker there is you know nothing about home décor." I paused to look up at him to make sure he knew I meant what I said, "I am truly happy for you. It was about time."

He smiled, "You are not the first to be telling me this little pup, but it is nice to hear it from you."

For a long moment there was silence between us, comfortable and easy then I broke it by asking the one question Navaari had avoided answering the entire time I had been there.

"Why did your daughter not come to see you bound?" I didn't think he would reply because before when I had tried to bring up the topic he had always shut me down as fast as he could. His daughter was a touchy subject at best but this time he surprised me.

"She disapproves," he said simply, studying his pipe as though it had suddenly become a fascinating artifact.

I looked at him in surprise. "What? Why?"

"Under Chiss custom remarrying is seldom done. She feels I am dishonouring the spirit of my late wife, her mother. She did not wish to be a part of this. She is angry with me for what she feels is a breaking of trust."

I sat back against the bench and let out an angry puff of air. "Well, that's just dumb."

He smiled at my reaction but the sadness in his eyes didn't go away.

"What's the real reason she didn't come?" I pressed.

He shook his head and took a long draw from the pipe, the scent of the smoke permeated the air like a strange sweet perfume, "She wants nothing to do with her Dantassi life. She is ashamed of it. The Chiss view us as something to both fear, look down up on and ultimately ignore. We are a part of their past, their history they would rather forget. She has left her Dantassi past behind to become Chiss. Returning here reminds her of where she came from and she does not wish that."

I frowned, "But you are her father."

He nodded, "So I am but in the end sometimes the family you are born into is not the family you choose to be with."

I leaned my head against his shoulder. "Well I think she's stupid then," I said tartly.

He chuckled a little and stroked my hair. "She has chosen her path just as you choose yours."

"I don't choose my path, Navaari, it chooses me. I just seem to go along for the ride," I said with a large sigh.

"Psshht," he answered back, letting me know he wasn't buying my pat answer. "You choose everything you do, all in life is chosen." He paused for a moment then said, "You need to go back to your mate, whether you are believing it or not he needs you, now more so than ever before."

"I find that hard to believe." I grumbled.

"Perhaps but it is the truth," he said, "I would be happy forever if you chose to stay here and live as the Dantassi but your place is not here. I do not know what your future will bring but I do know that you and Nikätza'arth'pavjäska are two parts of a whole. When you are together you shine and when you are apart and fighting it is as though the sun has gone dark. You need to break from this stubbornness and return. He came to you when you needed him and now you must return that favour. He needs you, even if you do not believe this, even if he is not showing this. Do not let your pride and anger get the better of you. It will be something you regret for the rest of your life."

I sighed. "Okay I get the message."

He laughed and emptied his pipe. "Come back inside before An'jast'a has to come search for us, if she does it will not be a happy thing."

We returned to the celebration and it went on for many more hours. I stayed until I could no longer keep my eyes open and An'jast'a shooed me to bed.

Two days later I took my leave of Navaari and the Dantassi once more and was on my way back to Nirauan with sand-jiggers in my belly at what sort of a reception I would find there. I needn't have worried so much though because everyone on the base was so preoccupied with what Thrawn had done by winning his first major battle that my return was a very small thing in comparison with his finds.

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It seemed strange to be back on Nirauan after such a long time away but my things were here, and for all intensive purposes it was home, or as close to a home as things got for me, if I didn't count Hjal. I found myself at loose ends trying to acclimatise to both the planet's time difference and climate. Time lag caught up with me after a while and I slept for nearly a day.

Once I felt more like a human being and less like a sun-doped Jawa I began the process of catching up on all that I had missed during my time on Hjal. It was Voss Parck, thrilled to see me back safe and sound, who filled me in on all that had occurred in the time I had been away. As we sat in the quiet of the small private lounge which Thrawn reserved for private conversations, eating a light supper and drinking a very nice wine he told me how, once Thrawn had received the data from me, he had taken his

fleet to Obroa-Skai and raided the great library's archive computers. Not only had he been able to determine the location of Wayland, which did not surprise me, but he was also able to obtain a vast wealth of up to date information on the New Republic. There had been a skirmish over the planet when the New Republic's assault force consisting mainly of frigates and three wings of X-wing fighters had shown up. Parck grinned as he recounted how Thrawn, using his keen knowledge of art had managed to bring about the attack force's defeat. I just shook my head at his thought process. I had never known anyone else to use art as a tactical weapon before.

"After he was done there he went to Myrkr and then on to Wayland," Parck said.

"Did he find it?" I asked, "Mount Tantis?"

"Oh yes," Parck nodded, "He most certainly did, and we've been busy ever since."

"Why is that?"

"He's taken some of the technology he found there and he having it installed here, in one of the subbasements."

I frowned, "He's having cloning tanks installed here?"

Parck did not bother to hide his surprise, "You know about that?"

I shrugged, "I knew there was a cloning facility on Mount Tantis so what else could he have been after? Why is he growing clones here?"

Parck shrugged. "He did not say, I think he is trying to maybe experiment with the effects of the ysalamiri on clone growth but to be honest Merly, it's all technology I can't keep up with. Now the cloaking device... that's another story."

"Wait the what...ysalamiwhatsits?" I flapped my hand at him to back up a bit.

"Ysalamiri, some creature he found on Myrkr that repels the force," Parck said looking at me with a frown, "He said you were the one who actually found them."

I nodded, "Ah those things," I said with a sigh. "I remember but I didn't know their name."

"He's had them installed all over the *Chimaera* to keep his crazy Jedi master in line."

"Crazy jedi master? What crazy jedi master?"

"Some really strange old man he found on Wayland, claims to be Jorus C'Boath but he's actually a clone. He's as mad as a sun crazed durni and as dangerous as a tusken raider. Seems he's a jedi master and a pretty powerful one as well, anyway he's on board the *Chimaera* helping Thrawn direct the flow of battles or some such nonsense."

"Buggery sandrats I've been gone for just over a month and the whole galaxy has turned upside down," I said wryly. "Well I guess that explains why he didn't want me on board his flagship."

"Yes," Parck nodded. "He asked me to tell you to, and I quote, not even think about it."

I laughed and sipped on my wine. "I have no desire to go near any crazy Jedi master, clone or not. Between the Emperor and Lord Vader I have had enough jedi-ness to last me a lifetime," I said, "So what's he doing now?"

"He'll be arriving here in two days to take on supplies, sort some things out then he will continue what he has been doing."

"And that is?"

"Showing the New Republic who is really in charge of the galaxy."

I smiled. It was nice thought. I just hoped he knew what he was doing. "Two days?" I asked.

Parck nodded. "When I informed him you had arrived on the base he did tell me that I was to keep you here until he had a chance to speak with you."

"Oh oh."

"He mentioned to me that you and this Admiral Larsen had a little misunderstanding?"

"Oh that, well I left his ship without permission and he was a little annoyed, when he tried to pull me in with a tractor beam I micro jumped out of range, yeah he's a bit pissed but there's more to it than that."

This time it was Voss Parck's turn to smile, "With you, Merly, there usually is."

What could I say, he was absolutely right. I sipped my wine with a smile while he began to fill me in on the news of what had been happening on the base all the time I was gone. I was grateful for his kind chatter it kept me from thinking about Thrawn's arrival and all that it would bring. The last time I was with him things hadn't exactly been cheerful.

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I sat with my legs dangling over the side of the gantry and my chin on my arms as I rested them on the railing watching Thrawn disembark from the shuttle. He didn't look up but he knew I was there. I watched as he returned the salute from his deck officer and then, with Rukh in tow, left for the commander center and then to the debriefing I knew was scheduled. It was just past two in the morning local time and I had no intention of going near our quarters not to mention sleeping.

People were used to me being up on the gantry, sitting like a little kid watching a Jawa market so I was left alone mostly. I just observed the activity on the dock as pilots and crew came and went, going on about their business. Even at this late hour there were a myriad of things to do and it was interesting to see, of course avoidance of Thrawn made anything more interesting including watching the dock-bay crew sweep the floor. I wasn't tired although I should have been. I had woken up early because of nightmares and then spent most of my day with the Fel boys, teaching them Cheunh and helping their mother, Syal who was kept busy with their latest addition Jagged. He was a bit of a handful.

I had come to watch Thrawn's shuttle land as soon as Parck told me it was on the way to the base but actually seeking Thrawn out was not on my agenda. I decided to wait until he sent for me, or not. Either way he had to make the first move. It was nearly four am when he broke the stand-off by coming to fetch me himself. I felt the subtle shake of the gantry when he walked along it and only glanced at him when he squatted down, heel to haunch, beside me. For a very long time we just stared at each other until he broke the silence.

"I am sorry," he said simply.

I continued to stare at him until something in his expression wavered and then I nodded, "Me too."



He opened his mouth but the overly abrupt hand gesture on my part stopped any words he wanted to say from escaping. "Don't," I said, "I know you feel you need to explain but you don't.

His expression indicated frustration.

I sighed and returned to resting my chin on my arms to stare over the docking bay. "Navaari was right."

"In what way?" He asked.

"You and I are like the ingredients in a sun. We need each other to shine. It's fine as long as all the chemicals and gasses that go into making it up are in harmony, but when something goes out of balance it explodes, usually violently and then things get...well... a bit tense. It's all very exciting in a weird sort of way until someone gets burnt or hurt. We're very good at going nova and we're both very good at hurting each other when we're angry." I glanced at him and he nodded, waiting for me to finish. "It takes two to start a war. You were wrong...but so was I." I paused for a moment. "And," I added, "I think a part of me likes winding you up like that even though I know it will end in disaster."

"Why?"

I shrugged ever so slightly with one shoulder, "Because I'm human, I need emotion from my partner. You're so calm and so cool headed almost all of the time, you use your own super intelligent logic to out logic everything and everyone else, and it's like living in a vacuum. I almost never know what you are thinking or feeling unless you show me and even then that's rare. Sometimes I feel as though I could be part of your office furniture. Riling you up like that is the only way I have of really knowing that you actually care about me, even if it's anger it's better than cool, calculated indifference."

"I have never been indifferent when it comes to you," he said quietly. I could taste the hurt behind the words.

"I know that...logically," I said with a little grin then returned my gaze to the quiet of the docking bay.

"But logic isn't always enough?" He said after a moment.

"Something like that, I guess." I nodded. "Look, I'm not now, nor was I ever having an affair with Ged Larsen. That's not to say it didn't cross my mind because that would be a lie. He's attractive, intelligent, arrogant and bossy which is exactly the sort of man I seem to like. Maybe if you were not in the picture he and I would have started something but I am also sure if we had it would have ended badly. So you were wrong about all of that, wrong and hurtful. You need to believe me when I say I would not do that to you. If, and I have to stress the if part here, if I were going to cheat on you, you'd know about it because I would talk to you about it first." I glanced up at him.

He arched an eyebrow, "Then it wouldn't technically be cheating."

"You get my point." I gave him a look.

"I do." He conceded.

"You have no real reason to be jealous but you are anyway. I like it even though the results are a bit...unpredictable and winding you up just to get a response is also unfair. In this I was wrong and I'm sorry but, as I said, it takes two."

He reached out to brush the side of my face. "Time with the Dantassi seems to have a calming effect on you."

"No, it's the mind numbing cold of the planet does that."

"So, I take it from the fact that no objects are being flung at me that you have forgiven me?"

"There is not really anything to forgive," I said after a lengthy silence.

"Indeed?" He replied sceptically.

I glanced at him. "If I had told you to stop you would have."

He sighed as he stood up. "I think this is a conversation better finished in private, don't you?"

I stared at him for a moment then reluctantly got up, unsure of how the rest of this conversation would play out. I walked beside him in silence as we made our way to our private quarters. The halls of the base were quiet and almost deserted. There were a billion questions I wanted to ask him about his campaign but I kept my mouth shut not wanting to break the oddly calm stillness between us.

He let me through the door first before following me inside. Once inside he began to strip off his uniform jacket in a single graceful motion. It was like watching him shed a skin and once he laid it carefully over the back of a chair he seemed to relax. I watched this process with a sense of profound wonder. When he was done he turned to look at me, for a second our eyes caught and time paused. When he beckoned I came to stand before him. When he crooked a finger under my chin and raised my face upwards I didn't resist. We stared at each other and then he nodded ever so slightly.

"If you had asked me to stop, I would have," he said after what seemed forever.

I just continued to look at him.

"But you said nothing." He continued, almost puzzled. "You let me...."

I gave a slight shrug with my left shoulder and moved away from his touch. "You seemed to need...."

"I did not need to be cruel or hurtful and I was both." He interrupted angrily, turning away from me to pace over to the window; the dawn was making its presence known as the night sky began to lighten in the east in faint red streaks. "It is a poor leader who cannot admit his mistakes," he said, "I have had time to think on what passed between us and it was...unnecessary."

"I pushed, you lost it, we're both to blame," I said more sharply than I meant to. "Sometimes I like it when you lose control; sometimes I want you to lose control and be like that," I said honestly.

"Why?" He asked turning to look at me, curiosity and concern rippled across his face.

"The Emperor would have said it is all about power games, my uncle would tell you it's because I don't know when to back off but I really don't know the answer. It's probably someplace in between."

Thrawn arched an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged. "I don't care to get into the why of it and it's not something I want to make a habit of either. It happened; it's done and over with so can we please just let it go, okay?"

"Just like that?"

I nodded. "Just like that. Some things are better left alone and I think this is one of them," I said, watching him carefully, wary and worried that something really had

broken between us. Vader had often been abusive and Thrawn had berated me for allowing it, as if I had had a choice, and now here we were discussing a similar theme only this time it wasn't Vader he was angry at it was himself. I watched the struggle on his face and then breathed a small sigh of relief when I saw him let it go. I went to sit down because suddenly I was very tired.

"I've said it before, I will say it again; you are a distraction I do not need but you do make my life interesting." He remarked quietly.

I wasn't quite sure how to take that so I just smirked a little and sipped my drink. "You're not the easiest man in the galaxy to be with either you know."

"Then we make the perfect pair, don't we."

"That's what Navaari says all the time, only he usually adds we're both too stupid and stubborn to see it. I really am sorry. I think you've been right all along when you said I need some sort of crisis to deal with in order to be happy."

"You should try to base your happiness on something less destructive," he replied.

"You mean I should not create more conflict?"

He nodded. "We have more than enough of that to go around right now without you adding to it my dear."

"Your campaign?" I asked, "How is it going anyway?"

He smiled slightly but it never reached his eyes. "As well as could be expected given the circumstances," he said after a moment.

"That didn't sound encouraging."

"Things sometimes do not go according to plan," he said cagily.

"But Park said you were doing well." I frowned.

"Define 'well' Tekari," he replied. "I am working with too few ships and too many raw, untrained people. Given these circumstances we have done well so far but it is difficult and I cannot help but think the New Republic seem to have an inordinate amount of sheer dumb luck on their side. Though we have made great strides and I am, for the most part, pleased with what we have accomplished so far." He drew a deep breath and came to sit beside me. "I do not discuss openly much of what has gone on. I wish to boost moral not drive it down but we lost a significant battle because I misjudged the enemy's capacity to think on their feet."

"Doesn't that crazy old jedi master you have on board the *Chimaera* help?"

Thrawn shot me a sharp look, "He does his job but he is unpredictable and in this particular case was of no use. Park told you about him did he?"

I nodded, "And the clones, and the cloaking device."

"I see," he said unhappily, "Well, Joruu C'Boath is a clone of an old jedi master I once had the misfortune to meet when I was a lot younger. This clone has all the unpleasant personality traits of the long dead original jedi master as well as clone instability. In other words he is a dangerous time bomb who is quite out of his mind but he has his uses and for the most part I have him under my control. When I no longer have that ability I will eliminate him," he said, "I would prefer you stay as far as way from him as possible which is the main reason I wanted you on board the *Virulent*."

"And now?"

Thrawn shrugged with one shoulder, "Ideally, my dear I would prefer you return to the *Virulent* and resume your work there."

"After the fuss you made you want me to go back there?"

"It is still the safest place for you to be and one where you can be of use. I am concerned that C'Boath will sense your presence here and try to obtain you for his student. I have no illusions about what he would do if he became aware of you and your talents and I do not wish to have to deal with such a problem should it arise."

I slumped back against the couch. "I should have stayed with Navaari."

"The thought had crossed my mind but I am not so sure his new wife would have appreciated that."

I scowled at him. "You should have been there," I said suddenly switching to the topic of Navaari's wedding.

"Yes, but I was not and it seems everyone except you understands why. I have a job to do and I cannot drop everything to come to a wedding. It was far more important that you be there and it meant far more to Kirja'navaar'inkjerii that you were there than I. If I cannot accomplish this task, if I cannot unite this galaxy under one military might then the future will be uncertain indeed."

"Uncertain? We'll all just be under the rule of this crazy New Republic, what is so terrible about that?"

"Nothing if you live in a time of peace and security but I happen to know that this little galaxy is not as safe as everyone seems to think it is."

"You're talking about this threat from beyond?"

"I am." He nodded. "I realize no one wants to hear about it, I realize it is easier to say it's a lie there is nothing beyond this galaxy and that it is simply an excuse to obtain more power but mark my words, should this invasion come to pass this galaxy will be very sorry it was so quick to eliminate the might of the empire."

"Every time you speak of this you scare the hell out of me."

"As well you should be scared," he said flatly. "These creatures eliminated a Chiss defense fleet as though it were a small bug to be stepped on and while my people may not appear outwardly aggressive we have some of the finest warriors in this galaxy. It is a mixed blessing that the Chiss have no desire to rule everything or to make the first move when it comes to dealing with threats from other species because if they did, the New Republic would not exist. So yes, you should be scared."

"If this threat is so terrible then why not talk to the leaders of the New Republic, why not try to make them understand."

He laughed, "Do you really think that after everything they have done to beat the Empire they would willingly and openly talk to the last Imperial Grand Admiral and then give up their power over what they would see as pure speculation?"

"But you said..."

He held up his hand for silence. "I know of a threat that may or may not happen. I am calculating by the knowledge I have and the artwork I have managed to gain access to that this species we discuss will come, they are driven to do so. However, it is only conjecture and," he said with a sigh, "I have been wrong before." He drew a deep breath, "No self respecting government would ever in their right minds, give up their power to a

military might based on such a theory. They would no more trust me on my theory than they would the Emperor to be nice."

"Artwork?" I asked quietly, remembering a piece he had once shown me very long ago in his flat on Coruscant. It had utterly creeped me out.

"Yes."

"I remember the painting. Aside from being the ugliest thing I have ever seen what did it tell you?"

"That this is a species best left alone and we should all pray they do us the same courtesy." His reply was evasive and said this topic was not up for discussion yet.

"What about joining with The New Republic instead of trying to beat them then?" I steered the topic back.

He shook his head, "I personally do not believe that the New Republic has what it takes to actually join forces and fight off a common enemy, just as the last republic bickered until the end so will this one. It is the nature of the beast. While they all say they want fairness and equality it is the way of things that some species are more equal than others. I guarantee you that should this threat come to pass, it will take this government too long to take appropriate action and then they will spend more time trying to figure out who to blame than trying to solve the situation."

I stared at the dregs of my drink and let the weight of the silence descend on my shoulders. "I really hope you're wrong because if this is the future we face then everyone will wish they had the might of the Empire to back them up."

Thrawn regarded me carefully. "The problem is no one is ever happy with how things are run and everyone not running things thinks they can do a better job. When Palpatine took on the mantel of emperor everyone cheered and those who opposed were few and far between, but when suddenly things didn't go their way the same people who cheered turned against him. I would willingly bet that in ten years we will see the same kind of dissent in this new government when people realize that they do not get all that they want or when things do not go their way."

"Do you think you can win?"

He thought about his answer for a while, "Yes, but it will not be easy and certain things have to go very right for it all to happen."

"If I ask for details you won't give them will you?"

"No."

I watched his face, not saying anything and then asked when he remained closed on that subject, "So what now?"

He cocked his head to one side and downed the rest of his drink. "Now, if you permit me, I shall take you to bed."

"No more discussions?"

"Not of a verbal kind, unless you wish to stay up discussing politics and war until I need to depart of the *Chimaera* again but I can think of more pleasant ways to spend my time with you."

"Endless discussion about war and politics...that's not really my idea of fun," I said letting him take me by the hand and pull me to my feet.

"Nor mine," He smiled.

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It was a familiar scene. Me standing with my hands balled up into fists on my hips, angry and stubborn, while Thrawn, his arms folded across his chest, regarded me in his cool, reserved manner as we argued or rather I argued ...loudly. People avoided the area of the corridor where we were standing as though their lives depended on it.

"Why must you always be so difficult?" He asked calmly. "It is a simple thing I am asking and yet you feel the need to complicate it."

"I am not complicating anything; you're the one forbidding me to do something I have done millions of times before! It's the lower levels of the base for Sarlacc's sake not the creepy, flesh eating bug infested caverns! My workout room is in the basement and I used to go down there all the time! What the hell are you hiding from me?"

I was trying his patience but I didn't care. I was tired, cranky and beyond reasoning with. I had wanted to go down to the room I used as a gym but now, all of a sudden, the area was now off limits and I didn't like this much. He had reasoned there were other rooms I could set up and use as a private work out area if I had wanted but that was not really the point. The discussion had gone from civil to angry when he had outright forbidden me to go into the sublevels and then would not give me any real good reason.

"Merlyn, the area we are discussing is now off limits to all but a very select few due to the delicate nature of the project being undertaken and you are not on that list."

I took a deep breath to begin my own tirade in response but before I could even get a word out he calmly but firmly grasped my upper arm and led me into one of the offices and shut the door.

"What are doing?" I hissed.

"I would prefer we do this in private. It is not good when you undermine my authority in public. While I know that giving you an order is rather like waving a red flag at a raging bantha the rest of this base does not need to see it in action."

"Well there wouldn't be any argument if you wouldn't forbid me to do things I have already been doing since the first week I have lived here."

He sighed. "Just because you were allowed space to use does not make that particular space yours for all of time. The sub-levels are now in use for a very large and very secret project which demands the utmost in security and while I know you can keep your mouth shut I simply cannot take the risk."

"Risk of what?" I demanded. "I'm not going anywhere because you've made it pretty clear you'd prefer to keep me close and besides there is nowhere else for me to go anyway and if anyone invaded the base they'd discover your secrets all by themselves with no help from me what so ever."

"How difficult are you going to be about this?" He asked after a very lengthy silence in which we just stared at each other.

"Very." I replied. "That was MY room, you said I could have it and now I can't for no real good reason! You've no right to keep secrets from me all the time."

His eyebrow shot up. "No right?" He asked. I could swear I saw the faintest hint of a smile on his lips but it vanished as soon as it came. "I am the leader of this base, the leader of the Imperial Navy and I have all the rights in the galaxy to keep what ever

secrets I see fit to do so from you. Just because you share my bed and my heart does not mean you are automatically privy to everything going on in the universe, especially if it has to do with my current and future campaigns," he said, "You are my mate not my first in command and the sooner you get that through your lovely head the better."

I couldn't really come up with a suitable reply to his logic so I did the next best thing and made a face that said I don't care and we were at an impasse. The moment stretched into a too long silence that I wasn't going to back down from.

He drew a deep long breath and then shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I say does it. As soon as I have left the base you will find a way to bypass the security and go down there."

I made another face because he was right. I really didn't take being told no very well.

"If I take you down, explain and show you the project myself will you promise to leave things alone afterwards?" He asked carefully, "Because I really don't want to have to lock you up for the duration of this campaign."

"You wouldn't dare!"

His glare said *just try me* and I didn't need to be force sensitive to know who would lose this fight. He was willing to compromise but that only went so far.

I sighed loudly and nodded. "Okay."

"Okay what? Okay you allow me to give you a guided tour through this project and then you leave it alone or okay I incarcerate you for the next millennia and let everyone think we have a very kinky relationship?"

"Think I'll take choice number one, if that's okay with you."

"Smart girl," he said.

I sighed and moved away from him. After nearly four months away, he had been on the base for just two days and almost all of it had been spent in meetings with his staff. I had seen him briefly once when he first got back because he had come into the quarters to change into fresh clothes but that had more or less been it. He was due to ship out again sooner than I would have liked and I was not really happy about it. I felt as though I never got to see him anymore and I wasn't sure how to cope with the sensation of being a bystander in what looked to be a very complicated game of dejarik. He understood that most of my being difficult came from not wanting to admit I was scared and that it was just easier to pick a fight with him than deal with my fear of losing him. I kept telling myself I should never ever have gotten involved with him in the first place but it was a bit too late for that now. I had my back turned to him and stifled a yawn. I was exhausted.

"Tekari..." He started but I shook my head and made a please don't motion with my hand.

I didn't know what to do or think any more. After we had made up from the terrible fight which had taken place on board of the *Virulent* we had talked about where I should go, and what I should do. His suggestion had been to return to working with Ged Larsen on board of his ship but I had outright refused, citing his jealousy of Ged and my need to be on the base to help Syal with the children and teach Cheunh but really I was scared to leave. For the first time in my life I felt as though I had no place, no real purpose, and no useful job and I wasn't handling this very well.

"Merlyn, look at me."

I did as he commanded. He reached out and caressed the side of my face with his hand, this time I didn't flinch or move away. "Perhaps you should talk to the doctor about giving you something to help you sleep, something to maybe counter these nightmares you've been having." His voice had softened now that we had brokered a deal.

"No," I said. I didn't want drugs to help me sleep what I wanted was to understand the terrible dreams that had started up again. He watched me for a moment, trying to puzzle out what I wouldn't tell him. I guess when it came to secrets I also had my own fair share.

"Sj'iu Tekari...." He started but I shook my head again. I didn't want to hear what he was going to say, however this time he ignored me and continued, "You wake up half the base at the moment with your screams. Tir tells me that Syal is worried about you. I have not seen you in this state in a long time and not opening up about it is not going to help." He lectured. I wondered how many time he had said these words to me. When I said nothing he continued, "Are these the dreams in which you see me die?"

I gave him the one shoulder shrug. "I really, really do not want to talk about it," I said and I meant it.

"Fine, but sooner or later you will need to deal with these nightmares and find a way to get some sleep."

"I don't know why you're so worried about it," I snapped. "It's not as if I keep you up." It was a low shot because I was over tired and angry as well as scared and frustrated. We stared at one another and I wondered if I had gone too far. The moment between us wavered and then the expression on his face gentled.

"I know the past four months have been difficult for you and I appreciate that you are unhappy with this situation, however when the commanding officer of this base gives me reports which include concerns about your well being I am afraid I do worry about it."

I exhaled slowly. "Guess that will teach me for confiding in people."

"Do not blame Voss or even Syal; it was the doctor who expressed concerns, Voss merely mentioned it to me," he said.

I just stared at him wondering when this discussion had suddenly become all about my bad sleeping habits rather than his secrets in the basement.

"Talk to me Tekari," He said quietly, "Please?"

I bit at my bottom lip and turned away from him, wrapping my arms around my body. "Do you recall that awful painting you once had in your dining room on Coruscant?"

"I do."

"Well that's what some of these dreams are like," I said, "I can't explain it but they're bad. I wake up terrified because something terrible is coming, is going to happen and I don't know what because I can't see it clearly enough."

"Do you not think it is just a manifestation of your worry for me, for what is happening now?"

I made a face, "You sound like Doctor Thracer."

"Be that as it may, you did not answer my question."



"I don't know." I shrugged, "But it feels different from the dreams I have about you, about the campaign even about the Emperor. In these dreams everything just feels wrong, as though the universe becomes twisted somehow." I struggled for more words and then gave up exasperated. "What do you care anyway? You are too busy fighting your own war!" I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth but it was too late. I flapped my hand at him and fought back tears of frustration. "I'm sorry. I'm so...."

He cut me off. "I understand, I don't take it personally when you lash out because you are so tired you cannot think straight but I will march you to the medlab if you don't get some rest."

"Not advisable." I growled. "You may be leader of this base but I can still hurt you." As I said those words I wondered if Rukh would suddenly appear and put his knife to my throat. Where ever Thrawn was Rukh was not that far away.

For a long heavy moment Thrawn watched me and then he just sighed letting some of the tension he had been holding in go.

"I don't know how to help you. I arrive back on this base to find you pale and drawn. You've lost weight and everyone who cares about you has come to me expressing concerns." He eventually said, "I see you in turmoil and I don't know how to fix that. Even if I could tell you right now this campaign was a complete success that all was well and you and I could settle down somewhere and start a family that would not help would it? You would still wake up screaming from something I can neither see nor do anything about. Would my constant presence at your side alleviate these nightmares?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. These dreams, these visions, they're not like the ones I have about you and yes I still have those as well. Hell, I even still dream about Jyrki for Sarlacc's sake. But these new ones, they are vague and utterly terrifying." I wasn't telling him the whole truth about how much detail I could recall from these new sets of dreams and I was pretty sure he knew that but he let it go for now.

He glanced at his chrono and said, "I will be free of meetings in about four hours then I am all yours."

I nodded not trusting myself to speak.

He came up to stand behind me and with his hands on my shoulders turned me to face him again. "Why don't you go and see if you can get some rest so we can talk without it turning into an argument?"

I saw genuine worry in his eyes and I felt a pang of guilt. He had enough on his shoulders as it was without me adding to it.

"I will come for you when I am done and we can talk then, I promise."

"And this super secret project that's stolen away my training room?" I asked with a little smile.

"That was part of the deal." He stroked the side of my face with the backs of his fingers, kissed me on the forehead, "Go and sleep, please? I truly do not want to spend the precious amount of time I have with you arguing, we've done enough of that to last a lifetime and I am quite weary of it," he said, waited for me to nod and then he left.

I stood still for a few moments and then headed to our quarters. It was late afternoon and Thrawn was right I was exhausted. I stripped off and slid into one of his

shirts because it held his scent which that was comforting and drifted into sleep. I didn't dream and nearly five hours later Thrawn kept his word.

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It was the touch and warmth of his hand as he ran his fingers through my hair that woke me up. He sat next to me on the bed, fully dressed, leaning back against the headboard and smiled at me when I focused on his face. "Do you have any idea how truly lovely you are?" He asked.

I made a face and got up, not bothering to hide the blush that rose to my cheeks. He did not say things like this all that often and I was always at a loss for words when he did. I never thought of myself in that way and somehow it surprised me that he did. In my head I would always be the plain Outer rim girl who never quite fit in anywhere but he saw past all of that. I stumbled to the fresher to wake up. Once I had cleaned my teeth and washed the sleep from my face I felt a whole lot better. When I returned to the bedroom Thrawn had not moved but he had taken off his uniform jacket. He patted the side of the bed I had just come from and motioned for me to rejoin him there.

"I want stim'caf." I told him.

He shook his head, "No you don't." he countered. "You want me, now come here."

I was surprised at the sudden shot of desire his words created and it made me blush as well as smile. "You are so arrogant." I told him as I sat on the bed beside him.

His smile was smug. "I am simply very good at what I do, my dear." And to prove his point he began to trace his fingers lightly across the skin of my thigh.

I shivered at his touch, watching the blue of his hand against the white of my own flesh and wondered if he was deliberately tracing along the scar there or not.

As if he could read my mind he said almost absently. "I should have made you heal in a bacta tank."

The scar on my thigh was the first of many I had gathered over the years since I had begun working for the Empire but unlike most of them this one had a meaning and memory that was not altogether unkind. "I'm glad you didn't. It serves as a reminder," I said softly.

"A reminder of what?" He asked, sliding his hand further up my leg, under the shirt to my belly.

I swallowed as what he was doing with his hand was starting to make thinking difficult. "That nothing is ever what it seems to be and when I let my guard down I tend to get hurt."

"Even when you are with me?" He asked as he watched my reaction while he brushed my breast with his thumb.

I gasped. "Especially when I am with you."

"I don't think that's what you really mean Tekari." He murmured.

"Oh?"

"No, I think you mean it reminds you that everything is dangerous."

"Everything is." I nodded wordlessly as he unbuttoned the shirt I was wearing and brushed it aside.

"Perhaps," He smiled that beautiful yet feral smile I had come to think as his hunter's smile. "But you rather like danger unfortunately," he said.

I pulled his shirt off and ran my hands down his chest, tracing the line of blue black hair that went from his navel to his trousers. I didn't need to be a jedi to see that he too was aroused and in need.

I traced the form of him through the fabric of his pants and gave him a feral look of my own. When he growled from the back of his throat, I laughed. Two could play at this particular dangerous game and at least here we were, more or less, evenly matched. For a moment we stopped and stared at each other and I that single second the rest of the galaxy slid away, there was only him and me. This passion which sparked between us never ceased to astonish me and sometimes I wondered if there was enough space in the universe for such a powerful thing.

Four months apart had done its damage and suddenly a desperate sort of need made me hungry for more than just caresses so when he brought his head down close to mine to kiss me I threaded my fingers through his hair, gripped hard enough to surprise him and whispered in his ear "Don't be so damn gentle this time."

I figured there would be time enough afterward to unravel the secrets he had in the basements but right now there were more pressing things at hand. I released my hold and he pushed himself up. His eyebrow arched and for a moment he paused, braced above me with a smile that was unreadable to consider what I had just said to him.

"As you wish, my dear," He replied and with that the games began in earnest.

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Several hours later, satiated and a lot less tense, I followed him quietly down to the door to the now forbidden basement area. As we stood at the door he looked at me. "What you will see is a secret. I expect you to respect this absolutely and I also expect you to not come down here again unless I give you permission to do so. If you disobey this order then I will have you locked up. Do you understand?"

I didn't like being spoken to this way but since we were standing in front of a matched set of Chiss guards I didn't argue. I nodded, "Yes, Admiral."

He nodded at the guards who moved slightly to allow us to unlock the door. As we walked down the small corridor to the turbo lift I felt my head buzz but shook it off as a reaction to too much physical exercise and not enough to food. He was silent in the lift but I could feel him watch me carefully.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head as the lift stopped. "Come let me show you the project." And without anything further he stepped out of the turbo lift into another dimly lit hallway. I shook my head to clear away the dizzy sensation I was feeling. This wasn't how I remembered it. He had changed things down here. I followed him, having to trot to keep up with his long legged strides. He keyed in a code on the door-pad and the security door slid open. He walked through into the room and I followed. I immediately doubled over, clutching at my head and sinking to my knees with a gasp.

"Ysalamiri," he said as if that explained everything and then grasped my arm and helped me to my feet.

I was completely and utterly head blind and the effect was hellishly disorienting. Stepping through the door into the room had been like stepping into the vacuum of space with no suit on. It was as if everything I knew and felt had suddenly been sucked out leaving me cold and blind in the process. The only other time I had ever experienced this was on Myrkr. Slowly I got my bearings and adjusted to a world without the force. I had not truly realised how much of a part of my life it was until it was suddenly no longer there.

The room was dimly lit and fairly quiet with the exception of the humming machinery and a quiet bubbling noise. I looked around and saw, built into the walls and ceiling of the room branches of Myrkr trees and on these branches were the strange, furry serpent like creatures Thrawn had named Ysalamiri. The room was full of them. It was no wonder I had reacted the way I had, these creatures somehow managed to repel the force away. I drew a deep breath and began to take note of the machinery until I came to the large tanks, the source of the faint bubbling sound. At first I thought they were empty but then I noticed one was not and went to take a closer look.

"Cloning tanks from Mount Tantis." Thrawn explained walking beside me.

I glanced at him then to the growing being inside the one tank that was being used. "Is that a...human?" I asked, it was hard to tell because the clone was still in very early stages."

"A Chiss actually."

I glanced up at him in surprise.

"Humans make excellent soldiers and we are already making use of the large cloning facility left to us in Mount Tantiss for them but I wish to see if I can breed a better class of soldier and the Chiss make for better soldiers."

"Who is it a clone of?" I asked.

He regarded me for a moment and then said, "No one you know and the one who volunteered wished to remain anonymous."

I nodded. I could certainly understand wanting to not be known but eventually that truth would be all too evident when the clone matured. "Why all these creatures?" I waved my hand at the menagerie around the room.

"They repel the force as you well know but unbeknown to most it is the force that also greatly interferes with how fast we can mature a clone. When the force aspect is removed the clone maturation process is sped up greatly, allowing us to create more clones faster. It bypasses the cloning sickness that was sometimes prevalent in clones who were matured too quickly."

"Did the Emperor know this?" I asked now curious.

Thrawn shook his head. "I do not think so. He was aware of Myrkr and its unusual fauna but he avoided the planet and removed it from all the databases. He would not have instituted the use of a force repelling creature in a place where he thought he was a god."

I nodded rubbing absently at my temples.

"Are you alright?" Thrawn asked.

I nodded. "It's just difficult to get used to. It would be like you suddenly losing your ability to see." I smiled wanly, "Right now I am just an ordinary girl with no special abilities."

"Well, perhaps your special abilities have been temporarily removed however, my dear, you are anything but ordinary."

"I can't even tell if you are telling me the truth or just pulling my leg when you say that." I sighed and looked around again at the room.

He didn't dignify that statement with an answer. Instead he said, "Any questions you have about this project ask them now because once we leave this room there will be absolutely no further discussion about it and you will not be allowed entry again."

I shook my head, "No more questions."

I was pretty certain I would not ever want to come back here. I did not like the eerie sensation of being cut off from the force and the clone growing in the tank made me very uneasy. I sighed and thought about it but in the end there were no more questions to ask. He was planning an army of Chiss clones. I really didn't need to know more than that nor did I really want to.

"I will be installing more of the Ysalamiri in the hallways, just to that you are aware," he said.

I nodded and turned to him. "Thank you."

He tilted his head to one side, "For what?"

"Sharing this with me."

His smile reached his eyes and he almost laughed. "That was pure self preservation Tekari. If your curiosity had not been satisfied you would have found a way to venture down here on your own and I don't wish to think of the conclusions you might have come to or what the effects of these creatures would have done to you. Better that you know what is going on and I know what happens when you are in the same room as the ysalamiri because they will be a part of my life for a while, or at least until the clone making process is done and the Jedi Master is off my ship and out of my presence."

"If these creatures nullify the force won't it be impossible for your jedi master to detect me?" I asked suddenly wondering.

"I dare say you are right but do you really want to take that risk? I know I do not," he said as we left the cloning room as quietly as we came.

Only once we were back up in the main floor of the base did the force return to me. It was as if someone had suddenly turned on all the lights. We walked in silence back to our quarters and once there he poured two brandies and motioned for me to sit beside him on the small couch. He touched his glass to mine and sipped slowly. I did the same and relished the warmth that slid down my throat.

"I will be leaving the day after tomorrow and I want you to return to the *Virulent* when she returns to this sector," he said suddenly with no preamble.

I just glanced at him over the rim of my glass. "Why?" I asked.

"Because I think you will be safe there and I want you to work as a liaison with Ged Larsen for me."

"After everything that happened?"

"The only thing that occurred was my inability to control my own emotions and that will not happen again. Larsen has assured me you will be safe and I trust you."

"You do?"

He smiled. "Yes," he said and it was not a lie. "You are not happy here, even though you try to be and you need a job that is more than just something to while away time. I need you on board the *Virulent* and Larsen says that he has use of someone with your abilities in the area of ships mechanics as well as your, for lack of a better description, office skills."

I gulped the rest of my brandy down and toyed with my glass. "And will I get to see you?" I asked quietly.

"When and if I have time during the next stages of this campaign then there will be time for you. I cannot promise any more than that," he said looking at the remnants of his own drink, "But I will keep you better informed."

"Promise?"

He regarded me for a long moment, his glowing red eyes bored into mine and then he said, "Yes. On that I promise."

I nodded, "Okay then I will go back to the *Virulent* but if you ever and I do mean ever pull a stunt like you did the last time I was there I will put you on your ass so fast even Rukh won't know what hit you."

He smirked and put aside his glass. "Is that a threat or a promise Miss Gabriel?"

I narrowed my eyes at him as he removed the glass from my hand just in case I decided to use it as a projectile and before I could come up with a suitable retort he shut me up with a kiss. It was hard to argue with this ability of his to quell any discussions and instead of fighting him I played along and kissed him back. We didn't have so much time together that I wanted to waste it talking about trivial things.

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I sat with one hand gripping the edge of Voss Park's desk and with my other I held my hair back from my face. I felt like bantha poodoo, not to mention deeply embarrassed. "I am so sorry about that." I mumbled.

"Merlyn maybe you should go pay the doctor a visit." Voss's concern would have been almost funny if it weren't for the fact that I had just suddenly and violently thrown up in the waste basket by his desk. "There's been a bad case of Corellian flu going around and I hate to say this but you really don't look so well."

I nodded and took the tissue he handed me to wipe my mouth. "You're right, I don't feel so great." The truth was I hadn't been feeling so great for a while but had just put it down to lack of sleep.

He grinned and made a motion with his fingers that I had missed a spot. "Regular rest and some food would help that you know. You push yourself too hard. I heard you spent nearly fifteen hours straight in the pit fixing ships the other day. You know that is against regulations." He poured a glass of water and handed it to me.

"I hate seeing broken ships lying around. We need all the working ships we can get." I shrugged, sipping the water slowly. "I can't sleep and I can't settle so I make myself useful."

"I am quite sure that when the Admiral said you should do something productive to keep busy until the *Virulent* returns from whatever mission Admiral Larsen has it on he didn't mean kill yourself by working overtime in the flight deck pit," he said with a sigh, "Even the chief of ops came to me worried about the time you've been spending there. Half the crew are sick with this virus so it's no wonder you are too. Don't make me pull rank and forbid you to go down to the hanger."

I gave him a weak smile. "You're right, I just wish...." I stopped myself from saying what I really felt out loud, Voss knew it anyway, "I suppose just bugging off to Hjal would also not be a good idea," I said with a sigh. I had been toying with the notion of going to spend some time with Navaari but never quite made up my mind about it.

"Oh I am certain Thrawn would not mind you going to Hjal but please don't just leave without telling me, the paperwork is murder." He teased. "Really, Merly, go see Doc Thracer and for goodness sake get some rest and maybe eat something, you look like something out of one of those awful holo-horror dramas Fel likes to read."

"You know you can be really bossy some days."

"Just because I care." He shot back with a grin.

"Thanks." I got up a little shakily. I had been feeling queasy for a week or so on and off but usually it went away after a while. The throwing up was a fairly recent event and given that someone on the base had contracted the Corellian flu which had spread rapidly, my being unwell was not a surprise. What had surprised me this time was that it had been the smell of the stim'caf Voss had poured me which had made me so sick.

"I swear as soon as I hear anything from him I will come and find you myself." He added looking at me with genuine concern. "But really if Thrawn comes home to find you dead or in a coma or something from this flu it will be ugly."

I nodded again, mumbled another embarrassed apology for being sick and made my way to the medlab where Doctor Thracer didn't seem all that shocked to see me. "I'll be right with you dear. This Corellian flu outbreak is creating a lot of paperwork. Go wait in exam room two."

He came into the small room just as I was throwing up again. "Oh, that's not very good. Let's see what's going on shall we," he said as he shut the door.

I stood quietly by the bed as Doctor Thracer fussed. He asked questions, took my temperature and then waved the small hand scanner up and down my body. There was a moment where he just looked at me with an expression I could not decipher and then he tucked the scanner away.

"So?" I asked. "What's wrong with me this time? Did I manage to catch this wretched flu?"

"Nothing is wrong with you. You are in perfect health," he said with a smile.

"Well I don't feel healthy." I snapped. "I feel sick and tired and just plain out of sorts."

He nodded. "Yes, that's perfectly normal for a woman in your condition."

"My condition? I thought you just said I wasn't sick," I said, confused.

He looked at me in surprise. "Merlyn, you're not sick, you're pregnant."

The shock of his words drained the blood from my face and for a moment the world around me spun out of control. I felt his hands catch me and the next thing I knew I was lying down on the bed trying to recall how to breathe.

He handed me a glass of water, "You really didn't know or suspect?" He asked with surprise.

I sat up slowly and shook my head. "How is this possible? How did this happen?" I asked him.

He frowned for just a moment, deciding if the question was a serious one or not then after taking a good look at my face decided I wasn't messing with him. "You are sexually active are you not?" He asked carefully.

I nodded. "Yes but...."

"And you don't take anything to prevent pregnancy from happening do you?"

"No," I said crossly. "But Thrawn does."

Doctor Thracer shook his head ever so slightly and sighed. "He didn't tell you." He murmured.

"Tell me what?"

"The Admiral stopped taking Evexelhan," he said naming the drug which enabled men to have sex without producing viable sperm thus preventing unwanted pregnancies. The treatment had become very popular for members of the Imperial navy who did not want to suddenly find themselves landed with a baby and a wife after one night of shore leave. Thrawn had told me a very long time ago when the topic of babies had been brought up one evening that he had taken care to prevent this possibility. It would have been a very bad thing to get pregnant during Palpatine's reign.

I looked at him, stunned. "When was this?"

"Shortly after he returned from his exploration of Mount Tantiss." Doctor Thracer frowned because really he was giving me information that was, in theory, private between him and Thrawn. "He said the drug had started to give him headaches, which is one of the known long term use side effects."

"That was ages ago." I protested, "He should have told me." And I wondered why he didn't. That was very unlike Thrawn, he usually took care to avoid any unseemly complications of any sort and babies would be considered a major complication, at least in my book at any rate.

The doctor frowned and fiddled with the scanner in his hand. "The chances of you conceiving a child with him were, as far as statistics go, incredibly slim, next to impossible actually, and you are not together that often perhaps he felt the risk was minimal or maybe he really just forgot. He's had a lot on his plate lately."

I stared at the doctor angrily. "Yet here I am, minimal risk aside, pregnant." My mind reeled as I spoke that word out loud. "He should have said something. I am certain he had no intention of any sort of family plans, this is not something he wanted especially now."

For a terrible long moment an unhappy silence weighted the air down.

"I can advise you on your options," he said quietly after watching my face carefully.

"Options?" I asked a little confused then I realised what he was not saying. I narrowed my eyes at him. "You mean like terminating the pregnancy?"

He nodded carefully keeping his expression neutral.



I shook my head. "No way. That is not an option I even want to hear about," I said angrily, unconsciously clutching my abdomen, suddenly fiercely protective over this little life I had thought was lack of sleep, bad dreams and stomach flu.

"Merlyn, apart from the pregnancy is everything alright? Between the two of you is everything alright? You don't seem happy about this."

"Don't seem happy? You just told me the impossible has happened." I couldn't stop the tears that welled up in my eyes, "I'm too shocked to know what to feel." This was the truth.

"The shock will wear off. How will you feel about it after the news has had time to sink in?"

I thought about it for a moment and then gave him a little smile. "It's clichéd and silly and probably the most girly thing I will ever say in my entire life, Da'hajn help me, but I want this," I said, "We've talked about it, you know, on and off through the years we've been together but always the time just wasn't right and then when you told me that it would be damned near impossible I had given up the idea but ...this child is nothing short of a wonder." I whispered the words carefully. "I think apart from the shock I'm well...pleased, I guess... I think."

"You're very good at hiding your joy well." Doctor Thracer said wryly.

I made a face at him. "Well, this could not have happened at a worse time. Thrawn's in the middle of a war that will last for who knows how long. The last thing he will need or want to hear is that he's going to be a father." I didn't even want to imagine that conversation.

He nodded without comment but his expression said he wasn't buying my explanation.

"How far along am I? Can you tell?"

He looked at the scanner's data. "Approximately forty two days, give or take, so nearly nine weeks going by Coruscant standard time." Nirauan's days were longer and instead of five day weeks, here they stretched out over into seven days per week. We tried to keep to Coruscant standard time whenever possible but it wasn't always easy to do given the planet's time and rotation differences.

I did some mental math and nodded. "His last time on the base," I said with a sudden flashback to that particularly memorable evening. Just the thought made me blush but the doctor tactfully ignored this.

"When you missed your period did you not wonder?"

I shook my head. "I was never regular, I've told you that, especially with all of the sport and exercise I do and lately it's been even more irregular than ever. I just put it down to stress, general bad eating habits and lack of sleep." I sighed. "I didn't think anything was wrong until I started throwing up at the drop of a hat and then I just assumed it was this stupid flu that's been going around," I said, "But all of a sudden I can't stand to be around stim'caf anymore and you know that's not normal for me."

That made him smile. My stim'caf habit was legendary on the base. "It should pass. Cravings and changes in food and drink likes and dislikes are pretty standard."

"I hope it goes away soon!" I said, alarmed at the thought of not being able to go near stim'caf for fear of throwing up.

He nodded. "It's normal as is the morning sickness which, despite its name, can occur at any time I am afraid to tell you."

"Ugh." I made a face.

"Drink lots of fluids and you need to eat better as well as rest more. I will make up a diet plan for you and we'll need to monitor your weight gain. I should warn you, you'll be tired and you will have mood swings due to all the hormone changes."

"The drinking and eating part I can probably manage in between the throwing up parts but the sleeping part... can't guarantee that unless you have a sure fire cure for getting rid of nightmares."

"I wish I could help you with the bad dreams, Merlyn, I see what they are doing to you but I don't know how to help other than offer you some sort of counselling to discover their roots."

"Talking won't help," I said with a shrug.

He sighed and nodded. He knew all about my strange gifts and the issues they brought with them. "I want to keep a very close eye on you. While Chiss and human physiologies are similar there are some major differences which will complicate this pregnancy greatly. That means monitoring your health carefully. I don't want to scare you but this will not be an easy pregnancy."

"Differences? Aside from the obvious appearance ones what should I know about?"

"The major one I am concerned with right now is the different gestation times. Humans carry offspring from between two hundred and fifty-nine to two hundred and ninety-four days. Chiss gestation times are longer by nearly fifty to sixty days. I don't know what sort of stress that will put on your body."

"He wants me to return to the *Virulent* and work with Admiral Larsen. I would have been there now except the *Virulent* is off on some mission and out of contact for another month or so."

"Well I don't really care what he wants from this moment on you are my patient and you will remain here. While I am sure the doctor on board Larsen's ship is good he will not know yours or Thrawn's medical histories the way I do, he certainly won't have much experience with Chiss physiology and I have better equipment here," he said thoughtfully. "Don't make me pull rank on you to get you to do as I ask."

"You're the second person to say that to me today." I smiled.

"I'm surprised you don't hear that more often. You are reckless and impulsive but if you want to carry this child to term you will have to curb that nature and settle down a bit."

There was something he wasn't telling me so I asked outright. "What's the but? Because I hear a definite but in there, what are you not telling me?"

He drew a deep breath. "Most inter-species pregnancies don't last to term. The variables in DNA make it almost impossible to grow a viable embryo that lasts beyond fifty-six days and, to be brutally honest with you; this is usually a good thing due to the deformities and mutations that occur." He looked at me to make sure I was actually hearing what he was saying. "You need to be prepared for the fact that the chances you will carry this child to term are very, very slim. I will do everything I can for you to make

it possible as long as it does not place your life in any danger but statistics are not on your side."

"So what you are telling me is not to get too attached to this baby?"

He sighed, "Without trying to seem like Doctor Doom here, yes. If you make it past the two hundred day mark then we can hope a little but before that, especially in the first hundred days I would advise caution and that's the reason I don't think you should be anywhere else but here."

"I will have to lie or find some really good reason why I should stay here," I said quietly.

"You already have a good reason, dear, you're pregnant with his child." He was puzzled.

"How long before it starts to show?" I asked ignoring the unasked question in the doctor's eyes.

"Not for a while yet, at least a hundred and thirty days or so depending on development."

"So we can keep this a secret, at least for now?"

He looked at me for a moment then nodded. "Yes, if that is your wish."

"And you won't tell Thrawn or anyone else?"

"Unless you give me permission to do so I am legally not allowed to but why, if I may ask, do you not want to tell him or is he not the father?"

I shook my head. "Oh he's definitely the father," I said quickly with a smile I couldn't quite stop. "There's never been anyone else."

He nodded. "Then what is the problem?"

"He has enough to worry about and as you said I might not carry to term. I'd rather tell him good news when I know the news is good. If I tell him now and things go wrong ...." I shrugged offhandedly but suddenly and to my surprise I didn't want to think about that. "Besides it's not as if he is here every day to see what's going on. I'm not even sure when I will see him next so best not to worry him just yet, especially while he's in the middle of his biggest move yet. When we know for certain there will be a baby then we can tell him, okay?"

He wasn't happy about this but he nodded anyway. "As you wish but I have to tell you I don't like it and I am pretty certain he won't either when he does find out. You know how is about you keeping secrets from him."

I made a little gesture with my shoulder. "Well that's my problem when it happens isn't it. Right now he's busy, in fact he's up to his neck in it. I don't want to add to the stress."

"I heard that he was planning on going after the ships at the Sluis Van yards." Doctor Thracar said as he loaded up a hypospray. I gave him a look. "Prenatal vitamins, nothing more," he said as he pressed the spray gun against my neck. "You're eating habits are terrible when Thrawn is away and your body needs a boost."

I nodded. "The fleet needs ships, though I find it weird there are not more Imperial ships out there. I mean the Imperial navy was enormous and not so many were actually destroyed at Endor. Where did the rest of the ships go? I mean surely if an Imperial Captain heard that a Grand Admiral had survived and was trying to take back the Empire would he not come running to join in?"

Doctor Thracer shrugged. "I agree with you but I have no answers. Thrawn often asked the same question as you and I had no answers for him either. Perhaps these ships are holed up somewhere so remote that no one knows what is actually going on, or maybe the crews simply gave up and left these ships abandoned somewhere in space. I don't think we will ever know." He dug out a data pad from one of the drawers and started to punch stuff into it.

I shook my head. "It doesn't add up, you know." Then, suddenly feeling exhausted I discovered I didn't really care about ships or fleets or much of anything. I sighed. "I didn't know he spoke to you about his campaign."

The doctor smiled. "We have come a long way from the very first time you met me, you know. I have you to thank for that."

I raised my eyebrows at him.

"You have a way of bringing people together, though I don't think you notice that much. After Endor he had no one to talk to about you and what you were going through so he came to me and through that experience we developed a friendship after a fashion. He does not confide in many people nor does he have many people he would call friend but somehow I am honoured to be one of them so yes he talks to me about his campaigns though not in great amounts of detail. Friend or not that's still classified information but I think he finds it of use to have a non military point of view sometimes."

"So he finds it weird as well that so much of the Imperial Navy is ... missing."

"Yes but he cannot afford the resources to try and find them or try to obtain information on where to start looking."

A thought flashed across my brain but I bit down on it before it could show on my face and I changed the subject quickly. "How long will this nausea and vomiting go on for?"

"Hard to say, though in normal human pregnancies it usually subsides after eighty to ninety days though there are exceptions to this rule and given the nature of this pregnancy I can't say with any certainty this will hold true for you. I can give you something for it if you need it."

I shook my head. "No." When he raised his eyebrows at me I explained, "You can't tell me for sure that anything you give me won't harm the baby can you?"

"No. You are the first human I know of to conceive with a Chiss. I have no idea what will happen so I am going to have to do some research on Chiss pregnancies. I truly didn't even think this was possible and I remember telling you that when you asked me some time back. I guess I am eating my words today." He smiled.

"So this is a good thing right?" I asked carefully.

"Yes, if you two wish a child this is a very good thing though I cannot stress enough caution in your optimism but the fact that you even conceived at all is a very good sign, bad timing aside."

That made me smile. "So... tell me what I need to know about being pregnant because this is a first for me."

Doctor Thracer handed me the data pad and did his best to educate me on the subject of being an expectant mother. By the time he let me go I was more bewildered and astonished than ever. I was grateful to get back to my quarters so that I could just lie

down. It was an awful lot to take in and on top of it all I was worried about Thrawn. The attack on the Sluis Van Ship yards should have taken place and I had half expected to hear about the results by now.

As I lay on the bed I could not help but think about the lack of Imperial ships and wondered where the rest of the ships had gone. I was certain now, from the dreams I had been having that the Emperor was not dead but very much alive and also planning some sort of grand come back. The real mystery was why had he not found Thrawn? The two of them would have been invincible together. But then again, I thought the together part was probably the real issue. Palpatine had let power go to his head and for all intensive purposes I thought he was just mad. Sharing had never been high on his list of things to do and sharing with Thrawn, well that would be just wrong in the Emperor's books. I wondered if he was simply waiting on some hidden planet somewhere for Thrawn to do the major damage to the Rebels and then sweep in and take the end glory for himself. If that was the case then Palpatine was more than just a power hungry madman he was a petty idiot. Thrawn did not want to rule the galaxy as its new Emperor; he wanted to bring back the law and order which had held the empire together so that if there was an invasion from some nasty unknown species that lived beyond the galaxy's edge then just maybe we'd all be prepared, at least that was his story and so far he was sticking to it.

I absently rubbed my belly and thought about the new life that was growing inside of me with a sigh. It was too early and too small to sense or feel anything yet it was there. A child, our child. The prospect was daunting. Oddly enough I found myself wondering what Palpatine would have thought of this had it happened while he was still alive and on Coruscant. Chances were good he would be repulsed by the idea of a human and a Chiss mating and producing offspring but there was also a good chance my child would be a force user and that would complicate things even more. If Palpatine lived and if he ever found out I was certain he would want this child to train especially if it had Thrawn's brains and my talents. I knew a sliver of icy fear then, and hoped that what ever gods were watching over me stuck close by because I was quite scared to death which, I suddenly realised, was probably how my own birth mother felt when she had discovered she was pregnant with me as well.

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The mood on the base had shifted slightly with the news that Thrawn had not been able to grab all the ships he had hoped from the raid at the Sluis Van yards. Suddenly the reality of what the Grand Admiral was attempting to do and just how hard it would be had begun to sink in. According to Parck Thrawn had managed to sneak up and was in the process of taking all the rebels ships but rather than let Thrawn take the ships from them the rebels had used the fact that Thrawn had forgotten to jam the signals of mole miners and turned the machines on the ships to destroy them. When I had heard this news I was astonished at what had taken place.

"They're desperate." Voss had said when he had given me the details. "As you can imagine, Thrawn wasn't overly happy with the outcome. They did manage to procure some ships but not nearly as many as they had hoped."

I had just shaken my head. The New Republic's victory was empty since they had to destroy the ships to win but it hadn't made me or anyone else feel any better about what had happened.

"So what next?" I had asked.

Voss had shaken his head, "I don't know. Thrawn did not go into details about his plans and I did not ask."

I had nodded and that had been that.

Later I learned that instead of returning to the base for supplies and briefings Thrawn had chosen to take the ships he had managed to obtain to a secret location and then go back to Wayland to check on the progress of the clones being created there. All Voss could tell me Thrawn had other ideas and they did not involve returning to Nirauan for the next little while.

In a way I was relieved to hear this because I was pretty sure if he were to see me in my current state he'd know instantly something wasn't right and badger me about it. The morning sickness was proving to be an issue and there wasn't much the doctor could really do about it except prescribe herbal remedies and teas which helped a little but not enough. The very fact that I couldn't go near stim'caf alone would have set off Thrawn's curiosity alarm bells.

I had told Park that I had come down with a particularly bad version of the Corellian Flu which had a long recovery time and he accepted this without question. It meant no one would think it strange that I rested a great deal or that instead of working in the pit instead I spent a lot of my time reading in the quiet of my quarters, not that I figured anyone would really care anyway, but it was always good to have an excuse. With Thrawn's campaign so far underway things at the base were fairly busy and I was a minor blip on the radar as far as most of the people were concerned.

I was not surprised when Voss came to me shortly after the news about the Sluis Van raid to tell me that the few Chiss who had been learning basic had told him they no longer had the time to study and felt they had come sufficiently far enough to more than get by. I had to agree with this assessment of their skills and in the end I didn't mind the break. I was exhausted almost all the time which surprised me but apparently was normal according to what the doc said.

"Your body is a little busy at the moment," he said when I complained about it during a check up. "I don't, for a second, imagine that growing another being is easy and neither should you."

When I made a face he had just laughed. "My dear you had better get used to your body and your time no longer being your own." He admonished.

It was a daunting thing, this little life that was slowly but surely growing inside of me, but it was also infuriating. While I still could not sense or feel it I was well aware of its presence due to the morning sickness that seemed to happen at the most inopportune times. The almost constant nausea was driving me crazy.

"I do not know what to say, Merlyn, usually I can address this problem with standard medications but in your case there's not much we can do. The herbs are not

helping and the antic emetic drugs are too risky and unfortunately I cannot think of anything else that might work for you," he said, "I will do some more research and see if I can find anything to help because you are supposed to be gaining weight not losing it."

I patted my abdomen feeling the ever so slight roundness that I was pretty sure wasn't fat. "This little alien is not making my life easy. Just like his father."

"His?"

"Feels like a him." I smiled. "It's always males making my life hard."

Doctor Thracer gave me a look full of worry. "I realise that I am preaching to deaf ears but do not get too attached to this pregnancy you are not out of the woods yet, not by a long shot."

I made a face. "I know, I try but it's difficult."

"I understand that but I am concerned."

"You said everything was ok."

He sighed. "You are in no immediate danger and as far as I, and all this equipment, can tell you are stable but the fact that you are so sick so much of the time worries me a great deal. You have to eat and you really have to gain some weight."

"You want me to get fat?" I grinned.

He shook his head with a smile. "You are a slender woman Merlyn. You were tiny when I first met you and you're still tiny. If it were not for the fact that I've actually seen you tuck away more food than a grown man on occasion I'd think there was something wrong. I do not think that getting fat is one of the things you need to worry about. I am quite sure that the admiral will adore you no matter what, after all he's stuck with you in spite of all your crazy antics. I only need to see the way he looks at you to know that he won't care about a bit of extra weight as long as you are healthy and well and I dare say he'd welcome that to finding you skinnier than a skeleton."

"Funny ha ha." I retorted, getting off the exam bed.

He regarded me for a moment. "You don't have any abdominal pains, especially sharp ones or any spotting, do you?"

I shook my head. "No, just nausea, vomiting and a lot of really, really bad dreams which I guess would explain why I am so tired all the time."

"Well the same advice still follows no heavy lifting, no stress and your mission is to find food you can keep down and to drink more fluids." Doctor Thracer said flapping his hand at me in a shooing motion. "Now, I have patients to see to and you seem to be healthy so go away and stop worrying."

I nodded and then because there was nothing else I left to find something useful to do.

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As I washed my face and stared at my reflection in the mirror I could understand why Doctor Thracer was so concerned. I looked gaunt and there were terrible dark circles under my eyes. I had hoped that the soup I had eaten would stay put but it hadn't and I was getting really fed up of this. It was late and this was wearing me down and even I was starting to worry about the baby, about myself. I was tired. I was tired of being sick and even more tired of the terrible dreams which had me waking up

screaming in terror. I was scared and feeling very sorry for myself. I probably would have spent more time feeling that way had the chimes to the door not suddenly rung making me jump in fright. I made sure I didn't look quite as scary as I felt and went to answer the door.

"Syal!" I said surprised to see her.

"Hullo Merly, can I come in?"

I stepped back to let her past. "Are the boys okay?"

"Oh they're fine," she said with a smile, making her way to the small kitchenette.

"I thought we'd have some tea and a chat. It's been a while since you and I just had a girl's evening. I had K'arla'sh baby sit so we could spend some time together." She replied as she put water in the kettle.

I smiled and pulled the tea pot and two cups out of the cupboard then reached for the tea but was stopped by the touch of Syal's hand.

"Try this tea instead," she said gently, "it's one of my favourites."

We waited in comfortable silence for the water to boil and then with the pot full I placed everything on a tray and which she picked up before I could and we made our way to the living room. We sat and she gazed at me for a very long moment and then she said, "So why did you not tell me you were pregnant Merly?"

For a moment I forgot how to breathe then I shook my head. "How did you....?"

"I've been pregnant enough times to just know," she said as she poured tea and then handed me a cup. "This will help with the morning sickness, or in your case the all the time sickness."

I sniffed the tea suspiciously. "What is this?"

"It's an extract from a root the Zabraki use in their cooking. They call it zjenzär and it's what makes Zabraki food so spicy."

I took a sip and smiled. The taste was familiar to me. I loved Zabraki food. "This really helps?"

She nodded, "I am allergic to most anti emetic drugs and this was suggested to me when everything else failed. My first pregnancy was pretty rough. When medicine couldn't help me I went to see a herbalist and this was what she suggested. I was sceptical but it helped."

"Then why the hell hasn't Doctor Thracer suggested it?"

"It's used in cooking as a spice," she said with a shrug, "that it helps against nausea isn't something most people seem to know about."

"Does everyone know?"

"Know what?" She asked, "Know that you're with child? No I doubt it. The flu has been going around the base so you not looking so well isn't so weird but usually people get over a flu after a couple of weeks and you don't seem to be getting any better. Eventually folks will be wondering about that so I thought you might like some help. Have you gotten word to Thrawn about it?"

I shook my head. "It's too early."

Syal frowned.

"Doctor Thracer, he thinks well, he wants me to be cautious." I sighed. "He keeps warning me about the dangers of cross species mating and the terrible outcomes."

She nodded. "He's worried you cannot carry to term."



"I don't want to tell Thrawn until I'm sure and while he's away it seems selfish to give him yet another thing to worry about."

"I doubt he will see it that way." Syal said, "I get why you think it is a good idea but I think you are wrong. It's his baby as well and even though he is a passive observer he is a part of it, he should know the whole journey not just the last few months. I didn't even know you were trying."

"We weren't," I said with a shrug.

She raised her eyebrows at me so I told her what had happened and when I was done she took a deep breath. "That's not at all like him."

"I know but it doesn't matter anyway because what's done is done," I said absently stroking my abdomen. "Unplanned doesn't mean unwanted," I said with a smile.

She nodded, "But still that's not like him, not at all."

"I don't really know, it's been ages since we've actually spoken."

"Still has he ever kept anything important like this from you before?"

I thought about it for a moment and then shook my head. "Not that I can ever remember. He's never kept anything from me that would impact me in that way," I said slowly. "I mean he won't talk about his work much, in fact he flat out refuses to discuss it most of the time so I really don't know anything that goes on in that area, but if it was something to do with me, to do with us, as far as I know he's never lied and he's always been upfront about things. It's one of the things I love about him. I always knew where I stood with him but lately...I don't know especially after this."

"What do you think it means then?"

I shook my head, "I don't know."

She was silent for a moment, "You have to tell him about the baby. Men don't like it when women keep such secrets from them, you have to tell him."

I smiled sadly. "A very good friend of mine once told me the exact same thing."

"And was she right?"

"More than she will ever know," I said quietly, thinking of Cati.

Syal gave me a puzzled look so in order to change the subject I told her the whole story about having to accompany Grand Admiral Zaarin to one of the Emperor's Grand Balls. By the time I was finished with the story she was in tears from laughing so hard.

"Zaarin must have been so mad at you," she said between breaths.

"You have no idea," I said ruefully, "In fact he was so pissed that he tried to rape me a year or so later."

"What!" She very nearly spilled the tea from her cup.

I nodded and told her that story too.

"You're unbelievable, Merly," she said with a grin. "You look so... I don't know...harmless."

I grinned. "I know but I grew up on a docking bay in Mos Eisley, trust me I had to learn the hard way how to defend myself. One of the mechanics at the bay showed me how," I said, surprised at the pang of sadness I felt at the thought of Jyrki. "Seems like forever ago though and I never imagined for one moment I would be living at the other end of the galaxy, in love with a man who is not even human and pregnant with his child."

"Do you regret it?"

"Not a bit." I replied and I almost meant it, if Syal spotted the lie she let it slide.

"So any word on when Thrawn will return to the base?" She asked after a moment's quiet.

I shook my head. "No. Last I heard he was returning to Myrkr for a sweep and clear."

"So it could be a while before he returns?"

"Your guess is as good as mine Syal." I replied, "But I hope it's soon."

"Yeah I understand. It's so hard when they are away."

"Usually I can deal with it but this... pregnancy... changed all that."

"It always does." She nodded, "It always, always does."

We both sat back against the couch with a sigh. And for the very first time I understood what my Uncle had meant when he had said that choosing to be with being with an Imperial lifer was my heartache. I was so grateful to have a friend like Syal who understood exactly what it was like.

## Chapter Ten

I woke up covered in sweat gripping my belly protectively screaming at something to stay away from my baby. When the last vestiges of the nightmare slipped away and I realised where I was, I burst into tears. Never in my life had I missed Thrawn more and never in my life had I felt so scared. Once the crying jag passed I just rested my head upon my knees, hugging them close to my chest trying to remember how to breathe.

The nightmares were almost always the same, ending with me waking while trying to protect my unborn child from some terrible danger I could never recall once I was awake no matter how hard I tried. When I had talked about this with Doctor Thracer he theorised that it was my subconscious fear of not carrying to term but I wasn't so sure. I had always had bad dreams, some worse than others but these ones were indefinable and insidious. As if some terrible enemy was out there waiting, lurking to create havoc on my life, my world and everything I knew.

Knowing that I was not going to get back to sleep I heaved myself out of the bed, got dressed and made my way down to the small cantina. The night cook on duty, Toryyn Tuary glanced at me knowingly. This was not the first time he had seen me after a bad nightmare and I was sure it wouldn't be the last.

"Same as usual?"

I nodded and watched as he made me a large cup of something he called a 'shai which was warm, creamy, somehow very comforting and didn't make me sick. I loved the blend of spices he used to make the drink whose recipe had been his mother's. She had made this drink for him and his brother when they were children to help them sleep.

"How's the family doing Toryyn?"

"Good, I got word that my sister's having another baby. I am going to be an uncle again."

I grinned. "Wow congratulations. How many does this one make?"

"This will be her fourth child." He smiled and then asked hesitantly, "How are you doing?"

"You mean aside from the terrible sleeping habits? I'm good." I answered with a smile.

"Glad to hear it," he said handing me a large mug.

"So what is the latest scuttlebutt?" I asked taking a welcome sip from my a'shai. Toryyn was the best source of base gossip around.

"Marika and Joshi are a couple."

I smiled. "That's not news, anyone with half a clue could see that was going to happen."

"True." Toryyn nodded, "But now it's official."

I laughed. It was not unexpected that after a certain amount of time couples would start to happen on the base and while there was no outright directive against it, Thrawn was smarter than that, most people didn't go out of their way to announce it either. "Sometimes living here is like being in the middle of a bad holo-drama."

He gave me a look which said 'and you would know all about that wouldn't you'. "I did hear a whisper that The Admiral was in the Kessel Sector, near Honoghr but that was a while back, I also heard something went on at Endor."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow. "Wonder what he was doing all the way out there."

He shook his head. "No idea, they don't give us cooks any real information but the *Virulent* is orbit maybe there lays your answer."

"The *Virulent*?" I asked, "When did they arrive?"

"A couple of hours ago, I had a few of the crew come through here," he said, "They like my nala pudding it seems."

I glanced up at the chrono on the wall. "You're about to get busier, the watch just changed."

"The hungry hoards wanting breakfast before they go to bed, go figure. I love this time of the morning." He gave me his sweet one sided grin and nodded at the first group to come through the door. "Showtime."

"Talk to you later, I'm headed to the back lounge to read." I gave him a little wave and then left before the full watch change crowd came in and things got loud.

I liked the smaller lounge because it was usually quiet and not well used so I could sit in my favourite chair near the window and read without anyone bothering me. Tonight I was all on my own which was nice.

I was currently half way through a book, a set of biographies of renowned Chiss personalities that had been given to me by one of my language students. It was fun to read and I had been pleasantly surprised to find that Thrawn had been considered a "personality" although there wasn't much written that I didn't already know. It was fun to read but it also made me miss him more.

I marked my place in the book with my finger and stared mindlessly out of the window wondering what the hell Thrawn was doing in the Kessel Sector. The last I had heard he had returned to Myrkr to destroy what was left of the smuggler base he had found there. Honoghr was Rukh's home world but I could not come up with any good reason why Thrawn would want to go there.

Rukh had told me once in a rare talk that his home world had been all but destroyed by the Rebellion and that Darth Vader had promised to help rebuild it but I didn't know more than that. There wasn't much written about Honoghr in the planetary database and even less about the beings that inhabited it. I guess that neither the Emperor nor Lord Vader had wanted anything public about one of the most ruthless assassins in the galaxy. When Lord Vader had rewarded Thrawn by giving him the Noghri Thrawn had been pretty tight lipped about it. When I had first met Rukh it was not the very best of circumstances but since then we had become friends of a sort, as much as friends was possible with a deadly Noghri assassin. He trained with me occasionally because Thrawn had asked him to but personally I think he enjoyed putting me on my ass. Most of the time I enjoyed the workouts, the Noghri fighting style was singular and beautiful and I had learned a lot. I was so deep in thought that I didn't hear the door open nor did I notice the person walking up to where I was sitting until he spoke half scaring me out of my seat.

"I was told I could find you in here." The voice was warm and familiar.

I looked up and smiled. "Ged!"

"Well that's a smile worth travelling light years for," he said leaning down to kiss my cheek. I didn't pull away from him and smiled at his familiarity. It was a good job the room was empty; the gossip mill would run rampant. He pulled up a seat next to mine and sat back in it with a sigh.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, "I wasn't expecting the *Virulent* back for weeks."

"New intel and supplies, it's a short turn around," he said evasively with a slight shrug. "So how have you been?"

"Doing okay. Had a bout of the Corellian flu but I'm getting better. I hope that you've been vaccinated against it, it's on the base."

He grinned, "Already taken care of. You're up late or should I say early."

"Bad dreams."

Ged knew all about my nightmares. "Well that explains the shadows under your eyes but not the fact that you are glowing, you look radiant. I guess living here must agree with you."

It was my turn to shrug. "No one is shooting at me, I don't get woken up every few hours with surprise drills and the food here is better so I guess that helps."

He laughed. "I will be sure to tell Remy you said that about his food."

"Don't you dare! He was already insulted enough as it was when I wouldn't touch his version of Corellian Spice cake."

Ged smiled at the memory. "And then he was about as apologetic as it gets once he found out the reason."

"Now you know why I call that cake Zaarin's surprise."

"You do seem to attract the scyks, especially the older, more influential ones."

"Was that a dig Admiral Larsen?" I asked with a smile.

"Maybe a small one," He conceded.

I shrugged. "I cannot help it if older men find me interesting but you know the same could be said for almost all the palace girls. I think older men just love young women."

"I wouldn't know." Ged replied. "I stayed away from that kind of trouble."

"Until I came along it seems."

He gave me a sideways look. "Oh Merly you are whole new level of pain in the rear. Palpatine warned me about you."

"He did?"

Ged nodded. "Mmm, but that's a story for another time though. I am not here long enough to tell it."

I just smiled at the familiar bantering. "So how are things going on the campaign front?"

"It's like an elegant dance," Ged said with a graceful gesture of his hand, "And you know better than anyone else just how clever Thrawn is at complicated dance moves but the rebs are smart. They seem to manage to get past some of his plans and that crazy old Jedi master Thrawn has working for him is a real piece of work."

"Have you met him?"

"No, Thrawn keeps our fleets quite separate. He doesn't want to tip his hand to the rebels that we even exist," Ged said brushing away a piece of nonexistent lint from his trousers.

I smiled. "He always keeps his cards close to his chest. It gets annoying after a while" I said, "I don't doubt that Thrawn can keep his dark-side pet under control though. That's what his furry little friends are for."

"Yes and their effects are most unpleasant."

I nodded knowingly. "Well don't go down to the sublevels then, the place is full of them."

"Is that so?"

I shook my head. "You'll have to ask Thrawn about it all. I am sworn to secrecy."

"More cloak and saber stuff." Ged retorted dismissively. "Thrawn's whole campaign is full of it." He shook his head, "Well, C'boath is on Jomark for the time being."

"So what was Thrawn doing at Endor?"

"You heard about that? Aside from dealing with rebels there, he met an old friend, I believe."

"Oh?"

"Ever hear of a smuggler named Kaarde?" Ged asked.

I nodded. "Talon Kaarde, yeah I've heard of him. Information is his game, likes to play all sides of the fence depending on who pays best, usually smart enough not to get killed while doing it but he's not any friend of mine, old or otherwise."

"Thrawn had him taken prisoner."

"What? How'd he manage that? Kaarde is about as wily as it gets in the smuggler not wanting to be taken alive category."

"It's true. Apparently Kaarde's new girlfriend gave him up."

"Kaarde has a girl? That's news to me, all the gossip usually says is that he was just too busy being the underworld's new man to have time for a girl, not that many didn't try."

"Actually, you know her," Ged said smugly, "Speaking of palace girls."

"Now I am intrigued."

"You remember the Emperor's favourite courtesan?"

"Oh you're kidding me," I said, "Mara Jade is slumming with Talon Kaarde? I thought she was dead. She just vanished after escaping from Isard's clutches."

"Apparently not." Ged made a face. "She went to Thrawn. Wanted to rejoin the Imperial forces but really was there to bargain."

"Bargain?"

"Kaarde's life for the Katana Fleet."

"Oh this just gets better and better," I said, "The Katana Fleet? Give me a break. That's a fairy tale pilots talk about when they've had one too many."

"Well according to Jade it's very real and she bargained Kaarde's life for it."

I raised both eyebrows. "Wow. That is an unexpected twist."

Ged's laughter filled the room. "You said it."

His laugh was infectious and I giggled until it hurt wincing at the sudden sharp pain in my belly.

"Everything under control?" Ged asked catching my expression.

I took a deep breath, "Yeah just not used to laughing like that."

"You're with the wrong guy then," he said with a smirk.

"Keep trying Admiral." I grinned at him once the pain had subsided. There was a moment's silence and then I asked. "So what did you really want to see me about Ged?" and suddenly the atmosphere in the room wasn't quite so warm any more.

Ged's manner shifted from easy going to serious. "I would have waited until morning but I heard you were up," he said as he shifted in his seat, crossing his leg up on his knee. "I was wondering when you would be returning to the *Virulent* to resume your duties there."

I sighed and looked out of the window. Dawn was still a few hours off. "I'm not," I said after a few seconds. I turned back to look at Ged only to find him staring at me intently.

"May I ask why?"

"I'm happy here," I said, wincing as another strange twinge of pain lanced my belly.

Ged cocked his head to one side and regarded me carefully. "Really." It wasn't a question and his sarcasm annoyed me.

"Yes, really."

"I would never have pinned you for the stay at home type of girl Merly."

"Then you don't know me as well as you think, Ged Larsen," I said more sharply than I meant to.

He sat back and sighed. "You mean to tell me that you are staying here to wait for Thrawn to come back, playing the part of the devoted mate and you're content with that?"

"You're angry," I said with some surprise not bothering to answer his original question.

It was his turn to draw a steadying breath. "I don't often hear the word no," he said being evasive.

"Ged, I'm happy here can't we just leave it at that?" I did not want to argue with him. I did not want to have to tell him the real reason, I too could be evasive. Thrawn should be the first one to know about this child not Ged Larsen.

"Well, maybe this will change your mind. I need you."

I grinned. I couldn't help it. "You practice that line in front of the mirror?"

"No, and I don't mean like that, you made that abundantly clear and I do know when to back off."

"Thrawn spoke with you," I said flatly reading between the lines.

"Let's just say your place in the Grand Admiral's life has been well clarified for me," Ged said dryly. "You should have said something to me right from the start."

I made a face, "Not this again," I got up out of the chair and rubbed my belly absently. "I told you why I didn't say anything and for the record when you actually asked about it I did tell you we were a couple, it was you who pushed the point."

"But I was right wasn't I?"

I scowled. "About what?"

"About the fact that a small part of you does like me." His smile disarmed my annoyance.

"Well you were partly right, yes." I conceded.

"Partly?"

I walked around a little, "You were right when you said I do seem to attract the scyks."

"And the lady wins the round." He nodded. "Come sit back down and stop pacing about you're making this scyk nervous."

"What do you really want Ged?" I asked ignoring his suggestion to sit.

"We, I need someone to do a pickup."

I raised my eyebrows.

"We need a civilian and a civilian ship. We have an agent missing and we can't get to them."

"You don't need me for that; you need a tac-team." I sighed. "Who is the agent anyway?"

Ged shook his head. "I can't tell you that until you come onboard, the information is highly classified."

"Well it doesn't matter, find someone else. I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"I told you, it's personal."

Ged stood up and rounded on me. "What the hell is going on with you? You're one of the best agents we have no matter what you tell yourself. You speak multiple languages, you fly like a maniac and you are a force user. No one on the Rebel side even knows you exist. You're a ghost in the machine. You can come and go as you please and no one would ever suspect you. You are the best person for this job and if you don't do it chances are our agent will die, do you want that on your shoulders?"

I looked him in the eyes. "You have no idea what's on my shoulders so back off," I said very quietly.

He took a step back from me. "Merlyn...."

"Don't," I said holding up my hand. "You have a boat load of people perfectly capable to do an extraction. Why me?"

"I already told you why. Are you fishing for compliments now?"

"No," I said icily. "I want a reasonable explanation for why you want me to do a job you have better trained people for and the 'you're the best agent we have crap' doesn't cut it. Tell me the truth or get out of my face."

"I told you the truth. You have a civilian ship and you're not on any of the New Republic's lists as a known Imperial so you can slip in behind enemy lines."

"What the hell are you talking about? Enemy lines... you sound like a bad spy from one of Jeb Holloway's books."

"I can't say any more than that, not unless you tell me you'll do this."

"Well I can't so stop asking me."

Ged's jaw tightened. "Merlyn, it's your job!"

"My job!" I raised my voice, starting to get angry. "My job? I don't work for you, I don't work for the Empire any more at all to be honest and I sure as Sarlacc don't have any specific job! I am not one of your agents, or one of the Emperor's Hands or any other fancy title you can come up with no matter what you think. I was Lord Vader's office girl and that was hard enough. I have done my time Ged and I am not doing this sort of work for you or anyone else. I am not an agent."

"I beg to differ. Thrawn has used you on several occasions as just such creature. You are an Imperial agent whether or not you believe it and I am damned sure Thrawn would tell you to do as you are told in this case."

"I wouldn't bet on that and my answer is still no. Find someone else."

"Why?" He asked sounding almost hurt.

"I told you it's personal!"

"That is not an answer."

"It's the only answer you are going to...." Suddenly pain ripped through my abdomen and I doubled over, knees buckling to the floor, yelping in agony.



"Merly?"

I gasped as I curled over my belly protectively, my forehead touching the floor as I fought against the pain.

"What is it, are you okay?" he asked kneeling at my side.

I gripped his arm, "Get the doctor now." I gasped as a second, sharper pain tore through me. The air danced and I could feel myself getting light headed. "Doc... now... please."

He picked me up and almost ran out of the lounge. "Where's the med center?" He barked at someone in the corridor. I never heard the answer because I screamed as a third even sharper pain sliced up into me. By the time he had reached the medlab Doctor Thracer was already there and waiting, someone must have alerted him we were coming.

"We'll take it from here Admiral Larsen." I heard the doctor say as I was laid on a gurney.

"Is she okay?"

"I have no idea but as soon as I do I'll let you know now if you don't mind..." Doctor Thracer said gesturing for Ged to leave as the med droid moved me into the next diagnostic room.

Once the door was closed I reached out to the doctor and caught his arm. "Is it the baby?"

"I don't know yet. What happened?"

"Arguing." I breathed. "One minute we're arguing then all of a sudden it felt as though I was being impaled on a knife."

"And now?"

"Still hurts," I said through gritted teeth.

"Okay you need to calm down and breathe slow deep breaths for me, can you do that?" He said.

I nodded and concentrated on doing what he had told me as the diagnostic scanner in his hand hummed quietly. When it was done the room seemed unusually silent.

"My baby?"

"The baby is fine," he said as calmly as he could but there was worry underneath his words. "I'm giving you something for the pain."

"What is wrong?" I asked wincing at the sting of the hypospray.

"There is a small tear in the placenta," he said.

"Is it bad? Can you fix it?"

"It could be very serious but this tear is very small and luckily the bleeding is minimal."

"Bleeding? I'm bleeding?"

"Yes, but it's very minor and we're going to deal with that now. You're okay, do you understand. Bacta will help repair it however this means from now on in you rest and by rest I mean no stress, no exercise, no running around, no flying, no travelling, no heavy lifting or sneaking down to work in the pit, no anything and absolutely no arguing with admirals, any admirals. I should be confining you to a bed here but I know that won't happen, so will you promise me to rest?"

"Bacta, you're not going to put me in the tank!" I struggled to sit up but he wouldn't let me.

"No, it can be done locally and the med droid will take care of you once I get you sedated."

"Ged, does he know? He can't know, not before Thrawn... he...must ... not...know." I could feel myself get ramped up again but Doctor Thracer placed a hand on my shoulder.

"You know what I said about no stress well that starts right now. I will tell Admiral Larsen you are fine, that it's nothing to worry about. I will also tell Admiral Larsen that I want to keep you here for observation and that you need to rest which you do and the mild sedative I am giving you will make you sleep so even if he wanted to ask you questions he won't get any answers. The *Virulent* is scheduled to depart once the supply loading has been done so he will be out of your hair soon enough but I have to tell you, my dear, you had better talk to Thrawn about your condition sooner rather than later. You won't be able to keep this a secret for too much longer."

"Why not?"

He smiled, "Because you're starting to show." said and before I could argue I felt the push and sting of the hypospray. The drug worked quickly and I slid into a dreamless sleep letting the medical droid do its work.

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I woke up groggy and disoriented to find Ged sitting by the bed. It was surreal in more ways than I could say. For a moment I wondered if there was not some great cosmic joke being played at my expense when it came to the men in my life but then decided I was too tired to really care. If Ged wanted to sit and make sure I was still alive then who was I to argue but I hoped that the base scuttlebutt didn't find out about this or else Thrawn would have a field day and I sure as hell didn't want to deal with that right now either.

"Welcome back to the land of the living."

I looked at Ged and smiled. "I thought you would have gone by now."

He shrugged slightly, "We were scheduled to depart an hour ago but there was an issue with one of the supply runs."

"So you decided to hide out here?"

"I would have been here earlier but your doctor is quite protective of you, you know," he said with that charming smile of his. "He wouldn't let me see you until now and only because I pulled rank. He was quite insistent I don't do anything to, how did he put it, agitate you."

"He's known me for ages, saved my life a few times. He's family." I replied. "That whole spiced cake incident? Well if it hadn't been for Doctor Thracer I would not be here today."

"I can see why Thrawn keeps him on staff then. How are you feeling?" he asked, his concern was genuine.

"Better. Thank you," I said sitting up a little.

He nodded. "You gave me a hell of a scare."

"Sorry." I just smiled faintly. He wasn't the only one who had been scared. I sensed he wanted to ask more but he didn't and I was grateful. I didn't want to have to lie to him, I wasn't sure he would believe any lie I told anyway.

"Look, I don't want to get you all riled up again because I think your doctor will send Rukh after me but I could use you on the *Virulent*. So when you get better think about it, will you?"

I nodded. "I appreciate that but...."

Ged held up his hand. "No buts, you have a place with me and my ship. You're a talented young woman and, my personal feelings aside; I could use your abilities. So if you change your mind...."

"Thanks," I said, "That's good to know. I appreciate it." And oddly enough that was the truth. It was somehow comforting although I could never have said why I felt that way.

He looked as though he was about to say more but Doctor Thracer came in. "Miss Gabriel needs to rest," he said in a way that brooked no argument.

"Very well," Ged said as he leaned down to give me a light kiss on the cheek. I didn't miss Doctor Thracer's look of disapproval. "Next time no theatrics just chit chat and a drink, okay?"

"Aye, aye admiral." I replied and lay back, closed my eyes and let sleep claim me again.

It was early when I woke up to see the doctor standing by me and the sound of the hand scanner humming quietly.

"Good morning." Doctor Thracer smiled. "How are you feeling now?"

"Sleepy," I said, "Waking up, need to use the fresher and want to clean my teeth. Has Ged gone?"

"I guess you are feeling better." He nodded finishing up the scan. "The *Virulent* left orbit hours ago and Admiral Larsen along with it."

"Don't be too hard on him, he's not as bad as everyone thinks," I said with a smile.

The only answer I got to that was a disdainful look.

"So what's the verdict?" I sighed gesturing to the scanner in the doctor's hand.

"The scans show the baby is okay now but was in some distress earlier," he said.

Even hearing that word was unsettling. "Distress?"

"Everything is okay for now though but you must rest until that tear is fully healed." He wagged his finger at me. "So you are stuck in here with me for the next two days. The bacta should take care of it."

I did not complain about that because if the truth were to be told I was grateful to have the excuse not to do anything or go anywhere but after two days I began to get restless. I wasn't a good candidate for enforced bed rest. I never realised how much I moved during the day until I wasn't allowed to do so and I was certain I had driven the doctor nuts. There was a palpable air of relief when he grudgingly released me from my stay in the medlab.

"I know telling you to spend most of your time lying down is like telling a rebel to sign up for the Imperial academy but I cannot stress this enough, you must take it easy especially for the next five days. I do not want to scare you, no wait I do want to scare you. So go to your quarters and lie down, or sit down in your bed and read, sleep, or watch those bad Holloway holo-dramas you like so much. You must not exert yourself. No heavy lifting, no stressful movements and no more arguments with anyone, it gets your blood pressure up and I am concerned about that as well."

I nodded unhappily. "Yes doctor."

"Oh and you need this," he said handing me a slender bracelet. "It will monitor you and if there are any more emergencies that require you being carried to the infirmary in true Holloway dramatic fashion all you need to do is activate it and I will get an alert." He showed me how to use it and then he watched as I had slipped it on my wrist.

"Ged did that whole manly rescue thing without my permission." I replied feeling my face flush.

"Dramatic or not, he saved a lot of time by his actions and he saved you a world of pain. It could have been a lot worse if he had waited for the medical team to come to you. You owe him a thank-you at some point." He chided. "Now you may return to your quarters. Promise me you will rest and follow my orders."

I sighed, just what I needed to owe Ged a big favour, then I nodded and let the doctor help me into a hover chair which he guided out to where the med droid was waiting.

"If have any problems you comm. me right away." Doctor Thracer said, "I will be there as soon as possible."

"Roger," I said and then returned to my quarters hoping no one saw me and asked too many questions. My secret was getting harder and harder to keep. I wished Thrawn would come back soon. Some great deity must have been listening because eight days later I got my wish.

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I was asleep when he arrived back on the base. It was only when he slipped quietly into the bed did I wake up enough to acknowledge his presence.

"Well this is a first," he said softly as I snuggled into his warmth. "Usually I haven't even stepped off the shuttle and you are wide awake, waiting for me up on the gantry. I wondered where you were."

"It's cold up there this time of night," I replied, still half asleep, "Maybe you should plan for arriving during the day instead of all odd hours in the early morning. I'm tired."

His hand caressed my face, "I've been replaced by a warm bed." He smiled as he kissed the side of my neck. "But perhaps this will change your mind." His hand wandered up under my night shirt.

The thrill of his touch made me ache and I gasped. I had almost forgotten what this felt like, it had been so long. He ran the flat of his hand over my belly, stroking over the small roundness gently and I smiled at the shivers of desire that leapt up through me but then Doctor Thracer's words about rest sprung unwanted in my head. I caught Thrawn's hand in mine and pulled his arm so that instead of caressing me it was wrapped around me and still.

"You must really be tired," he said settling in to spoon around me.

"You have no idea." I mumbled.

"Then we will have to catch up in the morning." He murmured in my ear, his breath warm on my skin.

I just nodded, yawned and drifted back to sleep safe in his arms. When I woke up next it was morning, sunlight danced through the window and the scent of fresh stim'caf permeated the air. Thrawn smiled as he put the cup on the bedside table but unfortunately it had the opposite effect to that which he had hoped. I had no time to apologise or explain as I flew out of bed, hand clapped over my mouth, racing to the fresher just in time to throw up.

"Are you alright?" Thrawn asked through the door.

I was too busy throwing up to answer him so he knocked on the door.  
"A'myshk'a?"

"Just give me a moment." I managed to say before heaving again.

"Should I call the doctor?"

"No!" The last thing I wanted was for Doctor Thracer to come charging in with a med team thinking my morning sickness was some huge emergency.

"Merlyn?" Thrawn knocked again this time starting to sound annoyed as well as concerned.

"I'm fine." I yelled at him when I was certain this round of vomiting had passed. By the time I came out of the fresher Thrawn was sitting in one of the reading chairs near the bed, had finished his 'caf and was looking at me with one of those unreadable expressions I had come to loath.

"Your definition of fine is interesting." He remarked coolly.

"Sorry about that," I said as I slipped carefully back into bed. "Can you take that away?" I asked waving at the offending stim'caf by the bed. "Please?"

He obliged, sitting back in the chair, cupping his hands around the mug as though to warm them. "Are you ill?"

"No." I shook my head.

"Then what was that all about?"

"It's nothing to worry about, really."

"Nothing to worry about? You just spent ten minutes throwing up, it doesn't sound like nothing to worry about."

"I'm fine. It's nothing."

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly then drank from the stim'caf which had been meant for me. "I see." which was Thrawn speak for *I know you're not telling me something and I don't like it all that much.*

"No, I don't think you do see," I said wearily.

"Well, my dear, you are not exactly being forthcoming with information. I would dearly like to know the truth because the base is buzzing with rumours about you."

"Oh?" I folded my arms across my chest.

"Well, for a start I am curious as to why I am hearing about you throwing up all the time, so much so that several people have asked me if you are seriously ill, why you stopped all your work in the pit, the deck officer is quite concerned? That people think you are dying from some terrible illness because you spend more time with the doctor than you do with anyone else and why ten days ago Ged Larsen carried you to the infirmary while you screamed in pain. And now I bring you stim'caf and it sends you running to the fresher to vomit."

"Wow, news travels fast," I said tartly.

He tilted his head to the side. "And answers, do they also travel fast."

I heaved myself out of bed slowly and made my way over to the kettle to make myself a cup of Syal's magic tea to settle my stomach. Thrawn remained silent, watching me while I pottered around. When I was done I sat back on the bed and faced him warming my hands around the cup. "May I ask you a question before we start the whole Merly-interrogation thing?"

"Of course," he said with a slight amused twitch of his lips.

"Why did you not tell me you stopped taking evexelhan?"

A frown crossed his face. "I did tell you." It wasn't a lie and he was surprised by my question.

"No, I would have remembered that conversation." I countered.

"I sent you a letter to tell you because we were out of communications range. I assigned Jarack Behl to work with Larsen, who had requested a spec-ops operative, so he was the courier."

"A letter?" I asked sipping my tea.

"Yes. I wrote as soon as I stopped taking the drug so that you could see the *Virulent's* medical officer to discuss birth control," he said and then added more vaguely, "The evexelhan was causing some ... problems."

"There were no letters from you about that while I was on Ged's ship," I said with a scowl.

"Jarack might have missed you when you left to go to Hjal. You did leave the ship in rather a hurry and you didn't tell anyone where you were headed right away either."

I ignored the underlying reprimand. "I never got the message at all." I was surprisingly angry all of a sudden. "Not on the *Virulent*, not while I was on Hjal and not after I came back here. What ever you sent, I never got it."

He frowned some more, paused slightly then took a different tack, "What does this have to do with you being ill?"

"I'm not ill," I said quietly, "And it has everything to do with everything."

His eyebrow arched and he gave me that *Okay I'm waiting* face. "So if you are not ill, my dear, then what is wrong with you?"

"Nothing is wrong with me," I said with a sigh.

"Merlyn...," He was losing his patience.

"I'm not sick," I said softly, pausing while trying to find the right words. I looked at him knowing that once I told him the whole world would change, everything would change and it scared me half to death.

The expression on Thrawn's face went from annoyed to concerned, "What is it?" He asked quietly. "Is it so terrible you cannot tell me?"

I shook my head. "It's not terrible," I bit my lip suddenly terrified.

"Then what is it that has you acting like the world is going to end?"

I opened and closed my mouth twice while he waited and then because I couldn't find any easy way to tell him I just said it, "I'm not ill," I said quietly, "I'm pregnant."

The air in the room went very still. The moment I had both longed for and dreaded came and went in an instant. There could be no going back now and I felt as though the world had stopped. For a very long moment Thrawn just stared at me and said nothing, his expression completely unreadable. He steepled his fingers over his lips drew a deep breath and then he broke the silence.

"Pregnant?" He said very quietly.

"Yes." I answered all the while never taking my eyes from his face.

"So you're not ill then?" His eyebrows raised up a notch.

"No."

"Pregnant." This time it was more of a whisper to himself than to me and this time it wasn't a question.

I kept quiet because now I didn't have any more words and I still couldn't read his expression. He sat perfectly still for another few seconds and then he stood up to pace about.

"We are going to have a child?" He asked carefully looking at me over his shoulder.

"Hopefully, if everything goes well," I replied.

He stopped pacing about and stood stock still for what seemed far too long. I wondered if the sound of my beating heart could be heard all over the base. I was suddenly very anxious.

"Say something," I whispered finally, "Please?"

"I do not know what to say. This was...," He searched for the right word so I helped him.

"Unexpected? Unwanted? Bad timing? Unwelcome?" My own words sounded angry and I could feel myself start to shake. Tears welled in my eyes.

He looked at me and then said carefully, "Unexpected yes, but not unwanted, bad timing... perhaps but not at all unwelcome."

I looked up into his face and blinked the tears out of my eyes.

His eyes tracked to my hands and he frowned, "You're trembling, are you alright?"

I just stared at him, "Are you?"

He looked at me as though he were seeing me for the very first time. His eyes studied my demeanour, my expression and everything else. I sat very still and waited because there was nothing else I could do. I was terrified and it showed. The moment hung in the air and then his whole body language relaxed as sudden understanding flooded his features.

"I am so blind," he said more to himself than me as he sat down by my side.

My eyebrows bunched together in puzzlement.

"You were worried about how I would feel," He asked with incredulity, "You thought I would be unhappy about this news? Is this why you tried to keep it a secret?"

I swallowed. "It's awfully big news." I whispered.

He shook his head and caressed my face gently, "I am just ...," He searched for the right word and this time I stayed quiet, "...surprised Tekari. Very, very surprised. I thought you were going to tell me you were deathly ill; that something terrible was happening to you or that you had somehow managed to contract some incurable disease. I was prepared for bad news, not this." He drew a deep breath, "That you are pregnant was the last thing I ever imagined hearing, please forgive my reaction. As usual you surpass my ability to predict what you will do next." He brushed my cheeks with his thumbs, wiping away my tears.

I let out the breath I had been holding and collapsed against him. "So you are not angry?"

"Angry?" He asked in surprise. "You thought I would be angry?" He kissed the top of my head, "After all this time you still cannot read everything on my face. This is good to know." He smiled, "No, I am not angry, far from it but being a father was not something I ever thought to plan for at this time of my life so I need a few moments to process this information." He smiled, "As you said, it's awfully big news."

"Well I didn't exactly plan for this either. I thought you were still taking the evexelhan plus I was told you and I would not be able to conceive."

He cupped my face between his palms. "This is nothing short of a wonder; you are nothing short of a miracle." He sighed, "I am unable to express how I feel in the appropriate manner and I apologise for that but believe me when I say this is the most extraordinary thing I have ever been told in my entire life."

And with those words the dam that I had been holding back from the moment I had first heard about being pregnant burst and I sobbed into his chest while he did the only thing I needed him to do, he held me. Once the crying jag was over he handed me a tissue and got up from the bed.

"How is your stomach?" he asked.

"Better. Syal's zjenzär tea works wonders."

"So Syal knows? Who else does?"

"Well Syal figured it out so maybe others did too but I didn't tell anyone, so as far as I am aware only the doctor, Syal and you. Though, come to think of it she might have told Soontir. He is her husband after all."

"You always were the keeper of secrets," he said gently. "So I can order some breakfast? I think you and I have a lot to talk about and I don't know about you but I'm famished."

I smiled and nodded. "No stim'caf though, for some reason it makes me throw up instantly."

"So I have noticed. Is there anything else I should know about before I order?"

"Nothing fried." I offered. "Fresh fruit works well."

"I'll see what the cook on duty can do." He smiled and before I could say anything else he left.

When he returned it was with a tray laden with food. It made me laugh. He set the tray on the bed, gesturing for me to get back under the covers and sat down beside me.

"I can't eat all of this."

"Some of it is for me," He replied picking up a piece of sliced fruit. "But the a'shai is for you." The kitchen staff seems to know more about what you love to eat than I do."

"Well they feed me more than you do." I told him munching on a piece of toast.

"I am happy to know I leave you in capable hands," he replied .

I glanced into his eyes and sighed. "I'm glad you're back."

He nodded and then he said, "So I believe you should start at the beginning and tell me everything."

And that is what I did in between bites until both I and the food were done. He didn't say anything. He just laid his hand upon my belly and I laid mine upon his. For a moment it was like being bathed in sunlight. I didn't have to be a mind reader to know that in that moment the only emotion in the room was love, pure and simple.

"So for now everything is okay?" He asked once the moment had passed.

"So far so good, but the doctor keeps telling me not to get too attached. His magic number is to get past two hundred days," I didn't mention the whole scary conversation about genetic defects and dna rejection.

"And where are you now?"

"A hundred and thirty-one," I said quietly.

He nodded thoughtfully and then asked. "What about you, Sji'u Tekari, are you okay with this?"

I drew a deep breath, "I'm scared to death. I've never been pregnant before, I never thought I would be a mother before and I have not exactly had a lot of experience with children or babies."

"Having seen you with Syal and Tir's boys I have no doubts about your abilities, you will be a great mother," He replied meaning each and every word.

I lay back against the pillows. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly from out of the blue.

"For what?"

"The evexelhan, I should have double checked and made sure you got my message. It never occurred to me that you might not."

"I understand and Jarack has always managed to get your letters to me no matter what." I shook my head. "I didn't even know you had assigned him to the *Virulent*. You're not the only one good at keeping secrets, Ged is as well."

"Speaking of, what exactly did Larsen want from you before you landed in his arms again?" he asked after he put the tray on the table then settled back beside me.

I made a face and ignored the dig. In spite of everything I liked Ged and I didn't understand all the hostility towards him. I decided it must be a man thing and



left it alone to answer the question. "He said he needed me to retrieve an agent from behind enemy lines, his words not mine."

Thrawn frowned. "He has qualified people for that sort of work."

I nodded, "That's what I told him but he was fairly insistent. It was almost as if it was something personal. One minute we're arguing about this and the next thing I know I am in the infirmary." I shrugged. I had told him about that. "Ged wouldn't tell me anymore about the mission unless I agreed to do it which I couldn't but I also couldn't tell him why not. He thinks I've become some weakling, wailing girl who wastes all her time waiting for her mate to return home from the wars."

"That imagery is sweet but if that's what he thinks of you then he doesn't know you quite as well as he believes he does," Thrawn said with a smile.

I sighed. "He was surprised and hurt when I told him no. His reaction was unusual. He has people far better trained than me for stuff like that. He said it had to be a civilian with a civilian ship but apart from that he wasn't specific and I know he was holding stuff back. Do you know what he's talking about?"

"Not off the top of my head but we have not been in communication as of late," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I heard you were out in the Kessel Sector." Thrawn's eyebrow shot up but before he could say anything I said, "News travels fast on the base, you should know that."

"I had some business on Honoghr addressing the Noghri, a disciplinary matter, nothing to worry about my dear."

I frowned. "How does Rukh feel about that?"

"Rukh's feelings are none of my concern, he does his job and he does not question my actions." Thrawn replied coldly so that I knew there was something deeper going on but he would not talk about it and now was not the time or the place to dig.

"Okay, what about Karrde then and Mara jade?"

Thrawn made another tight lipped expression and shook his head. "This also base gossip?"

"No. Ged told me," I said tartly. "Don't make that cross face, I thought you were going to at least keep me in the loop. You don't and when I asked him what was going on with the campaign, that's what he told me."

He sighed. "Well base scuttlebutt and Admiral Larsen seem to be keeping you well informed. We can discuss that topic at a later time," He replied dryly and I knew this route of conversation was also a dead end for now so I switched back to talking about something a little safer.

"Why doesn't Ged ask Jarack to do the retrieval, I mean he's good at that sneaking around behind enemy lines stuff right?"

"Behl is already working for Larsen so probably he's on assignment already and out of contact."

"Ged never mentioned Jarack once."

"Undercover means undercover, Tekari. It's doubtful that, unless you told him, Larsen even knows how close you and Jarack are."

"Yes but if Jarack had something for me then chances are if he couldn't deliver it he would have asked Ged to. While you and the rest of the galaxy may not like Ged very much he is an Imperial officer and an honourable one at that. Jarack would have given him your letter for me but I never got it and you know that Jarack would go through hell to deliver your correspondence to ...." Suddenly I felt as though my heart had stopped.

"You just went as white as a snow field, what is it?"

"You don't think it's Jarack that's missing do you?" I whispered. "That I never got your letter because Jarack never made it to the *Virulent*." I shook my head, "Why didn't Ged tell you? Jarack is your friend. If he is missing you should know this, you should...."

"Hush." He spoke calmly, "He has been working undercover, and it has to do with finding a leak on board of the *Virulent*. It's entirely possible he didn't want you to know he was there. He probably waited for the appropriate moment to get to you and you left the ship before he could do so. And if he passed the letter along to someone else to deliver it's possible whoever it was forgot. Not everyone is as reliable as Behl."

"But what if...?"

Thrawn's fingers upon my lips silenced me. "Tekari, he's working deep under cover."

"You keep saying that! But what if it is him?" This time he let me finish the sentence. "If Jarack is missing...." I shook my head, "Ged should have told you!" I was starting stress myself out. "He should have said something sooner and not do all this silly cloak and saber stuff!"

"Tekari, calm yourself. Ged Larsen does not run to me every time he has problems, he is quite capable of dealing with missing agents himself."

"Well apparently not since he came to me for help!" I winced at the sliver of pain I felt and clasped my hands over my belly with a gasp.

"Merlyn take a deep breath and calm down. Jarack Behl is perfectly able to take care of himself and if Larsen came to you for help then he already thinks he knows where the missing agent is. Stop jumping to conclusions based on a single missing letter. Now breathe." Thrawn replied quietly as he placed the flat of his hand on my back and rubbed slowly so that my breathing tuned into the motion. Only when I was a lot calmer did he stop. "Better?"

I nodded, "Yes, so what now?"

"Well, if it is Behl who is missing then I need know about it. Aside from my personal correspondence to you, he was carrying exceedingly delicate information," he said getting up off the bed. "I will try to contact the *Virulent* and see what Larsen has to say."

I just looked up at him.

"What is it, Tekari?"

"How long are you on base for?" I asked.

"It was only supposed to be for two days but that might change once I know more from Larsen."

I nodded and made a face. "I hope it's not Jarack," I said quietly.

"Well even if that is the case, it is not your concern. Your only job is to look after our child. Do you understand?" He said leaning down to give me a kiss. "Our child," He murmured in my ear.

I nodded. "I have a scan this morning if you want to be there to see." I patted my belly to emphasize what I meant.

"Really? Comm. me and I will be there," he said as he slipped on his uniform jacket. "In the mean time no stress, was that not what Thomas ordered?"

"Yes." I nodded, surprised to hear the doctor's first name.

"Then for once in your life follow orders please?" He smiled and only after I nodded did he leave.

I decided that in this instance being obedient seemed like a good idea and curled back up in bed until it was time to go and see the doc for the progress check. I could grill Thrawn about his campaign later.

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I suppose we must have looked like every other couple in the galaxy as the doctor waved the scanner over my belly, watching the screen for the images it showed. Suspense and anticipation mingled with something I could not define. Thrawn's hand tightened around mine as the images began to clear. I gasped. It was a three dimensional picture of the baby I carried within me, perfect and more real than I could have possibly imaged.

"There's the head." Doctor Thracer said, and then he chuckled. "He's sucking his thumb."

"He?" Thrawn asked.

I looked at the doctor and he nodded, "Yes Admiral, he. Miss Gabriel is carrying a boy which means you will have a son."

Thrawn just shook his head and stroked my face with his free hand.

"I told you it was a boy, doc. It's always men making my life hell," I grinned. "And the little alien I'm gestating is no exception to this rule."

The doctor moved the scanner and more images and views showed up, each one more astonishing than the last. "Everything looks in order."

"And the placental tear?" Thrawn asked before I could.

"As far as I, and this high tech amazing equipment, can tell there do not seem to be any more issues but my orders still remain, rest, rest followed by more rest. A placental abruption could be a whole other story. You got lucky last time, the tear was small and we caught it early. We don't want there to be a next time. You are not out of the woods yet, and this is still a high risk pregnancy because we don't know how the baby will continue to develop or if there will be further complications due to incompatibility issues. There are still a great many unknowns but so far so good." Doctor Thracer said as he put the scanner down. "I am being optimistically cautious here, so I won't order complete bed rest but I cannot stress this enough; you must not over do it."

"Okay Doc, I read you loud and clear."

Thrawn smiled and ran his fingers over the soft, small round shape of my belly. "Amazing," he said softly.

I glanced at the Doctor. "If you tell anyone you saw him like this I will hurt you."

Much to my surprise both men laughed.

"Beautiful and fierce." Thrawn said.

The doctor made a face, "More like headstrong and annoyingly stubborn."

Thrawn nodded in agreement. "That too."

"So we are good to go?" I asked before any more descriptions of my character got bandied about.

"Yep, until your next check up." The doctor said and motioned for me to get up and get dressed, "Which should be in five days unless something else happens. Do not take that bracelet off."

I nodded then motioned for the doctor to come close so that I could whisper in his ear. When I was done asking my question he smiled. "To answer your question, yes you can although I'd advise a certain amount of restraint and caution you to stop if you feel any pain or have any spotting. But the scans show that everything is okay for the time being so there is no reason to forbid you from having sex."

I blushed. "Thanks doc."

Thrawn smirked so I poked him on the chest. "Just because I asked if we could doesn't mean we will."

Thrawn's smirk broadened.

I poked him again. "You better have the next few hours free because you have a lot to talk to me about and I am not taking no for an answer."

"I suspected that would be the case so I am all yours until fifteen hundred hours," He replied offering me his hand to help me down from the exam bed.

"But first I want food," I said.

"After that breakfast, how can you be hungry?"

"It's lunch time!" I laughed. "And now I'm eating for two!" I said with a grin. "At least that is what the doc here tells me all the time. I asked Galli to make me veghash and Denezeelian fizz pudding."

"Not together I hope," Thrawn said sceptically.

"That was not my plan but now that you mention it...." I grinned.

"Pregnant women and their crazy cravings. Better get used to it Admiral." Doctor Thracer said clapping Thrawn on his arm. "Oh and Admiral...,"

"Yes?"

"While it is still too soon for my taste for this, let me be the first to say congratulations."

Thrawn inclined his head. "Thank you."

"Wow," I said quietly, the reality finally sinking in, "We're going to have a baby."

"If things continue the way they are, it looks that way but Merlyn I know I sound like the master of doom, however I cannot stress this enough, it's still early and there are still so many things that can go wrong so ...," Doctor Thracer began.

I finished for him. "I know, try not to get too attached. We are not out of the woods yet, but every day makes it more real. I can't help it, I'm already attached and now I am excited as well as scared."

"As you should be, my dear." Doctor Thracer smiled. "Now I believe you have a lunch date with the Admiral here and I have work to do so unless there are any problems I should know about then your next check up should be in a week." And with that he ushered us both out of his medlab.

Thrawn stopped and looked at me, "I have arranged for lunch to be brought to my private dining area and after we've eaten you can grill me at your leisure but I don't guarantee you answers for all of your questions."

I stood up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Okay, let's eat, my stomach is growling." Food was starting to rule my life.

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Thrawn had extended his stay on the base due to work on his super secret project in the subbasement along with many other things he would not discuss with me. I didn't try to press him. I had too much on my own mind to worry about his plans and machinations. We had spoken at length about how his campaign was going but mainly the discussion had centered on Mara Jade's unexpected visit to the *Chimaera* and what had happened after that.

"She appears to be quite taken with Karrde." Thrawn had remarked after he had finished telling me about how she and Luke Skywalker had managed to rescue Karrde from the *Chimaera*.

"I had heard that Talon Karrde was charismatic but I never met him. He was one of those smugglers who did not love the spot light and he deals more in

information than in actual goods. He began as a small timer under a guy named Car'das."

"Car'das?" Thrawn had interrupted. "Jorj Car'das?"

"You know of him?"

Thrawn's smile had been enigmatic, "In a manner of speaking. I met him a very long time ago when I was still a young man. It was from him that I learned to speak basic fluently and indirectly he is responsible for the death of my brother. I lost touch of his whereabouts until I joined the Empire and then of course it was easy to obtain some information about the man although after the battle of Yavin he vanished off the scanners. I did not manage to learn much about his organisation and certainly did not know that Karrde had been a part of it. Had that been the case I would have handled the situation with him far differently," he had said thoughtfully. "I underestimated Jade's desire to please her new employer."

"I'm not surprised she didn't really want to come back and work for you." I had said softly.

Thrawn's eyebrow had arched significantly. "Oh?"

"She probably felt incredibly lost after the Emperor's death and then she found Karrde. I'm betting she imprinted on him somehow, sees him as some sort of father figure or protector though she'd never ever admit that. She probably went out of her way to please him without actually realising what she was doing. She needs a powerful authority figure in her life; it's all she's ever known, in fact you told me that years ago. You betrayed her so that makes you the enemy now."

"She was not planning on being a loyal member of my team," Thrawn had replied coldly. "She was merely playing for time."

"Whatever her reasons, you only made her hate you more. She already felt betrayed by Palpatine's death and now you have only confirmed that feeling. She never liked you that much anyway and you gave her reason to despise you further by not honouring the bargain that was made." I had told him. "She killed for Palpatine, she would have died for him too but he never asked her for that outright, she was valuable enough to him that he had not been ready to lose his investment."

"I underestimated her determination," he had said quietly. "I also did not calculate that she would go to Luke Skywalker for help or that they would manage to get to the Millennium Falcon which was in storage on the *Chimaera*. They killed good men to get off my ship."

"You know, you can't control everything or everyone. Nor can you see the future."

He had looked at me with a smile. "I am aware of that my dear. You show me this error of my ways all the time."

"So what was the problem with the Noghri?" I had asked.

"Some minor dissention and I had reason to believe that Leia Organa Solo was hiding on their world."

"They gave her up?"

"No," Thrawn had answered thoughtfully. "I believe they lied about it."

"They Lied?"

He had nodded. "It would appear that their loyalties no longer lie solely with the Empire. I will have to monitor that situation more carefully."

"Why didn't you do anything about it while you were there?"

"I set some parameters in place but I have no absolute proof and the surest way to lose the respect of a people is to accuse them of a crime without proof even if they are guilty. All I have is some suspicious behaviour by a few Noghri and a feeling," he replied, "However issues with the Noghri are the least of my concerns. I

lost a ship during our last battle which means training an entire new crew from scratch."

"I heard about the *Peremptory* and the *Katana*."

Thrawn's eyebrows had risen. "Really?"

"Base gossip." I had said lightly. "There was some word about how the battle for the Katana fleet went but not a whole lot of details. We heard a ship had been lost and I pressed Voss for details. Don't be angry with him I just needed to know it wasn't you and now you know why." I had taken his hand in mine and placed it on my belly.

Thrawn had just smiled. "Suffice to say my dear that I managed to achieve enough of my goal to make the next stage of my plan possible."

I had nodded and then for no other reason than sheer meanness my stomach had rebelled and I had managed to make it to the fresher in time to vomit up lunch which had effectively ended our afternoon together.

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I woke up with a gasp, my fists clenching the bed clothes, sweat soaked and my heart pounding violently in my chest. It took a few moments for the last remnants of the nightmare to recede and when it did I realised I was in the bed alone. For a few seconds I knew a sliver of fear and then a small light from the other room switched on.

"Za'ar?"

"I'm here," Thrawn's voice said from the shadows.

I slid out of the bed and slipped on my favourite robe to join him in the sitting room.

"I did not wish to wake you." He told me as he put down the data pad he was holding.

"You didn't," I said with a sigh, "It's past three, what are you doing sitting in the dark?"

"I was thinking," he said enigmatically and patted the space on the sofa next to him.

"Thinking about what? Plans for the future or baby names?"

He smiled. "Names? No that had not yet crossed my mind. The Chiss do not name their children until a week after they are born and planning the name is not an arduous process since our children's names are mainly pre determined by our family name. Worrying about names is not something Chiss parents spend a lot of time concerning themselves about especially as sometimes the names will change depending on a chosen career. As for plans for the future, well they are always on my mind."

"Then what has you sitting alone in the dark at this hour of the morning?"

He sighed. "I finally received word from Admiral Larsen."

"Oh?"

"Well, it is classified information Tekari," he said evasively confirming my worst fears.

"It's Jarack isn't it?"

The muscle in his jaw clenched. I just stared at him until he drew another deep breath. He placed steepled fingers against his lips, regarded me with his glowing red eyes and then said, "Very well, as you know Jarack was on assignment to the *Virulent* to uncover a possible rebel informant onboard, the information he

found there led him to an infiltration cell based on Coruscant and that's where Larsen believes Behl is being held."

"That's it?"

"It was an undercover assignment even Larsen doesn't know everything about it. Behl had specific times he was supposed to check in but he's missed his last three. Larsen sent an agent who was already on the planet to investigate but there was no trace of Jarack to be found. There are unsubstantiated rumours about the capture of an important imperial but Larsen cannot confirm any of it." He paused, drew a deep breath and then continued, "Larsen told me he wanted you because it would be easy for you to slip in and out of Coruscant, you have friends there, you know things that most people don't about the palace and information should be a simple thing for you to obtain. He was right when he said you were the best possible person for this job because you are."

"The best person for the job." I repeated flatly.

Thrawn nodded. "Yes but...."

I didn't let him finish, "Best person for this job? May I remind you that I'm carrying your child? In case you hadn't noticed, I throw up at the slightest provocation and I can't just go running off to...."

Thrawn held up his hand, "Tekari, stop." He commanded and I shut up. "I told him you were unavailable which produced the obvious and expected arguments however once I explained the reason he backed off."

"What?" I was surprised. "You told Ged I was pregnant?"

"I did not see any reason to lie to him about it." Thrawn said, "Now he understands the risks to you and he will not request it again. Did you not wish him to know? I thought that you and he were... friends?" He gestured vaguely.

"We are, at least I think so, but I just didn't want anyone to know before you did. It just seems odd, that's all, you telling him and it's still too early to be telling people. You heard what Doctor Thracer said."

"According to the doctor you are doing well in spite of all the odds against you."

I shrugged. "It's still early and I'd prefer the whole galaxy didn't know." I didn't want to tempt fate.

He looked at me, "I wanted to be clear that you were off limits, I wanted to make sure he would not try to somehow coerce you into doing something you have no business doing right now. One of the things I admire about Admiral Larsen is his power of persuasion and I've seen him use it on you so I wanted there to be absolutely no misunderstandings between him and I."

I shook my head in wonderment. "The two of you... it's like watching two alpha male banthas fight for the rights to the herd sometimes."

Thrawn's eyebrow arched but he ignored the comment. "I am very surprised he was so secretive about who it was you were being asked to rescue. It would have been to his advantage to play on your attachment to Jarack. Now he is aware that the risk to your health and the health of our child outweighs his need for your skills," he said with a thread of steel and ice running under his words. "So there will be no running off to Coruscant to launch a one woman rescue. I have arranged for people to go in and retrieve our man. It is not your worry, only the baby and your health are."

I sat back against the couch with a sigh and pulled my robe closer around my shoulders.

"Go back to bed Tekari, it's late, you should be asleep."

"I can't get back to sleep after one of these dreams." I explained. "And I have the feeling you are preparing to leave soon."

"I was supposed to head back yesterday but there are some things which need my attention."

"Anything I can help with?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Does this have to do with your project in the subbasement?"

The moment of silence before he answered let me know I was right, "That project is strictly off limits."

I made a face. "I know that and I don't go down there ever because those furry little critters you have in the sub basements make me head blind and give me a headache but you did tell me about it so I have to assume that this part of why you come back to base and not just to see me." I sighed.

His lips tightened slightly. "Yes, I needed to check on the progress of the prototypes but I told you when I showed you what was going on that I would not discuss it further or outside of that area and I meant what I said."

"You complain about me having too many secrets but you're so full of them it's a wonder your brain doesn't explode."

He shrugged with one shoulder ever so slightly. "Secrets are part of the trade, my dear. You of all people should know this."

I just gave him a look. "So when are you planning to depart?"

"If all goes well I will depart for the *Chimaera* at twenty hundred hours tonight. We will be headed to Wayland for a progress report and after that we will continue the campaign. The next step will be to procure shield generators and more equipment as well as take back more sectors. I hope to combine this with more training for our newest clones while manning the recent ship acquisitions if, as I said, all goes well."

"You make it sound so easy."

He smiled. "That is part of my job, my dear. If I do not have confidence in what I am planning how then shall the people who serve under me have confidence?"

"Will you let me know if you hear any more about Jarack?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

Thrawn looked at me and smiled. "I will do my very best to keep you informed, that much I can promise but no more."

That was good enough for me. I sighed. "I know you don't want to hear this so I will only say it once, I wish you didn't have to go, I wish you could stay here."

He placed the flat of his hand on my belly. "Given the current circumstances so do I but even for this miracle I cannot abandon all that we have worked so hard to achieve, not even to watch the development and birth of my son."

I placed my hand over his. "This changes everything doesn't it."

His eyes glowed as he replied quietly. "In more ways than you could ever possibly imagine Tekari."

I looked into his face trying to read the underlying emotion I felt in his voice and sighed. "We don't seem to have much luck with our timing do we?"

"Well I don't know if I would agree with that," He said, "but what I do know is that while the circumstances may not have been ideal the outcome was. Now we are expecting our first child and I could not be more in awe of you, of this," He patted my belly gently, "this miracle growing within you. You will be an amazing mother and this is a complication I am happy to accommodate my life to. Once I secure the



Empire's place once more as leader in this galaxy then I am quite sure we will have more time for family matters."

I rested my head against his shoulder. "In order to do that you have to be here because this child will need a father and I will need you, so please stay alive at all costs."

"I will do my utmost to accommodate that request and have taken as many precautions as I can to ensure the safety of everyone under my command as well as my own." He caressed my face, "But we are at war and not even I can control everything that happens." He withdrew his hand from my belly.

I nodded. "I would suggest that maybe you could clone yourself," I joked, "but I don't quite know how to take just one of you, never mind two."

His smile was slight as he returned his attention to the small data pad on the table. "A clone? Of me? Now there's an idea," he said absently, as though he were actually considering it.

"It would be a really bad idea. Knowing you, you'd probably fight with each other over me and no one would survive."

His lip twitched in amusement.

"Don't you dare even think about it!" I told him.

He turned to look at me, crooked his finger under my chin and raised my face so that he could kiss me gently. "As my lady wishes." He murmured before keeping my mouth occupied and me unable to talk anymore which was okay, I was done with words.

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Thrawn left the base quietly. We had never been fans of big, sentimental, messy goodbyes but this time it was hard not to feel that terrible pang of separation and the dreadful uncertainty which lay before us both. In the quiet of our quarters he kissed me passionately, whispering for me to be well, to keep the baby safe, telling me that he would be careful and that everything would be alright; all the lies couples told each other when they were parting into dangerous, uncertain times.

"I will try to keep you apprised of what is happening when I can but I cannot guarantee regular updates although I do expect them from you along with images of the scans of our child. If I cannot be there in person I wish to be there in spirit," he said as he caressed my belly gently.

I nodded. "I will make sure you get them and I will tell our son about his father as often as I can."

"If people see you talking to your abdomen without knowing you are with child you know what they will think."

"They already think I am a bit weird so this will just add to the crazy Merly myth but I am sure that by the end of this week most of the base will have learned the truth, it's hard to keep secrets here." I answered.

"So I have noticed," He replied with a wry smile.

Suddenly there were so many things I wanted to tell him but all the words stuck in my throat and all I could do was look into his eyes and hope that he understood until the silence became too much to bear.

"Be safe." I whispered.

His hands were warm as he cupped my face and kissed me one last time before turning sharply on his heel leaving me alone in the sudden quiet which engulfed the room in his wake.

For a moment I just stood there holding his scent in memory, my hands wrapped over my belly quite of their own accord and for the first time I knew a fear for Thrawn that was new and entirely unwelcome.

"Okay kiddo," I whispered to my unborn child, "It's just you and me now." And before I could wallow in the self pity that threatened to engulf me I turned my attention to the data pad Thrawn had conveniently left on the table for me. It held all the relevant information pertaining to Jarack Behl's disappearance and possible capture. I had no intention of leaving the base to find Jarack but at least I could familiarize myself with the details.

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In the days that passed after Thrawn's return to his ship life on the base felt quiet, almost still. It was as if the entire population were holding their breath, waiting for something to happen but nothing did.

I knew from Voss that Thrawn had gone to Wayland to retrieve equipment. That he was also planning war games with Ged's fleet as training, getting ready for the next big push which was rumoured to be Coruscant. There was a terrible sense of urgency under the calm reports Voss gave me and I wondered what was really going on but left it alone. It would do me no good to dig at him about a topic I was certain Thrawn had forbidden him to talk about in any detail. I found it surreal to think of Coruscant once more becoming a battle ground. I had lived through such a thing once and was grateful I would not have to do so again.

Thrawn had not spoken to me about his plans in this particular matter and I had not asked because when the subject of Coruscant had been brought up he had become distant and brooding. He had spent many hours sequestered in his meditation room pondering strategies and tactics but I often had the sense that he was troubled by some of the outcomes he predicted.

"Nothing is ever set in stone, Tekari," he had said once when I had brought the subject up one night as we lay in bed, restless and unable to sleep. "For every move I make there are hundreds of possible outcomes, not all of them in my favour. I must think carefully before I set any theory into motion."

"It sounds like you are playing dejarik."

His eyebrow had arched, "Except that instead of game pieces being at risk, it's millions of lives that hang in the balance including yours and mine. I must consider all possible permeations and consequences with infinite care which, for me, requires quiet time and thought."

I had only nodded because there had been nothing more I could add and one of those lives hanging in the balance was growing within me. The galaxy suddenly seemed far more fragile than it had a few months prior to discovering that I was pregnant. As we had lain in bed talking there were a mass of unspoken questions boiling in my brain but I had long learned that no amount of pushing on my part would gain me the answers I wanted if Thrawn was unwilling to give them. Instead I had left him alone when he required it and given him what solace I could when he had asked. After his departure I tried to keep myself busy but it was difficult. I had never enjoyed waiting and now, confined to the base with no real purpose, it was harder than ever.

Every day brought with it new discoveries about the tiny life I was carrying. I could feel him move, I could sense his being within me and even though it was pure fantasy I believed he could sense me too. I had asked Syal about this one day, feeling foolish but she had just smiled, telling me this was perfectly normal.

"Of course he is aware of you, he is listening to your heartbeat isn't he?" She had asked when I had spoken of it shyly.

I had smiled. "Were you this jittery with your first?" I had asked.

A sliver of sorrow had crossed her face for a second but it was gone before I could make sense of it, I wasn't sure she even knew it had been there. Before I could ask what I had said to upset her, she had nodded and answered me. "Oh worse, I think." She had said, "Davin was born small and too early. He was quiet in the womb, much like he is now, quiet and thoughtful. In fact he was so quiet sometimes I used to wonder if he was there at all. I ran to the medlab on many an occasion to see if everything was still alright. Chak on the other hand arrived late and through most of the pregnancy he was restless and kicked like a mura almost all the time."

"How do you get past the uncertainty?"

She had shrugged, "You don't, not really. But with each pregnancy it gets easier because you learn what to expect, mostly. With Jagged I didn't worry so much about the anomalies. He kicked, he moved, he punched with his fists and when he was born he came out backwards. It was as if he wanted to come into the world already standing on his own two feet and he's been fiercely independent ever since." She had smiled.

"Yeah, I noticed that. He's pretty amazing. All of your boys are amazing and I love them dearly."

"And they adore you right back." She had replied, placing her hand over mine. "You're going to be a wonderful mother so stop worrying so much."

I had never been more grateful to have another woman to talk to than at that moment; she was a fountain of knowledge as well as a comfort to me in what was a very uncertain time. It was no wonder that she was the one to see when I was having a bad day and help me through it.

I had not been sleeping well and the nightmares which had been plaguing me had gotten worse leaving me with a feeling of dread I could not seem to shake. I would wake up shaking and in tears but without any real memory of what the dreams had been about which was unusual and disturbing. As the day wore on the sensation became more pressing until exasperated I ended up in the small cantina drinking something I had hoped would sooth me. Sometimes it was good just to be near other people even if they mostly ignored me. Not having anything specific to do was starting to drive me a little stir crazy, baby or not.

I was staring off into space while nursing an already cold cup of tea when Syal found me.

"Here you are," she said sitting down across from me with a cup of tea in her hand. "You know for a small base you sure can be hard to find."

I grinned. "It's not that hard, just go to where there's food."

Syal laughed.

"Where are the boys?" I asked. "You usually don't fly solo at this hour of the day."

"Davin is with his tutor for another hour and Mar'sa is taking care of Chak and Jagged. I needed to get away. I don't know what's gotten into them today but it's a mad house in our quarters. I swear there must be a full moon or three going on."

I smiled but didn't say anything.

"Is everything okay, you seem sort of distant?" She asked after a few moments.

I nodded. "Yes, I am just having one of those days, you know? I can't settle. Everything hurts and every time I try to take a nap or go to sleep I have nightmares that make Kessel look like a holiday resort. It's as if I took a restless pill or

something, like I am expecting something bad to happen only there's nothing going on. I think I am creating stress where there isn't any because I am bored."

She studied my face carefully. "Is the baby alright?"

"According to the doc two days ago everything was fine." I nodded. "I have my next check-up in three days. Why?"

"That's good to know." She sat back against her chair, "You just look a bit pale is all."

"That's probably due to a great lack of sleep." I sighed, hating how I sounded. My entire universe now revolved around the tiny alien life in my belly. "I'm not used to sharing my body is all. It's as if he's doing everything possible to make me uncomfortable today. My back is killing me."

She looked at me thoughtfully and then asked, "Your back? You don't have any cramps do you?"

I looked at her in surprise, "No, nothing like that at all. It's just an ache. I'm not used to so much lying around. I think my muscles are rebelling against the inactivity. Plus I never seem to sleep well when Thrawn is away."

"You'd go see the doc if you thought something was up?"

"Yes, of course." I nodded, "Do you think there's something wrong, should I be worried about a backache?"

In that moment I watched her face carefully, she had something on her mind but she made the decision not to tell me anything more. Instead she just shook her head, "No of course not though maybe you should requisition a new bed. You just look tired and I am being overly protective," She answered. It was a lie but I was too tired to press her.

"We are just looking out for you is all," She added.

I smiled, "I know. It's as if this baby belongs to the whole base."

"Well in a way he does you know. I mean I thought Tir and I had the perfect fairy tale romance but it's nothing compared to you and Thrawn. You're the perfect couple and after everything you have been through you are still together, still in love and now you will have a baby. It's perfect and let me tell you, as an actress I should know, that's what people want, the happy ending to a story filled with all sorts of adventure and adversity. Your life would have made a really great holo-drama you know."

"Perfect?" I asked softly, "You think we're the perfect couple?"

"Well it looks that way on the outside."

I sighed. "I think Thrawn would argue on that assessment because I am probably the least perfect person I know and I must admit in the perfect world my baby's father would not be the warlord he is, challenging the current rulers in place to bring back Imperial might."

"Well that may be so but isn't it nice to know people think what you have is idyllic?"

I shook my head morosely, "No." I replied honestly. "Things that are perfect in my life have a very bad habit of going belly up in a really big bad way."

She cocked her head to one side, "You really are having an off day aren't you."

"Sorry, I woke up feeling all gloom and doom and it just hasn't gone away."

"You think something is happening with the campaign?" Syal asked. "Have you heard anything from Thrawn?"

"No, no news good or bad." I shrugged. "Really, I think I am just going stir crazy being here is what," I said trying to lighten the mood a little.

She laughed and suddenly the tension that had been building dissipated.

"Well, that I can understand."

"I never thought I would say this but I actually miss Coruscant. I think I would almost give anything to be able to head out to the coco district and do some shopping, something to distract me." Suddenly I missed Shiv and Cati more than I could say.

"Yeah. I do miss that, being able to go out for 'caf and cake, or to the theatre. I mean I don't regret coming here with Tir but it is hard to be so isolated and hemmed in. It's not even as if we can really go exploring outside the perimeter either for fear of being eaten by some unknown beast."

"Or worse, some flesh eating worm bug thing." I nodded. "My uncle once told me it was my heartache to be with an Imperial Navy lifer, I never really understood what he meant until I was already in too deep and it was too late. I mean Thrawn has been at war for a long time and it never worried me the way it does now. I am so scared for him, for us and for the future. This baby isn't even born yet and I am terrified of all the awful things that could happen. Nothing I have ever done in my life has prepared me for this, nothing and it's kind of making me go a little crazy, you know?"

"First baby jitters." Syal said gently. "It's normal. You are bringing a new life into the world, you worry about everything. Trust me that doesn't go away but you learn to get over some of the what-ifs."

I sighed. "I don't know I have so many of those 'what ifs' in my head right now I think my brain will explode."

"I'd love to tell you that once this war is over things will get better, but I've been saying that for most of my married life now. That's the trouble with soldiers, pilots and warriors, there is always more to fight about," She nodded.

There was nothing else I could add to that statement, she was absolutely right. For as long as I had known Thrawn there had been some conflict going on somewhere that he had needed to deal with. He thrived on such adversity, I was sure of it. Military problems gave his brilliant mind something to do. I was quite sure he would go crazy if he were cut off from space and strategic planning and all things in between. I remembered what he had been like when we had lived together on Coruscant while he was at the court. It had been a relief when he had been able to return to space.

I spent the rest of the day in Syal's company ending up back in her quarters so that she could relieve her babysitter. It was a pleasant enough distraction but I was grateful when I found myself back in my own quarters which were blissfully quiet by comparison. She had not been joking when she had said it was a mad house at her place. The boys ran us both ragged with their enthusiasm and rambunctiousness.

"I hope that you aren't quite so wild, little man." I whispered to my belly as I walked slowly back to my own quarters. If the boy I was carrying had any opinions on this matter he kept it to himself.

I ordered supper to eat in my quarters but once it arrived I found myself playing with the food rather than eating it. I was not hungry and the mild indigestion I had been battling on and off all day wasn't really helping much either. After pushing the vegetables about for the umpteenth time I set the plate aside and tried to watch some holo-dramas but that also proved to be futile. I simply could not settle down and eventually decided to go for a walk, taking my unfinished dinner to the dirty dish drop off in the cantina along the way.

I ended up walking through the base to end up in the main hanger bay along the high gantry where I stood for a long time just watching everyone go about their routines. I missed space, if the truth were to be told, and had I not been with child I would have requested leave to go and take my ship for a joy ride. A subtle pressure

deep in my abdomen made me place my hands over the small bulge that was getting harder to disguise.

"You be quiet." I whispered to my son, "You'll get your shot at space soon enough, I promise." And as I spoke the words I realised I was excited at the prospect of teaching my child how to fly.

"You know they say that talking to yourself is the first sign of madness."

I turned around and found myself looking at Voss who was grinning from ear to ear. "I was told you were up here by the deck officer."

I looked over the railing and waved to the deck officer on watch, Martim VanKamt. He smiled and waved back. I liked Martim, he was an old hand at the business of dock operations and he knew me almost better than I knew myself. I enjoyed working with him and we had often swapped stories about our lives and adventures while I was tinkering with or repairing a ship.

"So what's brought you all the way up here to find me?"

"Your comm. is off," He replied as if that explained everything.

I made a noise of exasperation. "It's not off; it's sitting on the table by my bed. I keep forgetting it. Seriously, I'm on the base what the hell is going to happen to me that a dozen people at any given time won't notice? There is no where safer except for maybe the *Chimaera*."

Voss made a face. "You know better than that, if Thrawn finds out you wander about here with no comm-unit he'll not be very happy."

"Yeah well what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve. I won't tell him if you don't."

"Roger that."

"So what's up?"

"I thought you might want to know, the *Chimaera* is due to return to base in the next two or three days."

"Oh, why?" I asked, feeling my heart skip a beat out of fear, "Is everything alright? I expected them to be gone for longer than just three weeks. Has something happened?"

"Everything is fine, as far as I know." He nodded, "The Admiral intimated that it has to do with some work on his cloning projects which can only be completed here, he's bringing equipment from Wayland for installation."

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh?"

Voss waved his hand in a *don't ask me* manner. "I really am not privy to all his secrets but apparently time is of the essence," he said, "Anyway I thought you would like to know, he'll be here for about two days if the installation he wishes to do goes well, maybe longer if it doesn't."

I sighed with a relief that was almost overwhelming, "Thank you. That's the best news I have heard all day," I said.

"How are you feeling?"

"Honestly, I'm terribly bored," I said after a few seconds.

"Bored?" He was surprised. This was not the answer he had been expecting.

"Feeling a bit trapped you know," I explained, "I'm used to being able to come and go but with this pregnancy I need stay on base and because it's high risk I can't do anything that might be dangerous which includes ship repair or sports of any kind so yeah, I'm bored."

He smiled. "You know, I haven't said anything because you didn't seem to want to talk about it but on behalf of everyone here who's asked me, I want to say congratulations."

I looked at my belly. "Thank you."

"If you need anything, you know, you only have to ask," he said shyly as we walked down the stairs to the exit. "We are all very excited for you both."

I smiled, "You are?"

He chuckled, "Of course we are. Your baby gives everyone hope."

"Hope?" I swallowed down the retort that was on the tip of my tongue in favour of giving him a smile hoping he did not see beneath it to the fear and uncertainty I felt.

"Yes," He said without explaining it further. "If you don't mind me asking, have you picked out names yet?"

"No, not officially. According to Thrawn the Chiss don't do the naming thing until after the baby is born and I am just superstitious."

"Why?" Voss's ask puzzled. "Everything is fine isn't it?"

"Yes, everything is fine," I said.

"So you've thought about names then, haven't you?"

I grinned at his curiosity, "Yes. I have. I've thought about naming him after my father or maybe Thrawn's brother but really I don't know, I think it will have to wait until he's born. It's hard to name a little person I haven't met yet and names are important."

Voss nodded. "I can understand that. One of my cousins took nearly a week to name their first born. She also said it was a difficult matter."

"What name did they eventually decide on?"

He chuckled, "They named him Jarren, after my great, great grandfather." He answered.

"I suppose he will follow in your family's illustrious footsteps?"

"I believe he will if his desire for Imperial toys is anything to go by, though my cousin Yelena would argue against it."

"I am starting to understand why mothers do not want their sons to grow up to be soldiers." I replied wryly.

Voss smiled. "I cannot even imagine what mothers must endure. Boys are hell, you know, but think about it this way. You carry the heir to the empire in your womb. He'll have the whole base watching over him."

His words sent a terrible shiver of fear through me and I gasped at a sudden pain I suspected was a kick from my son reacting to the adrenaline surge.

"Are you alright? You've gone as white as a Hoth snow field."

I swallowed the fear down and nodded. "I'm fine but I should probably eat something and get some sleep."

"You had me worried for a second, come on I'll walk you to your quarters so you can get some rest. The Admiral would have my hide if I let anything happen to you."

I smiled and then out of pure whim I gave him a hug and kissed him on the cheek. "I hope Thrawn knows what an amazing man and even more amazing friend you really are."

"I'm sure he does," Voss said half embarrassed by my sudden display of affection. He untangled himself from me and continued to see me to my quarters.

Once I was alone I made myself a cup of tea down settled down to watch one of my Holloway holo-dramas feeling humbled by the kindness of everyone around me. I was only half aware of what was playing on the screen because my mind was racing with all manner of thoughts. It had been troubling to hear Voss refer to my unborn son as the heir to the Empire; I found the very idea unsettling. I rubbed my belly gently wondering how people could make such grand assumptions about a child that had not yet even been born.

"You have no idea little man. If you were smart you'd stay put where it's warm and safe." I murmured softly. I waited to see if he would kick me in response but he was quiet, as if he were agreeing with my advice. Suddenly I realised I was exhausted and decided to go to bed instead of dozing in the chair in front of the holonet screen.

It took me a long time to fall asleep. In spite of being tired I was restless and could not stop my brain from buzzing at a million parsecs a second. I was glad that Thrawn would be returning to the base in a few days, his presence calmed me down. Being able to see and touch him made all the difference. He would tell me my fears were unfounded, his physical presence more soothing than any reassurances ever could be. I focused on these thoughts, trying to imagine that he was with me instead of light years away working out how best to bring the galaxy back under Imperial rule. Sleep, when it eventually came to me, did not bring any peace.

*I knew I was dreaming but I was powerless to stop it. The floor beneath my bare feet was cold, black stone and the room I was in was horribly familiar to me. I walked out of the darkened turbo lift into the Emperor's observation chamber.*

*"Welcome back young Merlyn," A soft voice whispered. "I have been waiting for you."*

*I shivered and wrapped my arms around my body. The long night dress was tight over my very large belly, the baby was due any day and I was feeling slow, heavy and swollen. "Why am I here?" I asked wearily.*

*"You bring me my new protégé." The shadowed figure sitting on the throne said smugly.*

*I shook my head, "No." I placed my hands protectively over my belly.*

*The figure moved so that the sliver of light from outside shone on his face and I gasped. It wasn't the Emperor that I had known but someone much younger, much stronger and far more virile. This was no weak old man devastated by his constant use of dark side power this man was a predator in the prime of his life.*

*"You carry that child for me," he said arrogantly.*

*I shook my head but remained frozen to the spot I stood on. I could not move for fear. As if he sensed this, my baby kicked hard enough to hurt and I gasped at the pain of it. "No, this child is not yours, not now not ever."*

*The young version of the Emperor got up from his throne like a hunting tiger that just spotted the perfect prey. "I beg to differ, my dear. You, the daughter of a Kaffir jedi and a clone warrior, have powers unattainable by normal force users that are of great value. Now this child, a cross between your genetic code and one of the brightest minds in the galaxy, will be a force to be reckoned with. I will have him as my own apprentice and train him and he will rule this galaxy with me, and help accomplish what your alien lover's pathetic attempts cannot. Your child will be the heir to this empire that I have so long searched for and as of yet not yet been able to attain."*

*"You know what Thrawn is trying to do, you know but you just sit here and watch?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "And now you want my baby to help you? You are a selfish, power hungry bastard and you always were. You should be working with Thrawn instead of sitting here planning these ridiculous schemes."*

*"He is a fool," The Emperor spat. "He cannot grasp what it takes to rule this galaxy, he cannot replace me."*

*I stepped back from the jealousy I heard in the man's voice. "Then why not help him?"*

*"I do not need his help." He spat, "I have all I need right here." He stepped off the podium and walked towards me.*



*I wanted to move but fear rooted me to the spot. He was taller than I ever remembered and his features would have been considered handsome had it not been for the cruelty etched on them. He walked around me as though I were a prized possession in one of his private art collections and then he placed a hand on my belly. I felt the child kick again and it hurt.*

*"Don't touch me." I pushed his hand away from me and mentally tried to calm the baby down.*

*He chuckled then grasped my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "You are so lovely," he said softly, "I always regretted that I did not make you one of my concubines instead of allowing you to tryst with that blue skinned alien who thought he was better than everyone around him. And," He added, "It was a great mistake to allow your talents go to waste under that half mechanical monster you seemed to adore for no good reason but now you are mine. That you kept your talents from me for as long you did was the only thing that saved you from being brought to me sooner." He smiled but it never made it to his eyes, "You should have been mine then."*

*"Yours?" I tried to move away from him but he held my arms tightly. "No, never. My heart does not belong to you and neither does my body or my baby."*

*"Your lover is dead, the galaxy is mine for the taking and you will stand by my side."*

*I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. "No, you're wrong! Thrawn lives and you are the one who is dead, this is not happening. This is not real!"*

*I wasn't expecting what came next. I wasn't expecting him to grab me or kiss me brutally. I wasn't expecting to feel the terrible power of the dark-side emotions which flowed over me like water threaten to drown me. I did not know how to handle the sudden rush of heat and lust that rolled over me in waves. I writhed to get out of his grasp.*

*"No!" I began to struggle and scream at the same time. I could feel the baby kicking violently and the pain it was causing was almost unbearable. "No, no, no, no!" I kept saying over and over.*

*The Emperor pulled at me so that I faced him and gave me a terrible grin, "Very well if you will not comply then I will take the child and you will die leaving him without a mother."*

*I stopped struggling to stare at him in horror. "No! You can't do that!"*

*"You foolish little girl you have no idea of the power of the dark side!" He growled and with that he drew back his hand and before I could stop him he pushed me hard enough to make me lose my balance.*

*I screamed as I fell backwards to the ground trying to ward off the Emperor's attack. He knelt at my side, pinning me to the floor with one hand pressed on my shoulder. "It's a pity you were spoiled by Thrawn's touch and Vader's stupidity. You would have made the perfect mate to stand at my side," he said softly, caressing my face with tenderly, "But now your child alone will have to suffice." And with that he plunged his other hand deep into my belly and began to rip my baby out of my womb.*

*I woke up screaming, clutching my belly in terror. For the first few moments I struggled to be free of the nightmare's grip, gasping for breath. The pain and the fear I had known were still too fresh for me to understand that I had not left it behind in the dream world. Slowly it dawned on me that the pain in my abdomen was real.*

"No...." I whispered in disbelief as a new cramp shot through me, vice like and agonizing. It took my addled brain a few seconds more to realise that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

I scrambled out of bed and immediately doubled over in agony because felt as though some giant hand had reached deep into my abdomen and was squeezing as hard as it could. I gasped, fighting down the need to scream while trying not to panic. I had the presence of mind to grab my comm-link as I activated the med-alert bracelet the doctor had given me. By the time I made it to the fresher I was more scared than I could ever remember being.

I curled up in a ball on the floor protecting my baby or at least trying to. When my comm beeped I activated it, listening to the Doctor's voice. He seemed very far away. I had no idea what he was saying to me. In a voice that sounded ragged to my ears I told him to come quickly, that something was very wrong and that he had better hurry. Everything was a blur and when he and the med droid arrived. I was not sure what was real and what wasn't. I heard the door to our quarters open and I heard his voice call my name. It was the med-droid who found me first and alerted Doctor Thracer. He knelt on the floor beside me and did a cursory exam. He didn't say anything, he just gave orders to the med-droid hovering at his side quietly. The small scanner in his hand beeped and he read the information it gave him without comment or change in his expression.

"Okay Merly we're going to get you to the medlab," he said gently as he and the droid helped me up to the hover-chair he had with him.

"My baby...?"

"I want you to breathe slowly; can you do that for me?" he asked calmly without answering my question.

I nodded and tried to do as he asked but the pain kept getting in the way. "What's wrong? What's happening?"

He lied to me to try and keep me calm, "I can't say for certain until I get a more detailed scan, I need to get you to the med-lab now."

I was terrified and Doctor Thracer's avoidance of my questions was more frightening than anything else. By the time we reached the med lab I was in tears and irrational with fear. The transfer from the hover chair to the exam bed was awkward and when I realised then that there was blood on my dress any grip I had on my panic was lost.

"Merlyn, you need to breathe and I need you to calm down, I know you're scared and I know it's difficult to do but you have to try. I don't want to give you any sedatives until I have a clear idea of what is happening so please try to breathe and try not to panic." His voice was calm, careful, and utterly terrifying.

"But I'm bleeding." I looked at him in horror as if he could not see this for himself. An irrational part of my mind wondered if the Emperor in my dream had somehow been real and in trying to tear my baby from my womb with his bare hands was responsible for what was happening now but when I looked at my abdomen all I saw was smooth, unblemished skin.

"I know," he said in a serious tone of voice all the while never stopping what he was doing. "Have you felt the baby move today?"

"What?" I shook my head trying to process his question, trying to remember. "Yes, maybe?" Suddenly I wasn't so sure. I couldn't think straight, "I don't know. I thought he kicked earlier but maybe not, it felt strange but it was hard to tell...I don't know."

He nodded. "Was there any spotting, anything unusual at all?"

"No spotting but unusual?...I don't...I don't..." I shook my head, panic was clouding my ability to think straight. "I don't know, no I don't think so." I was suddenly so afraid. "I just felt off today but I thought it was normal."

He nodded, "Well an off day isn't unusual, especially given the circumstances that you live with here," he said calmly, "I meant did you have any unusual pains?"

"No... well my back hurt but I thought that was just me...oh no...I should have come to you but I didn't want to be a pest...this is my fault, I should have...."

He didn't let me finish my sentence. "No, you did nothing wrong."

"But this isn't right, is it?" My voice trembled.

He looked at me for a moment but he didn't say anything and I understood through his silence that my worst nightmare was coming true.

"It's too soon," I shook my head in denial, "It's too early."

"Yes," He replied all the while never pausing in what he was doing.

"Can you stop this?" I asked as the med droid at his side helped me to undress and redress in a gown that tied at the back.

He did not answer my question. He just gestured for me to lie down. And I did so I winced as another wave of pain undulated through my abdomen. He set the auto scan into motion, the expression on his face was both neutral and grim all at the same time. I stared up at the ceiling, wiping the tears off my face trying to will myself to wake up except I was awake and there was nothing I could do about it. A sudden and tearing sensation and the terrible need to push made me cry out in pain. I struggled to sit up and was shocked when I did to see red spreading quickly beneath me on the sheet.

"Doc?" My voice sounded so small and far away to my ears that I wasn't even sure it was me that was speaking.

He swore under his breath. "Prep room one now!" He barked at the medical droid while guiding me to lie back down. Now he was no longer calm, now he was agitated and worried. The tension in the room had ramped up several notches.

"How bad?" I looked up into his face as he worked and saw the answer to my unasked question in his eyes when he glanced away from the readout to look at me.

"I'm sorry," he said gently as he prepared a hypospray. "You need surgery right now."

"No, please no...." I shook my head and began to fight against him as I succumbed to my panic. No amount of words, gentle or firm, from him could calm me down. He did the only thing left to him so that he could work, he sedated me fully. I felt the warmth of the drug spider its way into my system and within a few seconds the bright medlab lights, noisy machines and the hovering droids slid away into a dark void along with any hope I might have had that this would turn out okay.

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The world came back to me in bits and pieces, the steady bleep of a machine, the hum of a droid's servos and the swish of the main door opening and closing. I let the sounds wash over me. Slowly I became aware of voices speaking in low, hushed tones near me but I my eyelids were so heavy I could not open them.

"How is she?" It was a woman's voice, Syal's voice.

"She's doing well all things considered." The doctor answered her. He sounded tired.

"What happened? Voss was not specific in details; he just said it was an emergency."

He sighed, "She went into preterm labour with complications that required emergency surgery."

"The baby?"

"There was no chance. He was stillborn. There was nothing I could have done for him."

"Oh no." Syal's voice was full of sorrow. "She's going to be devastated."

"You're her best friend. I thought it might be good if someone other than me was here when she woke up."

I listened to the words being spoken around me but they didn't really sink in. I was still too doozy to register everything that had happened but I knew I had lost the baby.

"Will she be ...alright?"

"As I said, there were some complications and she lost a lot of blood but she will make a full recovery physically. How's she's going to cope mentally, Syal, I can't tell you." He sounded terribly sad.

"Does Thrawn know yet?"

"I sent word to the *Chimaera* as soon as she came out of surgery. He was already en-route to the base; he will be here as soon as he can."

"Can I see her?"

"Don't expect much," he said, "She's heavily sedated."

The curtain around the bed moved and I felt the warmth of someone's hand taking mine in theirs.

"Merly?"

I moved my head and opened my eyes a little to see Syal sit next to the bed. I opened my mouth to speak but Syal hushed me.

"Shhh," She whispered, stroking my hair.

"Syal?"

"Just rest, everything will be okay," she said quietly, telling me the lies that all best friends tell when nothing would ever be alright again. So I closed my eyes and allowed myself to fall backwards into the abyss whatever sedatives were still in my system, comforted by the touch of her hand.

Time spun outwards, allowing me small, strange glimpses of a reality I didn't fully understand. A dream world stole me away but nothing I saw made sense. I awoke feverish and delirious with some sort of infection. Pain and sorrow mingled with delusion and resentment leaving me bewildered and unable to stay coherent. The doctor, the med droids, as well as what felt like too many other people, hovered around me but it was all white noise and a blur. I knew that I wasn't well and people were worried but I did not care. The drugs I was being fed intravenously swept all the anxiety and fear away leaving only a strange sense of being out of time and space.

The next time I woke the fever had broken and my mind was clear. Everything that had happened came flooding back and the memory of it was excruciating. My hand went to my abdomen and I choked back a sob.

"I'm here, you're safe."

I turned my head to see Thrawn sitting near the bed, half in the shadows. He had been watching me sleep and by the looks of him he had been there for some time. He was out of uniform and he looked tired. He got up and sat on the bed by my side. He stroked my face with the backs of his fingers.

"How are you feeling?"

"Empty," I said, "Exhausted, and thirsty."

"The last part I can help you with," he said as he poured me a cup of water and helped me sit up to drink it. When I was done he set the cup aside and, pulling the

chair closer, sat back down in it. There was a long silence I didn't know how to fill it. It felt to me that Thrawn was also unsure of how to proceed. I looked into his eyes wondering if he hated me, if he blamed me for what happened.

"I am so sorry." I whispered when I could no longer stand the heavy quiet.

Thrawn shook his head. "You have no need to apologise. This was not your fault. Thomas said the problem lay in incompatible genetics; the baby's heart stopped hours before you started to miscarry. There was nothing you or he could have done to change that." His jaw muscles tightened as he clenched his teeth. "You are lucky that it was not worse. If you had waited before calling for help things could have gone very badly for you."

I heard his words but they were meaningless. "I was his mother; he was growing inside of me I should have known something was wrong, I should have seen it coming. I should have protected him."

"How?" Thrawn asked, clearly puzzled by my words.

"All those terrible dreams I had, they were clues...."

Thrawn sat back from me and scrubbed at his face with his hands. "They were dreams nothing more. You are not a seer or a goddess with infallible powers. You are...." But I didn't let him finish.

"I was his mother," I said again as if it would make any difference.

Thrawn nodded, "Yes and I was his father and I, too, was powerless to prevent this tragedy." He spoke quietly. I looked away from him fighting back a sudden anger I didn't understand. He reached over and gently guided my chin so that I faced him again. "I am also sorry that I was not here for you. I am so sorry you had to go through all of this alone. We both feel loss, we are both mourning. Our child is dead, yes, but none of this is your fault." The sorrow in his voice was real and painful to hear.

"Our child is dead." My voice shook as I repeated Thrawn's words. It hit me then and I could not stop the terrible knot of pain that suddenly stuck in my gut. I felt as though I could not breathe and clutched at my chest gasping for air. I felt as though I were drowning.

Thrawn shifted again to sit on the bed so he could pull me to him and hold me tightly. His hand held my head to his chest while he rubbed my back with the other. "I know," he said quietly.

I wanted to cry but I couldn't. All my emotions caught in my throat and I could not let them go. "I can't... I can't...." I gasped, "I can't...."

His hand never stopped caressing my back as I hyperventilated. "Breathe out slowly, just breathe."

I shook my head trying to get the words out, trying to find release for the terrible anguish bottle-necked within me. "I can't...." I couldn't finish any sentence I started. The ache of loss was overwhelming but there was no way to let it go.

Thrawn kissed the top of my head as he pulled me even tighter. "I know Tekari, give it time, just give it time."

He held me in silence until my breathing returned to normal and I began to drift back to sleep, laying me gently back against the pillows, handling me as though I were made of fragile glass. "Rest, I will be here when you wake up. I promise."

I nodded, closing my eyes, feeling him shift off the bed and move away. The curtain moved as he closed it behind him to give me privacy.

"Thomas, how long does she need to stay here?"

There was a moment of quiet. "I see no reason why she cannot return to your quarters in the morning. It will do her good to get out of this medlab to a more

private, comfortable place." There was another moment of quiet and then the doctor asked, "Was there something else?"

"I'm moving the time frame the Wayland project ahead. I need you to finish what we started tonight so that we can move on to stage two as soon as possible."

"Tonight? You cannot be serious?" Doctor Thracer asked.

"The schedule has changed. The priorities have changed. I need you to set it up now with no more discussions and no more arguments. I understand your feelings on this matter but they are irrelevant. The current project must end and the new one started before I return to the *Chimaera* at all costs." Thrawn's voice was low and hard.

"And when will that be?"

"Just as soon as I have concluded my business here, Thomas." Thrawn's reply was sharp but the doctor's tone matched it.

"And Merlyn, is she part of that business? Have you told her what is going to happen? What you have planned? What about her future? She needs you now more than ever."

"I am aware of her needs and her future is not your concern at this time, her health is." Thrawn's voice was as hard as stone. "When the time is right she will be apprised of the situation."

"She has friends on Coruscant. I hope your plans include keeping them alive too because right now the last thing that young woman needs is another loss."

"I am well aware of that Thomas and you need to learn to trust me." Thrawn replied icily, "Now you have your orders, please carry them out."

If there was an answer I never heard it as sleep mercifully claimed me.

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Thrawn was as good as his word and when I woke up he was there at my side. With his help I got dressed and returned to our quarters, moving slowly through the corridors. I was aware of the pitying stares from the people we passed. The news had spread that I had lost the baby and everyone knew. I felt as though I had let not just Thrawn and our unborn child down but everyone on the base who had placed hope on the birth of this child as well. It was a heavy guilt that weighed on my shoulders and I didn't know what to do with it.

When we reached our quarters I was never been more grateful to hear a door close behind me than at that moment. As I looked around the rooms, I found it strange how everything was the same yet utterly different. How in the blink of an eye the world had shifted sideways and nothing would ever be as it was. I had mourned deeply after the death of my father but that pain seemed strangely less intense to the terrible emptiness I experienced now. I felt the gentle touch of Thrawn's hand on my back guiding me to sit down. I looked at him, moving as though I were sleep walking through some terrible holo-drama I couldn't turn off.

"Will you be alright here alone? Shall I call Syal and see if she can spend some time with you?" He asked.

I shook my head hugging my arms around my body. The last thing I wanted was to have to be social in any way shape or form. "No, I will be fine." I told him.

"If you need anything...", He started but I shook my head again.

"Just go, I know you're busy. I don't need a babysitter," I told him flatly. "I just need to be left alone."

He reached out to caress my face then but I side stepped him and moved away. I did not want to be touched or comforted, "Please don't." I whispered, wearing my sorrow like a shroud.

He nodded, withdrew and without further word left me to my own devices.

In the quiet aftermath of his departure the quarters we shared seemed claustrophobic and oppressive. The memory of what had happened was still too fresh, too great. I went into the small suite of rooms he had first given when I moved to Nirauan and entered, locking the adjoining door behind me. I had known loss my whole life but nothing had prepared me for this and I had no idea how to cope with it.

Two days passed and in that time friends came to see me although I could not really fathom why. Their expressions of sympathy fell on my ears like snow on an open field in the middle of nowhere. I didn't hear them and I learned to hate the strange pitying look in their eyes as they tried to say how sorry they were. After a while I refused to answer the door and eventually the visiting stopped.

Doctor Thracer showed up to check up on me at Thrawn's request and told me in detail what had happened and why. In the end, after telling me it was not my fault for the third time he just said, sadly, that sometimes these things just happen, and more often than not there was no singular reason.

"The very fact you were able to conceive and carry for as long as you did is an excellent sign." He added. "We learned a great deal from this pregnancy and next time will know what to watch for."

I looked at him, "Next time...", "I wasn't sure I ever wanted to go through this again.

"Yes, next time." His words were forthright, kind and well meaning but they flowed through and over me. I could hear him speaking but none of it made any real sense. I knew he was worried, I could see it in his eyes but it all felt very far removed from what ever reality I now found myself in.

He paused for a moment and then he informed me that body of my son had been cremated and kept safe until I decided what to do with them. I just stared at him as though he were suddenly speaking a language I had never heard before.

Thrawn, who had remained quietly at my side for the doctor's visit, kissed the top of my head gently as though that would make everything all better. "He did this at my request Tekari, in accordance with Dantassi burial laws so that we may perform the rite of O'kuri'dai in the appointed time."

I frowned at Thrawn's words. I had only witnessed the O'kuri'dai once before. When a young couple I had been friends with at the enclave on Hjal had given birth to a still born child. It had been heartbreaking to watch as the parents had held the ashes of their baby's body in their palms for the wind to carry off. It was a way of giving back to the earth to allow for a rebirth at a later date. I had clung to Navaari as we had watched the young couple struggle with their grief yet the ceremony had given them closure. I did not want this.

I shook my head at Thrawn. "No, no I don't think so." I whispered.

"Merlyn, you must...", Thrawn started but stopped when the doctor interrupted.

"Admiral, a word?"

The two men glanced at each other then headed to the other end of the room to discuss the current topic at hand, me. I listened to them talking about me in whispers as though I were a ghost in the room.

"I'm worried about her, now is not the time to discuss funeral arrangements."

"As am I, but the O'kuri'dai must be performed by both parents, it is tradition."

"Tradition or not, now is not the time, look at the state she is in," The doctor was angry.

"I can see that Thomas but you know what she's like, she internalizes everything and shuts the rest of us out. She will have to go to the end of this darkness in order to get past it."

"And if she doesn't? As I recall the last time that happened and you waited to intervene it didn't go so well."

"Yes, however the circumstances were very different. At that time I was also not in a very good state of mind and I was unable to help her," Thrawn's sigh was loud and heavy.

"And you are able to help her now? You are barely here and when you are you spend most of that time in the subbasement working on your projects and experi..."

"Do not start that here." Thrawn's voice was soft and dangerous as he cut the doctor off mid word. "I have responsibilities I cannot ignore no matter what the circumstances. You would do well to remember that you have sworn secrecy and I count on your discretion. You are also the only person capable of aiding me so for the sake of peace between us do not bring this up again unless we are alone."

"You should tell her." Doctor Thracer hissed. "And you should talk with her, be with her."

"I know you are worried, as am I but I would prefer, in this case, to give her the time she needs. Now she has friends here, she is loved and cherished. I would prefer not to force the issue and neither should you."

"Well then, I will keep an eye on her while you are away." Doctor Thracer said but he sounded skeptical. "But I disagree with your assessment of her ability to deal with this."

"Your disagreement is noted." Thrawn snapped, then he relented, "I think even she did not realise how much she wanted this child," Thrawn said softly. "Children have been a difficult subject for us, the timing has always been an issue, being a couple in secret never helped and she never thought she could conceive a child with me and now this..." His words had faded off as he seemed at a loss for what to say.

"The good news is she did conceive. If it happened once, it will happen again but right now her body needs to heal and so does her spirit. She's been through so much already and I..."

I had turned around then to look at them both. "For Sarlacc's sake, if you want to discuss me without including me in the conversation then you can bloody well go and do it somewhere else." I snapped.

They stared at me for a moment and then left the room. Whatever else was discussed I was not privy to it, nor did I much care. From then on I refused to let anyone else into my quarters, not even Syal who came repeatedly to see me.

In the end Thrawn performed the Rite of O'kuri'dai, alone and in private, sharing his son's ashes with the wind. Neither the Dantassi nor the Chiss believed that the soul entered the body before birth so the child had no name, it was a broken vessel which needed to be given back to the universe it came from. There would be no grave to visit, no place to make the child's passing. On Tatooine there would have been a burial and a marker but here there would be only memory. I did not go with Thrawn to perform this rite even though he had asked me to and it widened the gulf between us further. I couldn't face it because that meant facing the truth of what had happened and I wasn't there yet. I wasn't sure I ever would be.

Afterwards, when Thrawn was on the base, I barely saw him. He was busy with projects he kept quiet about and the base was in a strange state of flux There



were under currents, that had I been more aware, would have worried me a little. I probably should have paid more attention but I was so wrapped up in my own grief that I failed to see what was going on, much less care.

Thrawn tried his best with the time he had to be there for me but I just shut him out preferring to sit in my own room in the quiet and the dark. We would have fought if I had had the energy or the will but instead I shrugged him off, cringing when he tried to touch me, becoming withdrawn when he tried to talk sense into me. I did not understand how he could continue to work as though nothing had happened. I felt a terrible and inexplicable sense of betrayal which I let him know.

"It is my job, Tekari," he said simply. "I cannot stay permanently based on Nirauan. I am the leader of these fleets, these men and women. They rely on me and I cannot just let all of that go, no matter what I feel."

"Our child is dead and you act as though nothing has happened." I told him flatly.

"No, I do my work and I mourn in private." He explained. "I am leading a war. I cannot afford to appear weak in any form so tell me how should I go about it Merlyn? How?"

I shook my head, "I don't know." I whispered.

He drew a deep breath, "I need to know that you will be okay while I am away because as it stands right now I am concerned. You look like a ghost."

I gave him a look, "Doctor Thracer says I am just fine."

"No, what he told you was that physically you are healthy but that was several days ago and since then I doubt he would come to the same conclusion if you were to actually go and talk to him as I have suggested," he replied, "You barely eat. When you are not asleep you sit alone, locked in your private rooms and I do not know how to help you. You will not let me share your grief and I cannot drop what I am doing to sit alongside you in the dark."

"How can I share this?" I asked, "You cannot possibly know what it is like to carry life and then to lose it, you have no idea!" My anger spilled into my words like poison.

He regarded me for a long time, his expression closed and unreadable and then he nodded, "Yes you are right. I have no idea of what you experienced or how it feels." He drew a deep breath, "I can only tell you of my own sorrow. I can only tell you that you are not the only one here who lost something precious and you are not the only person grieving but none of this is enough is it?"

"So what? Do you expect me to just get over this like you? Do expect me to be emotionless and cold? I am not a machine!" I avoided his question altogether in favour of picking a fight and being mean.

He didn't take the bait and answered me softly. "No, no I do not. I expect you to share your grief with me, not shut me and everyone else who cares for you out so that you can become a shadow swallowed whole by this terrible thing that happened. You need to weep and mourn for the loss but then you need to get past it and move on. It is as if you also died and I do not know what to do about it."

I turned my back on him but he was short on time and patience. He caught my arm gently and turned me around to face him again; he caressed my face tenderly and said, "Nothing and no one can replace what we lost but there will be other children, I promise you," he said.

It might have been the right thing to say but it wasn't what I wanted to hear. I pulled out of his grasp angrily, "Go back to your war games and leave me the hell alone," I said coldly and walked out of the room to lock myself in the fresher where I

sat for hours willing my tears to come but they never did. It was truly as if, with the death of the baby I had carried, I too had died.

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Depression ate at my soul like a black hole and I gave in to its seductive lure. It was easy not to feel anything; in fact I welcomed the blankness. I spent most of my time asleep or dozing in the bedroom with the shades down and the lights off. I lost all sense of time and space and knew only a strange half world full of twisted dreams and unavoidable guilt with nothing in between. I had become the void.

Thrawn tried to break through myself imposed exile with kindness and patience but I shut him out at every turn, hating him for everything without any valid reason. Eventually he left me alone but it did not escape my notice that, for the moment, his current work kept him on the base and close by. We might have gone on like that forever had it not been for Syal who decided, after nearly four weeks, that enough was enough.

She had come to see me many times but either I had simply not answered the door or Thrawn had turned her away. The last time she had argued with him, her words had sounded hard and angry through the walls, but he had been firm and I had been grateful. I could not face anyone least of all the one person on the base with several children and more sympathy than I could handle.

"She's worried." Thrawn had said after Syal had left, coming into the bedroom to stand leaning in the doorway.

"I don't care." My reply had been the same, always the same, sullen and dead.

"A'myshk'a...."

I had flapped my hand at him. "Do not start." I had snapped and then had returned to bed.

That had been three days ago and she had not come back since. Thrawn was at a loss with what to do with me and I just didn't care. We slept in the same bed because when I had tried to sleep in my own room he had gone ballistic and the fight had been exhausting. I had given in to his request because it was easier than fighting but the gulf between us was wider than the light years between Tatooine and Csilla.

Thrawn buried himself in his work and I tried hid in sleep but I tended to spend much of my time lying in the darkened bedroom lost in a daze of self loathing and guilt. I counted time around his coming and going so that I could prepare for him coming to bed by pretending to be asleep. So I was awake when the doorbell rang. I heard Thrawn move to answer it and strained to hear who was there and since we had already had our daily yelling match I could not imagine who would want to visit us.

"Good afternoon Syal." Thrawn said.

"Is she here?" She asked bluntly. I heard the door shut.

"She's sleeping. She's...." he never got to finish his sentence because she cut him off.

"She's always sleeping and I know for a fact that no one sleeps that much and I also know she wasn't sleeping a few hours ago because my sons and I were going to stop by and visit and we could hear the yelling half way down the hall. Now where the hell is she?"

"Syal, I told you she is sleeping."

"In here?" She asked and then tried to open the bedroom door. "It's locked."

"She does that when she wants to be left alone."

"She's been left alone enough." Syal was angry. "It hasn't done her any good."

"What does that mean?" Thrawn asked coolly.

"It means that she's not getting better, she's depressed and she's drowning in it. I'm worried sick about her. So should you be."

"You think I am not worried?" Thrawn asked and I could hear the edge of anger underneath his voice.

"I think you are hiding in your work and avoiding the real issues at hand."

"Which would be?"

"You both lost a child."

"I am aware of that. What is your point?"

"My point is you don't deal with it at all, neither of you do. You bury yourself in this war and whatever insane projects you have going on the subbasements meanwhile Merlyn, who has never learned to deal with death properly, feels guilty about losing the baby and that guilt is killing her."

"Guilt?"

I heard Syal sigh. "You are such an idiot, you have no idea."

"No idea? What do you think I am doing here?"

"To be honest, I don't know."

"I am trying to help her."

"By doing what?"

"Giving her space. Being here if she needs me."

There was a pause before Syal spoke. "What she needs is for someone to actively take control of this situation. She's a billion light years from her home and what's left of her dysfunctional family. She just lost a baby, a baby she was told she would probably never have with the man she loves more than life itself and you think you are helping her by leaving her alone?"

"It's what she wants."

"She doesn't know what she wants right now, between her grief, her guilt and the deadly cocktail of hormones in her body she's more screwed up than ever before. You, of all people, should know her track record with grief but you do not seem to learn." Syal retorted angrily.

"What would you have me do then?" Thrawn's words were clipped and tight.

"Open this damned door," She banged on it for emphasis, making me jump, "You're the base commander so I know you can override the lock."

Thrawn did as Syal asked and I heard the door to the bedroom slide open. It was dark so Syal went to the windows and opened the blind letting the daylight spill in. I rolled over, away from the light and buried my head under the covers.

"Merly?"

"Go away," I mumbled into the covers.

"Merly, please get up." She asked gently, sitting on the bed beside me. I felt the touch of her hand as she stroked my hair. It was dirty. I couldn't remember the last time I had washed it. "Merlyn, I'm not going away so please turn around and look at me."

I heaved a huge sigh and did as she asked. She could not hide her shock at my appearance although she tried.

"I take it back," she said to Thrawn, "You're not just an idiot you're a complete mor...."

"I get the idea Syal," Thrawn said quietly from his place by the door. "You don't need to say it again."

She got up off the bed and rounded on him with a fury I would never have expected from her. "She looks like hell. How could you have not noticed? When was the last time she ate or bathed? How could you have been so blind?" He drew a deep

breath but she did not let him say a word. "Go make yourself useful, make tea and fetch her something to eat, something light. Take your time, I think a bath is in order here and I want some time to talk with her before you get back."

"Tea and food it is," he said through tight lips and then, with a glance at me, left quietly.

Syal vanished for a moment and I heard the sound of water running. When she came back she had my bathrobe in her hands and without warning me she pulled back the covers. I complained as cold air hit my bare legs but she ignored me and pulled me up.

"Get up and go have a bath. You smell like a jawa." She bullied.

"Syal go away."

"No I will not so stop saying that to me. Enough is enough. Now will you get up before I drag you out of this bed and toss you in the tub."

I gave her a look.

"Don't try me Merly, I wrestle young boys into submission, you're a lightweight by comparison."

With a sigh of defeat I took the robe from her outstretched hand and did as she asked. There did not seem to be any point in fighting with her and I didn't have the energy. The bath filled up and bubbled, scenting the fresher like pascha flowers. I stared at it until Syal turned the water off and nudged at me.

"Don't make me undress you like I do with my boys either." She said.

I turned to look at her. "Why are you here?"

"Because I love you, because my sons love and adore you and we are all very, very worried. Now get in the bath and get clean so that you can start smelling like a girl again." She left the fresher and went back into the bedroom. "Trust me, you need this." She yelled as she began to open the windows.

I nodded at no one in particular, slipped off my night clothes and then stepped into the tub. I gasped at the sensation of the hot water on my skin. I had forgotten how nice it felt to sit in a warm bath. I had forgotten a lot of things.

"Too hot?" She asked as she walked back in to the fresher.

"No," I said, "It's fine."

"Lean forward I'll wash your hair, it feels like you have a year's worth of grease in it." I did as she asked and gave myself into her hands. She was gentle and motherly. It was somehow comforting and frightening all at the same time. I didn't want to be loved or cared for but I didn't fight it as she washed my hair for me. I was a grown woman but in that moment I felt like a child in her hands.

"I'm sorry about the baby Merly. We all are but you can't hide away like this."

I didn't say anything as she poured water over my head to rinse out the soap. I just sat in the hot bubbly water with my knees drawn to my chest hugging them tightly.

"What happened was terrible; I know how you must feel bu...."

I snapped my head to look at her. Water sprayed from my hair in a silvery arc. "You know how I feel? How can you possible know how I feel? How? You have three beautiful, healthy children. So how the hell can you tell me you know how it feels to lose a baby like this?"

She sighed and drew a long thoughtful breath. "Yes, I have three healthy boys but the very first time I got pregnant I miscarried. I was twenty weeks along, I was alone at home and Tir was away. I have an idea of how it feels."

I felt a sudden deep, deep self loathing slice through me for being so mean. "Syal I'm...."

She cut me off. "You didn't know, I've never told anyone so don't feel guilty about this, you already have enough guilt choking you to death as it is. I didn't tell you this to add to it. I told you because I wanted you to know I get it, I do understand what it is like to miscarry and lose a baby, to lose that hope. You are not alone. Maybe I don't know exactly what you are going through, no one can but I share the experience."

I nodded listlessly and let her rinse my hair off. When she was done she stood up, drying her hands on a nearby towel.

"I'll leave you to get out and get dressed. I am sure that man of yours has wasted as much time as he can without going mad and will be back any moment with tea and food." And with that she vanished.

I submerged one more time under the water and relished the sensation of utter quiet then I heaved myself out of the bath and wrapped myself in the big towel Syal had left for me. I found some clean clothes and made my way to the sitting room where Syal and Thrawn were waiting. I looked from one to the other and sat next to Syal on the couch. She poured tea and handed me a cup, then she poured one for Thrawn and herself. Then she continued talking as though there had been no interruptions.

"Tir and I were newlyweds when I learned I was pregnant. He was deployed when I got the test results but I didn't say anything because I didn't want to worry him. I was new at being the wife of a renowned Imperial pilot. I felt it was a wife's duty to be supportive and not do or say anything that would distract him from his work. He was supposed to be back before I hit my fourth month anyway and I wanted to surprise him with the good news. Instead I miscarried and it nearly tore us apart."

Thrawn arched an eyebrow and glanced at me. "Syal, I'm sorry. I do not know what to say."

"There isn't anything to say." Syal said, "It happened. It was devastating and it nearly wrecked our marriage because I was so wracked with guilt that I couldn't talk to him about it and he didn't know how to treat me, how to speak with me. I shut him out, spent far too much time alone because I felt guilty for not letting him know in time, I felt guilty for losing the baby, I felt guilty about everything and it damn near destroyed me."

"I remember your wedding on the holonews but I never heard anything about you losing a baby and Soontir has never mentioned it," Thrawn said gently.

"I was lucky enough to not be in any public place when it happened and I could afford a clinic that prided itself on privacy. Tir does not speak of it because he can't. It is a hurt that cuts too deeply still. He felt betrayed I think but also he felt his own brand of guilt for not being there when it happened. He could not help or protect me when I needed it the most and for a man that's a difficult situation to reconcile with." Syal replied matter of factly.

Thrawn nodded as though he understood exactly what she was talking about. "How did you get through it?" He asked all the while looking at me.

"Eventually I got help, we got help and I started to talk about it. Then I, we, mourned and finally, when I was able to, I threw myself back into in my work," she said quietly. It gets easier with time, not that you ever forget, but it gets easier ... in time."

I shook my head. The weight of the loss sat heavily on my shoulders. "I just ..." I shook my head for a moment, "I keep thinking there might have been something else I could have done."

"Why?" She asked pointedly.

"Why...?" I echoed her word as though it were an answer.

"Why do you feel you could have stopped this?" She asked. "Women miscarry all the time, it happens far more frequently than anyone wants to believe and you had an especially high risk pregnancy, why should you have been able to change any of that? You were already doing everything possible to safe guard the baby anyway. None of this is your fault."

I shrugged unable to answer.

"Guilt will destroy you and it's useless, that much I've learned. Why won't you let us help? We want to be there for you, help you through this and you shut us all out, all of us. My boys love you and they ask every day how you are doing and they want to see you. They miss you, they want to somehow help you after what happened but you don't let anyone near you anymore."

I felt a lump of sorrow deep in my throat. "They know?"

"Their father is an Imperial pilot; they live in a world where death is a possibility. When they asked what was wrong and what had happened I did not lie to them. They knew that you were pregnant; you know that, you involved them in your pregnancy. They laid their hands on your belly to feel the baby move. When they asked what had happened, because news on this base travels faster than light speed, I told them the truth, I told them that the baby you were carrying died. They understand what death means in as much as they can. They know your baby is gone and they know you are sad."

"Is that what you told them? That I am sad?"

"Aren't you?" Syal asked clearly confused.

I shook my head. "No, I don't feel sad," I said, "I don't seem to be able to feel anything. I feel dead."

"Dead?" Thrawn's head tilted as he asked. I glanced at him and then went back to looking at Syal.

"Did you cry?" I asked, "When you miscarried?"

"Yes, all the time for almost a month. I couldn't stop."

"Well I can't," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I cannot cry. I've tried but it's as if someone has taken a mole miner and gutted me from the inside out. I feel nothing except a terrible blackness." I sighed as I tried to explain, "Every death I have experienced I mourned. I cried, I was angry and it hurt, it hurt so much sometimes I didn't know what to do with it but it was a feeling, you know I actually felt something but this...I don't understand. I have never felt so empty before." I shrugged. "It's as if I stepped out of the normal universe into someplace else where there are no emotions, no feelings nothing just some strange and surreal void."

"Why have you not told me this before A'myshk'a?" Thrawn asked quietly.

I looked at him. "What is there to tell? I don't know how to get past this and you can't help. It is as if I am stuck in some sort of vacuum and you cannot possibly understand so what is the point in trying to explain it?"

"Thomas would have helped, you could have gone to speak with him if you felt I was not the right person to talk to," he said. There was a dreadful pain under his words.

"There are no drugs in the galaxy to make me cry," I said crossly.

"No, I guess there aren't and it actually shouldn't surprise anyone you feel this way." Syal nodded.

Thrawn gave her a look which said 'explain'.

Syal glanced at him but turned to speak to me, "Given the number of terrible losses and awful things that have happened in your life it seems to me that it's no

wonder your brain and body have just shut this out. How much can one person endure? You lost your mother, then your identity by learning you were adopted and that your birth parents were a jedi and a clone soldier who killed the woman that gave birth to you I mean that alone is a complete mind-fuck, then you lost Lord Vader whom against all odds you were close to and liked by, then your father died thanks to someone you once cared about. You thought you had somehow killed your uncle and your friend Navaari and on top of it all for the last decade plus you've been dealing with a psychopathic moron that you used to love, who you ended up having to kill on a forsaken planet after crash landing because he refused to take no for an answer. And for all of this you seem to somehow feel guilty, as though it were all your fault. For the love of all Corellia Merlyn it's no wonder you've gone off the deep end. There is only so much guilt a person can shoulder and I think you've cornered the market."

I didn't know how to answer her but I couldn't deny what she had said either.

"You need to talk to someone who could help you, maybe the doctor?" She suggested with a small shrug.

"And what's he going to do? He can't make me feel, he can't make me suddenly change or all better, none of you can. There is no on-off switch for my emotions. You keep trying to get me to move on but move on to where? There is no place left for me to go. So what am I supposed to do?"

"Talk to us?"

"Talking doesn't do anything."

"Maybe you just need to start letting people in." Syal said softly.

I stared at her as though seeing her for the first time. "Why?"

She opened her mouth to answer but then closed it again and looked to Thrawn as though he would have a better solution or a suitable answer for my question. Worry was etched on her face but it felt very far away to me, as though I were watching everything through transparasteel or as a holovid. As if none of it was happening or had happened directly to me. I wondered what would happen when this bubble I was in burst. I didn't think that was something I actually wanted to be around for.

"Oh Merly," She finally said softly, stroking a lock of damp hair off my face. She glanced at Thrawn and got up off the couch. "I'm going to go check on my boys before they drive their babysitter completely mad. You," she said talking to Thrawn, "see that she eats and drinks. I will be back in a bit to make sure neither of you have killed each other. Can I trust that won't happen?"

"I believe you can." Thrawn replied carefully never taking his eyes off me.

"Right, I will be back in an hour or so. If she's gone back to the dark hole of a bedroom and that food's not been touched I will be cross."

Thrawn's lips twitched slightly. "I will endeavour to avoid that, you are remarkably fierce."

"I am the wife of Soontir Fel would you expect anything less?" She said as she left.

The silence in her wake was deafening. For a very long time I sat cradling the cup of tea while neither of us said a word. Then Thrawn broke the standoff. "I am so sorry," he said.

"Why? You didn't do anything."

"Exactly."

I frowned and sipped at the tea.

"I have been a consummate strategist for as long as I can recall but your methods, your way of dealing with things defies all logic. Just when I think I have an

idea of how you react you do the opposite. I thought that you needed solitude and time alone to come to terms with this, that you would seek out your friends to find solace and comfort. This was a mistake on my part. I didn't understand that you did not want comfort or kindness. I did not understand that you have been punishing yourself and that what you needed was absolution which is something I can't give you, only you can do that. You have to forgive yourself, there is no one to blame for this especially not you."

"How? How can I do that?"

"You have to let it go which is something you have never learned how to do. I should have understood, the signs have been there all along but I didn't. I should have seen that you have been living with death your whole life, just as Syal said, and no one has taught you how to say goodbye. You have carried the weight of guilt since the death of your mother and you've never let that go, every time someone you care for dies this weight doubles. For reasons I cannot fathom you feel responsible for it. So listen to me, Tekari, you are not to blame for the deaths of Lord Vader, your friend Cati or your mother and father just as you are not to blame for this miscarriage. Sometimes terrible things happen and there is nothing you can do to prevent them. Please learn to forgive yourself and let this awful weight go before it destroys you once and for all."

It was a truth I didn't want to hear but he knew me better than I knew myself. I set the empty cup on the table and without asking he refilled it for me but I let it sit there without picking it up. "Stop it." I whispered. "Just leave me alone."

"No, no I don't think so. I have listened to you and bowed to your requests for solitude but not anymore."

"Then what the hell do you want from me?" I asked.

"What I want is my bond-mate back. This ghost you've become, this shade who haunts this base." He had shaken his head at a loss for words. The hardness on his face softened so that the hurt and worry he felt was plain to see. "I don't know how to help you. I can plan a war down to the finest detail but how to get past all these blocks you throw up escapes me. I am at a loss on how to fix this. I cannot turn back time and save you from this pain but if I could I would."

"How does anyone fix this?" I asked gesturing loosely with my hand.

"Well, for a start you stop trying to hold in everything and stop acting as though the rest of the galaxy does not exist. You are not the only one who lost a child in this relationship and you are not the only one who feels that loss. You are surrounded by people who love you, who can help you but you refuse to let them. At the risk of sounding selfish, for me in this matter there is only you yet as you pull further and further away from me I find myself at a loss and I do not know what to do about it."

I frowned, puzzled by his words.

He drew a deep breath and paused for a moment to explain what he meant. "I cannot discuss this with anyone under my command. I cannot openly show any feelings or sorrow so where does that leave me? Without you, I am left alone to deal with a grief I also do not have any experience with. You keep shutting me out and I do not have anyone else to turn to."

"When have you ever needed to turn to anyone?" I asked feeling a subtle deep anger in my gut.

"You might be surprised to learn that I rely on many people. Chiss do not show their emotions in public which you know, but it does not mean we do not have emotions. I may have control over my feelings almost all of the time but even I struggle with this. I deal with it because I have to but the pain is there. Do not



mistake my cool demeanour for lack of emotion." He was angry. "I need you even though you refuse to see it."

I just stared at him. "Since when have you ever actually needed me for anything other than warming your bed or looking pretty on your arm Za'ar?" The remark, which was meant to hurt, hit its mark fully and he sat back away from me the expression on his face suddenly hard and withdrawn.

"Do you think that is all you are to me?"

"I don't know what I am to you," I said with a shrug, "I don't know what I am to anyone anymore."

He opened his mouth to answer but then changed his mind instead he got up and paced around the room. After a few moments he spoke.

"From the first moment I ever laid eyes on you I knew there was something remarkable about you, the waif from Tatooine whom Vader had chosen to keep at his side. You were one contradiction after the other and that was an attraction I had not yet had the pleasure of at Palpatine's court. It did not take me long to understand that here was someone who didn't see me as alien, or strange or even as an outsider of lesser worth. You just saw me as rude. It was quite an eye opener I must admit. I had been called many things but rude was not one of them." He paused to stare out of the window for a moment then he turned back to me.

"The attraction was there from the start I think, you're a beautiful woman but it takes more than just physical beauty to turn my head. You were like a painting I could not tear my eyes from, let alone understand and explain. You have a fire and a passion that is infectious as well as creates a powerful desire yet you see yourself as ordinary, even mousey. You love without condition, giving your whole heart and soul to people, even those who have done nothing to deserve such a gracious gift and but you expect so little in return that it surprises you when someone does something nice. You are as fierce and as capable as any Chiss warrior yet there is a vulnerability and a fragility to you which touches me deeply creating a dreadful need to care and protect even when I know you do not wish it. You ask me what I need from you but I cannot define it in a few words. You bring out emotions in me I never knew existed for good and for bad. How else could I explain the insane jealousy I feel when other men vie for your affections or the irrational fear I feel when you suddenly vanish and something terrible happens to you. There is no way for me to describe the joy you bring when you smile, or the indescribable passions that engulf me when we bed each other. There are just too many ways in which you have altered my life for the better for me to list so let it be enough to tell you that without you in my life I would be a lesser man. If I have made you think or feel that you do not matter to me then I am truly, truly sorry."

I just stared at him. It was one of the longest speeches I had ever heard him make and the closest he had ever come to actually saying he loved me out loud. For the first time since losing the baby I felt an ache of sorrow that came from somewhere very deep down inside of me. I didn't like it and I didn't want it because I was certain that feeling empty would be far more preferable to the pain which was lurking beneath the surface.

He paused for a moment. "I am so very sorry," he said again as if I had not heard it the first or the second time.

I got up off the couch and walked away from him.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

I wheeled around suddenly angry. "Stop it," I said, "Stop saying that."

"No I will not because it needs to be said and you need to hear it."

I snapped. "What I need is to be left alone. What I need is for the pity and the sympathy to stop. If I hear the words *I'm so sorry for your loss* one more time I will kill someone. They make it sound as though I misplaced the baby. He died. He's dead and gone. You just don't understand so please leave me the hell alone," I said sounding far sulkier than I had intended.

"You think I do not understand loss? You think I do not understand *this* loss?"

"What I think is irrelevant." I snapped turning to stare defiantly at him.

"Merlyn, I performed the O'kuri'dai alone," He spoke softly. "Do you have any idea how difficult that was for me?" He paused, the muscles in his jaw clenching, "You should have been there with me, for our child, but you were not."

I shook my head. I did not want to listen to this.

"You were not there to say goodbye and it's destroying you." He waited to see if I would answer but I didn't so he continued. "As was tradition, I stood alone outside at dusk letting the ashes of our child brush through my fingers to vanish on the wind. I spoke the words to speed him on his way. He was a child born too soon; there was no soul to free only a body to return to the universe so that the next time it will return healthy to house a soul and join our family."

I trembled under the weight of his words. "Stop it," I whispered.

He did not.

"We should have been there together to do this but I was there alone. He must have been so very tiny because there were so little of him left for me to give back to the world." He held out his hands as if he were back at that moment in time, staring at them with an expression I could not decipher. "Do you have any idea how that felt?" He almost whispered.

I swallowed down the sudden ache of pain mingled with shame and shook my head.

"Tekari, while I do not know what it must have been like for you to carry this baby then lose him too soon and in such an awful manner but I do know what it was like to perform that Dantassi death rite alone for our child. There have been many things in my life I have found difficult but that moment, that moment in time was one of the hardest."

The knot I had been carrying inside of me suddenly seemed to explode. I could feel the pressure of all the sorrow I had stuffed down inside threatening to engulf me but still I didn't let it go. I turned my back to Thrawn and hugged my arms tightly around me as if that would help, struggling to keep myself together. In all this time I had wallowed in my grief never thinking about his because I had been the one to carry and lose the child. It had not occurred to me that he would feel so deeply about it.

"I'm sorry Merlyn," he said again, "So please, please come back to me; I do not want to lose you."

"Lose me?"

"It is as though you are willing yourself to die, as though you are somehow trying to kill yourself slowly."

"I do not want to die." I retorted a little too quickly because I wasn't sure he was wrong about what he had said.

"Really? It does not appear that you wish to live either."

"Then tell me what there is to live for?" I asked suddenly closer to tears at that moment than I had been since the miscarriage. "Tell me, when everything, everyone I love dies what the hell am I supposed to live for?"

His expression softened as he shook his head. "I am not dead," he said gently, "And I do not have plans to die any time soon so please stop counting me among the casualties already."

"You are not dead yet." My voice turned icy. "But I've seen your death and even if you do not believe my dreams I do. I dreamed my child would die and he did. Everything terrible that I have seen in my nightmares has happened. You keep repeating me you won't leave me alone but you will, I know you will. So tell me, how do I live with this?"

"I will not abandon you to this darkness that's swallowed you whole. I will not abandon you at all. I am right here and I have been right here all along. I am not going to leave you." He shook his head.

"You will," I said flatly. "I've seen it."

"I take your dreams seriously Tekari, but in the end, they are just dreams, your subconscious mind talking to you. I wish you would stop putting so much faith in such in something so intangible and start believing in me. You *must* trust me. I have things well in hand. There are many safeguards in place. I promise you this."

I opened my mouth to speak but was interrupted when the door chime rang. I sighed as Thrawn let Syal in with her two elder boys.

"They wanted to make sure you were alright with their own eyes." Syal explained.

Looking at them knocked the breath out of me. I had not expected her to bring her boys. Davin stood back, always watchful and quiet, ever the more serious but his little brother was not so shy.

"Aunty Merly," Chak said seriously, "Mommy said you wanted to be left alone but we wanted to see you. It's been ages and we were worried, like when daddy's away."

I looked at the little boy and felt something inside of me break. I sat down on the couch hard and Thrawn sat beside me, carefully, watchfully.

"Mom said the baby inside your belly died and that's why you're sad." Davin said.

I covered my mouth with my hand which was trembling.

"Syal?" Thrawn said quietly.

Syal just made a gesture with her hand that said 'just watch'.

"Yes." I answered managing to speak. "The baby died."

Chak made a face as though he were trying to sort out everything in his mind.

"But why?"

"He was born too early and he was too little to live in the real world."

"Why?"

I glanced at Syal and then at Thrawn. I had not been expecting the boys or their questions. "I don't know why, it just happened," I said.

"That's not fair." Davin said thoughtfully. "You would have been a great mommy."

I choked on the surge of emotion. I was not at all prepared for this conversation from Syal's boys or how it would feel to see their worry and love shining in their faces.

"Me and Davin drew you a picture. So you wouldn't be so sad any more. So you would always have a picture of your baby." Chak said seriously and he handed me a small piece of paper, "We don't want you to be sad. You need to be like a Dantassi, strong and brave because it's so hard."

I took the picture from his outstretched hand. My fingers trembled. I glanced at Thrawn and then looked at the little drawing and fought the wave of sadness which

swept through me, powerful and unstoppable. Tears welled up in my eyes and my throat burned.

The boys had drawn Thrawn and me in a garden somewhere. In between us they had drawn a small child, whose skin and hair was like his father's but he had my eyes. It was so simple yet so full of love and meaning that I had to fight back the emotion which threatened to drown me.

"It's ..." I took a deep breath, "Thank you both." I managed to say and before I could stop him Chak suddenly hugged me. I could feel the walls which had held my grief at bay begin to crumble and a world of grief began to flood in.

"Don't be sad, you still have us and we love you very much." Chak said as he held on to me fiercely.

I began to shake uncontrollably.

Syal gently pulled Chak back from me. I let go of the little boy and allowed Thrawn to wrap an arm around my shoulder drawing me into him protectively. He saw what was about to happen as did Syal.

"Syal, I think perhaps that's enough," he said gently.

"Come on boys, I think Auntie Merly needs some time." Syal said gathering her two sons up and shepherding them to the door.

"Can we come back tomorrow?" Chak asked.

"Yeah, can we? You need to tell us about Navaari, we haven't heard how his great hunt ended." Davin asked.

"Let's wait and see shall we?" Syal said.

"But mom...." Chak started but Syal hushed him.

"Come on, Merly and the Admiral need to be alone for a bit. I think we've said what we needed to."

I couldn't look at her but Thrawn gave her a nod and with that she left. I stared at the drawing in my hands, watching the paper shake with my trembling fingers. Gently Thrawn took it and laid it on the table. He pulled me to him and held me, stroking my hair. "I am sorry." He murmured. I fought against the oncoming storm and tried to push back from him but he would not let me go. "I am so, so sorry," He repeated.

"Please stop saying that." I whispered.

"No, I won't because it is the truth and you need to hear it, you need to believe it."

"Stop it!"

"Listen to me A'myshk'a, your responsibility is to the living not the dead. Our son is dead but I am not, those two little boys who adore you and their mother are not and neither are all of the other people here who care deeply for you. I am sorry I let this go on for as long as I did. I am sorry it took Syal to see what was happening and step in. I should have understood but I didn't." His words broke me.

"Our son is dead...." I whispered.

He threaded his fingers through my hair as he pressed my head against his chest. Finally my tears came then as he knew they would, as Syal had hoped. I didn't fight it, any of it and it hurt so much I thought I would die but in difference to earlier I no longer wanted to.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Thrawn came and went like a tusken in the night. His infrequent returns to the base were cloaked in secrecy and terse conversation. He spent most of his time wrapped up in meetings or down in the subbasement on his projects that he refused to speak about. When we managed to share some time together it wasn't enough.

"I'm sorry, Tekari. I know this is difficult to you," he said as I rested my forehead against his chest. His hands were warm on the back of my neck as he stroked me. With a sigh I broke away from him and poured more brandy in my glass.

"It is difficult but what's even more difficult is your attitude," I said as I took a generous sip of my drink. "Last time you were here you barely said two words to me and this time you can't wait to..."

"The last time I was here I had much on my mind." Thrawn interrupted.

"The last time you were here you barely wanted to touch me." I snapped, annoyed. "You said I distracted you from your mission, that you needed space and time to think! When I asked you to come to bed you pulled away from me as though I were a dirty rebel and you were not wearing your bracelet, the one Navaari made for you."

Thrawn's lips tightened slightly and then he drew a deep breath. "I can continue to apologise to you for my behaviour and you can accept that there will be times when this campaign has to take precedence and I will be distant or we can continue to fight and waste what little time we have together."

I heaved an overly dramatic sigh. "Do you have to be so standoffish when you're busy? It feels like you try to shut me out completely."

"It is a little more than *just busy*, my dear," he said, "And I have to make sure that I have my mind completely focused on the job at hand. Do you want me to fail? Those dreams of yours, you want them to come true?"

"My dreams? What do they have to do with you being a...an arrogant bastard."

"I told you I have a plan and that you need to trust me. If that means there are times when I am distant and cold then that is how it must be." He shrugged out of his uniform jacket and pushed up the sleeve of his undershirt so that I could see the sheen of the metal band around his wrist. I reached out and traced the warm metal with the tips of my fingers.

He nodded slightly, "You should know by now that my feelings for you run deeper than words can express. You really need to learn to trust me. I have this well in hand and these pockets of time we have together will be rare after this night so, really, do you want to fight or do you want to come to bed with me and remind me of what I shall sorely miss while I am off saving the galaxy from itself?"

"So last time was just an act?"

He regarded me for a moment then pulled off this shirt completely. "The last time I was on this base there was a great deal of work to be done." He took a step towards me. "The last time I was on this base I was dealing with a highly delicate matter concerning the cloning project and as I have asked you to keep your distance from this project you can understand my behaviour."

"You're hiding something," I said, standing my ground as he closed the distance between us.

His smile was sly and feral. "My dear, I am always hiding something that is the nature of my work. Now enough of this verbal fencing, stop wasting precious time in pointless argument and allow me to make up for one set of bad behaviour for another."

I let him manoeuvre me to the bed. "And after tonight?"

He smirked. "I think I have found a way to keep you occupied." He peeled off my dress starting with the shoulder straps.

"Wonderful," I said making a face and then allowed him to make me forget why I was ticked off with him in favour of a more pleasant method of combat.

Much later after enough energy had been spent that I was too tired and too relaxed to fight with him I asked what he had in mind to keep me busy.

He shifted in the bed to lie on his side with his head propped up on his arm then said with a smile. "It will be a surprise."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You know how I feel about surprises. Out with it. What is going to keep me so busy I won't have time to worry about you?"

"Not what who."

My eyebrow arched in impatience. "Who then?"

"Larsen, Ged Larsen." And then he smiled because he had just rendered me utterly speechless.

After he had dropped his bomb about sending me back to work on the *Virulent* under Ged the conversation had been cut short when a comm call had come through which required his immediate attention. He had left me to lie in bed and consider all the reasons for his decision, especially given what had happened the last time I had been on board Ged's ship but I fell asleep before he returned. When I awoke the next morning he was already up and had breakfast ready. I ignored him to go and shower first to clear the sleep from my brain. After I had dressed and then joined him at the table we ate in our customary quiet. Mornings were never big conversation times for us. He preferred his quiet and I was usually still waking up. Only after we had finished with food and were sipping our 'caf did the conversation begin.

"Where's Rukh these days?" I asked. "Usually he's trailing you around like a creepy shadow."

It was not the first question he had expected from me and it irritated him. His eyebrow arched slightly and the almost imperceptible tick at the corner of his mouth let me know Rukh was not a topic he really wished to speak about so I was surprised when he answered.

"He has remained on board the *Chimaera*. It did not seem appropriate to have him follow me here unless of course you wish to have an observer to our nocturnal activities."

I gave him a tight smile, "No. I rather like to keep that private." I replied then before he could move on to a different subject, "But you're unhappy with him."

The slight twitch at the corner of his mouth turned into a slight smile. "I do so often forget about your rather remarkable talents for observation. No, it is not that I am displeased or unhappy with him but shall we say I am finding the loyalty of his people questionable. He and the Noghri are great warriors but I do not need his talents here, after all my dear, I have you."

I sipped my caf and regarded him from over the brim of my cup. "Not for much longer, you're sending me away remember?"

"You do not have to go but I do think it would be better if you did." He countered.

"The last time you, Ged and I were on the same ship I do believe you had what the Doc would call a major meltdown. What is to stop that from happening again?"

"As you are so fond of pointing out I have nothing to be jealous about and Admiral Larsen has requested your presence. He feels you can be of use to him."

"Doing what exactly?"

"That, my dear, you will have to ask him when you see him."

I made a face and poured more 'caf in both our cups trying to decipher what it was he was not telling me then, after a lengthy silence, said, "You're not coming back to the base once you leave this time, are you? That's why you want me somewhere else, somewhere safe and kept busy."

"The campaign has reached its critical point. My work here, for the time being, is done and yes, you are right, I do not plan on returning until after Coruscant has been retaken."

"Were you going to tell me this or were you just going to ship me off and leave it at that?"

He drew a deep breath. "Yes, I would have told you but now I do not need to." Then he added, "I have learned that it is unwise to try and hide such things from you. It tends to lead to you going off and doing something foolish."

His answer felt wrong somehow but I just nodded. Sometimes pressing the point got me answers but more often than not it just led to an argument and I wasn't up to arguing so instead I asked again. "So what is it that I am going to the *Virulent* to do?"

"That is entirely up to you and Admiral Larsen although he did mention that he would not be unhappy to have another capable mechanic on the ship. I am quite sure you will not be bored but again, you are also free to refuse and remain here, as I have said."

I gave him a withering look. "The fact that you keep giving me this option means it would be better that I don't."

He smiled.

"Besides," I added, "I would drive everyone here crazy."

His smile turned into a slight smirk. "Yes, you would, you already are."

"I do have to wonder why being on board the *Virulent* would be safer than being here. Won't Ged and his fleet joining your campaign?" I asked.

"No," he said, "Larsen has different orders and I would take it as a kindness if you would not ask me anything further on this topic."

"Okay." I said. I figured I could ask Ged about that later, he was far more likely to give me an answer anyway. "When am I supposed to meet him? Is he coming here?"

"I've arranged for you to rendezvous with him at Bastion. I'd like you to take the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*. I think it would be better for you to travel in a civilian ship rather than an Imperial one. I know you like the lambda class shuttle but right now it is not a good time to be flying around in one of them. Given the options I'd prefer you take that rattletrap of yours instead." He teased.

"I like my civilian rattletrap ship. It was a gift and I'm rather fond of its quirks" I retorted.

Thrawn smiled. "Then it's settled. I'd like you leave early tomorrow morning which will give you enough time to sort out what you need to here and make the rendezvous with some time to spare should you run into trouble."

"Then I guess I had better get my day started then," I said getting up from the table. "Will we have some time together later on?"

"Of course my dear. Barring any unforeseen complications I should be done by twenty-hundred-hours. I had hoped we could share an evening meal and then..." he shrugged ever so slightly and smiled.

"Then I shall see you here later," I said as I kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Now I have to get my ship ready!"

"Try not to pester my Quartermaster too much." He replied lightly. "He has quite enough on his to do list as it is."

"As you wish." I grinned and left, heading to the hanger bay to make sure the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* was in good flying shape.

I spent most of my day crawling around the ship's engines making sure all the systems were in perfect condition. In spite of Thrawn's request I did drive the quartermaster to distraction with my requests and questions but he was more than used to this from me. I wanted to be certain that I was ready for every and all eventualities that may occur. I had been caught out once before and it had almost cost me my life. By the time I made it back to the quarters I shared with Thrawn I was covered in engine grime which meant that by the time Thrawn was done for the day I was soaking in the bath.

Our time together was short but full of passion and tenderness. This time he made certain to remind me of what I would be missing once we went our separate ways and it was bittersweet. When we had finally fallen asleep I had been plagued by terrible dreams which left me sad and uneasy when I awoke.

In the quiet of predawn I threaded my fingers through his as we said our goodbyes in private. Deep down inside of my soul I had a terrible feeling of finality. Suddenly I didn't want to leave him or to have him leave me but I knew there wasn't anything I could do or say that would change the inevitable so I said nothing but this did not mean he could not see what I felt written all over my face.

"I am quite certain that Larsen will keep you apprised of the campaign advancements and I promise to send word when I am able to do so," he said gently.

All I could do was nod and look away. My eyes filled with unwanted tears and as much as I did not want to cry I couldn't help it. This parting had such a feeling of finality to it that it terrified me.

He lifted my chin upward with the crook of his finger. "I promise. I have taken every precaution. We will not fail."

I nodded.

He brushed the tears off my face. "You worry too much. You place far too much faith in these dreams of yours and far too little in me. Once this final push is over we will have time together but until then you need to trust that I know what I am doing and I promise to trust that you won't run off with Admiral Larsen," he said with a teasing smile and before I could find any sort of suitable answer he kissed me long and hard pushing any retort far out of my brain.

"Now go and stay out of trouble," he said giving me a little shove away from him.

I did as he asked. I walked toward my ship with a heavy heart and, although it was considered bad luck by the Dantassi, I looked back over my shoulder to see him watching me with an expression I couldn't decipher but definitely didn't like. This all felt horribly wrong final somehow and suddenly all I wanted to do was turn around to run back to him to never leave his side again. Instead I boarded my ship and began the obligatory pre flight check.

If Thrawn stayed to watch me leave I never knew and once I was on my way I tried as hard as hell to exorcise the feeling of dread in my heart. If I was going to work with Ged Larsen I was going to need my wits about me. He was charming and



intelligent and I had almost fallen for that once. That wasn't going to happen a second time. I had a two day trip to ready myself, plenty of time I hoped, to shake off the terrible feeling that something awful was going to happen to Thrawn and that I would never see him again. I was certain that all women who had stupidly attached themselves to military men felt the same way every time their loved one left to fight on some war but somehow this thought didn't make me feel any better.

The trip to rendezvous with the *Virulent* felt like one of the longest I had ever experienced and I was very glad when I landed on board in one of the smaller docking bays to be met by a sour faced officer and a rather nervous looking ensign.

"Welcome on board the *Virulent* Miss Gabriel. Admiral Larsen apologises for not meeting you in person but has asked me to extend every courtesy to you and to show you to your quarters. So if you will follow me." The officer said tartly. The young ensign simply gathered my bags in silence.

I wanted to tell him to go away and that I needed to sort out my ship first but the look on his face said that even if I had tried to argue with him it would be in vain. I nodded and let him lead me through the vast ship to the quarters that Ged had chosen for me. At least this time they were more spacious and pleasant than the last time I had been stationed onboard this ship.

"The Admiral requests that you remain in your quarters until such time as he can debrief you," The officer whose name I didn't know or care about said.

Again I nodded. I was too tired to argue. Seeing that I wasn't going to give him any grief the officer left curtly and the ensign who had carried my luggage did the same. Once the door had closed I went over to the viewport and stared out at the planet below. Bastion, one of the Empire's secret places, spun beneath us like a coloured jewel. I felt rather than heard the destroyers engines rev up and marvelled as we left the planet's orbit. Once we were out of the gravity well we jumped into hyperspace. I had no idea where we were going nor did I much care, suddenly I was exhausted so rather than sit and wait for Ged to show up I decided to take a nap not really expecting to sleep but I did. Hours later the chiming of the door woke me up and looking like something a jax had dragged in I answered it to find Ged standing there with a grin on his face and a protocol droid at his side bearing a covered tray.

"Welcome back Merlyn," he said as he walked in uninvited to my quarters motioning for the droid to set the tray down on the table and then leave. "I thought you might be hungry and I brought some tea. We have much to discuss and not a lot of time."

Still trying to blink sleep out of my eyes I stared at him. "Did you cut your hair?" I asked stupidly.

He just grinned. "See I knew you couldn't resist my charms for long and yes, I did." And with that he motioned for me to sit down on the small couch while he poured tea.

"I'll just skip the small talk okay?" He said, "I have a job for you, for us both actually and I need you to listen carefully."

"I'm listening," I said accepting the steaming cup he handed me carefully.

"How well do you know your way around Coruscant's Imperial Palace?"

I frowned, "Well enough I guess. Why?"

"Well enough to get in without anyone knowing?"

"I think so but it's been a long time and who knows what the rebels have changed," I said as the dopiness of the nap left me to be replaced by a slow feeling of dread. "Why?" I asked again.

"Because I need you to help me break into the palace grounds without being caught or seen."

"What? Why would you even consider doing that?"

"I'm mounting a rescue mission and since no one else seems to be able to get the job done properly I am doing it myself, with your help."

"Rescue? Who are we going to rescue?"

He grinned. "Your friend Jarack Behl."

And that was when I choked on my tea.

"Are you utterly out of your mind?" I asked once I could catch my breath.

Ged smiled and settled back in his chair. "No, I don't believe so."

"You can't expect me to believe that you seriously want to go to Coruscant to infiltrate the Imperial palace to look for secret prisons?"

"Belief or not it needs to be done. Extracting Jarack Behl is not just something I want to do it's something I must do."

"Must?"

"He is one of our best covert agents and he has information vital to my mission."

"Which is?" I interrupted.

"That's need to know and ...."

"And what...I don't need to know?" I finished for him. I got up to pace around the room and sighed. "You know what Thrawn told me I would be doing here? He told me that I would be fixing ships not flying into enemy territory. If you want me to go with you on some crazy hell bent mission of mercy I had better damned well know why."

"I thought that you knew Jarack?" Ged asked ignoring my sarcasm. "Thrawn told me you were close with the man."

"Does Thrawn know what you want to do? What you want me to do?" I avoided his question because he was right.

"No I felt that given, how shall I put this, how protective of you he is it would be better if he did not have this to worry about while he was trying to reclaim the Empire."

"Great." I muttered under my breath. "Ged, you cannot seriously be planning this."

"I can, I am and I am asking for your help."

I stared at him for a very long time assessing his words and weighing what he was suggesting with just turning around and heading back to Nirauan. I knew he was right about Jarack and that he was also my friend, a friend whom I had given up for dead was really alive and imprisoned by the enemy. While I might argue loudly I had already made my mind up but I also knew that Thrawn would not be happy about this, not at all. He had sent me here with the idea of keeping me out of harm's way not so that I could fly straight into the heart of enemy territory.

"So you have a plan?" I eventually asked.

"More or less. It will depend on your knowledge of the palace."

I nodded, "Okay well then I need to get some things from my ship and I will need a data pad."

Ged smiled picked up the one which had been sitting on the tray and handed it to me. "It has already been coded to you."

"How wonderful." I took it. "Give me an hour."

"I have some work to attend to anyway so let me know when you are done. We can meet for supper in my private dining room. It's so much more civilised to discuss plans over good food, don't you think? We have an excellent chef on board. Do you have any preferences?"

"No Corellian spiced cake." I told him.

He gave me a smile that lit up his whole face and I suddenly remembered how handsome he was. He opened his mouth to say something then thought the better of it.

"What is it?" I asked.

He pursed his lips for a moment then said, "I wanted to say I was sorry."

"For what?"

"I heard from your doctor when he transferred copies of all your medical files about your miscarriage. I'm sorry."

"Ah," I said suddenly having to swallow down a sharp pang of sorrow.

"You should have told me you know." He pressed. "That the reason you refused the mission I was offering was legitimate."

I felt a little flash of anger. "I should not have to justify anything to you. I am a civilian. I do not have to do anything you ask me nor do I have to tell you about any private medical information. My just saying no is a legitimate answer and if you don't like that then you need rethink your strategy about having me help you."

He stared at me for a second and then nodded. "Yes, of course. Forgive me."

I looked at him. "You need to know I would have refused to help you regardless of being pregnant or not. I made a promise that I wouldn't just run off and do stupid stuff anymore so what you are asking me to do is not only save a friend but betray a promise I made to my bond mate."

"I understand." He drew a deep slow breath then nodded slightly. "All the same I am sorry about your child."

I had to clamp down on my sudden and inexplicable fury. "Ged, I like you, I really do, but you need to listen to me and really understand what I am about to say okay?"

"Okay."

"Do not bring up the topic of my baby again, do you understand me? Not ever." I spoke through gritted teeth and my fury rolled off me in waves. I know he felt this because he took an involuntary step back from me.

"Understood."

"Okay then," I said relieved. "Now if you'll excuse me I need to get to work." And before either of us could say anything else I spun around and stalked off to the docking bay furious without knowing exactly why.

Later after I had retrieved the data from my ship's on-board computer and had unpacked my stuff into my new quarters I made my way to Ged's dining room mentally preparing for dinner.

The meal was very good and the conversation polite and inoffensive. Once we were done eating, the dishes all cleared away and the stewards dismissed leaving us with a large carafe of fresh stim'caf we got down to business.

I placed the datapad on the table and turned it on. "These are blue prints of the Imperial palace including the hidden passages and secret places."

"Do I even want to know how you came by these?" Ged asked.

"They were a gift from the late Emperor." I told him flatly.

Ged gave me an 'are you kidding me' look.

"It's a very long story and maybe one day I will get drunk enough to tell you but not now," I said shuddering at the memory of the man who had once terrified me.

Ged nodded, "The intel that I have says that there is a secret prison somewhere deep under the Imperial palace and that is where the rebels detain their most highly prized prisoners," he said, "We at least had the good grace to keep ours in a secret prison ship somewhere other than the palace."

I shot him a look but kept my opinions on that to myself. "I don't recall any secret detention centers but that doesn't mean they are not there. It could be the rebels converted space in one of the subbasements for that use. I thought they were touting themselves as the good guys. Don't they have this big campaign about not being like the Empire?" I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice as I said those words.

"The good guys?" Ged snorted. "There is no such thing. Every government gets their hands dirty. You think these guys are any different? Maybe on the outside they all seem squeaky clean but somewhere in the halls of the hallowed principles there are shadowy figures with very grubby hands."

I tapped the datapad, "There are tunnels that go under the main buildings. They lead to a lot of different places including the Jedi temple and Lord Vader's main Coruscant residence. There are a number of subbasements as well as secret passages in between the walls and in the middle of the palace there are also some pretty big secrets. I am willing to bet the rebels haven't figured half of them out yet," I said, "So how do you know about Jarack anyway? I mean I thought he was on some super secret undercover mission and no one knew where he was or how to reach him?"

"I have agents on the ground and all of our agents have a tracking chip implanted." He said, "I knew when Behl went missing because his reports stopped. I have people looking for him because his chip is still sending transmissions this means he is alive but he's too valuable to leave in the hands of the enemy."

"Thrawn said he was looking to uncover a possible rebel agent here?"

Ged's jaw tightened. "That was part of his work. Information was getting off this ship that shouldn't have been. His job was to find out how and it led him to a cell on Coruscant. His last transmission stated that he was close to finding the leader and that was the last I heard of him. After that I had my people on the ground start looking for him."

"Your people on the ground?"

"I have spies everywhere." He said with such a grin I wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. "Really, it's part of my job."

"So what does that mean that you are the spy master?"

This made him laugh. "I suppose that's one way to put it." Then he took a sobering breath. "I have intel on where Behl could be and intel on his last location," he said as he input the data into the pad. "So that puts him somewhere here." He tapped the pad again and the image enlarged to show me. I synched the information and laid it over the blue prints I had.

"So, in theory, he should be somewhere here," I said pointing to the general area. I looked at the blue prints and recalled the palace layout. "I can get you in there if things haven't changed a lot and providing that Vader's residence hasn't been torn down. It would be easier to go from there than to try and get into the old Jedi Temple. I am pretty sure that Luke Skywalker has made that place more difficult to get in and out of."

Ged looked at me and then he proceeded to tell me his plan. After about half way through I held up my hand to stop him.

"You really are out of your mind," I said more rudely than I had planned. "If we do as you suggest we'll be caught in seconds. Your whole demeanour screams Imperial officer and if you think taking a disguised shuttle is going to get us past Coruscant Space Control you have another thing coming."

"Well then, do you have a better idea?" He asked folding his arms across his chest in that manner men do when their pride has been bruised.

"As a matter of fact I do," I said and began to lay it all out for him. When I was done it was his turn to shake his head.

"And you call me insane?" He said.

"It will work and it's way better than pretending to be smugglers in a stolen imperial shuttle." I replied gathering up my datapad.

He thought about it for a bit and then nodded. "Very well then I guess this means you are in charge."

I smirked. "Aye aye Admiral."

"So can I tempt you with a brandy?"

I smiled as I picked up my datapad. "No. I'm tired and I have a lot to think about."

"Of course," he said as we both stood up. "We will have plenty of time together on the flight to Coruscant."

I didn't say anything to that as I left the dining room but I was pretty sure that Thrawn would be unimpressed by this entire situation and suddenly I missed him so much it hurt.

Three days later we were ready to go.

"Are you sure this thing can fly?" Ged asked for the tenth time and I went through my preflight check.

"Are you sure your ship can run without you there?" I countered. "This pretty unusual you know."

"I have capable officers and a very capable captain they can do without me for a few days." He answered dryly.

"Uh huh," I said, "Flight this is the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* requesting permission to clear docking."

"*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* you are cleared."

"Roger that. See you in a few days *Virulent*. Try not to wreck the ship while we're gone." I grinned shutting the com off before Ged could say anything about my unorthodox chatter and flew out of the docking bay into the beauty of space. As soon as I could I set hyper drive in the direction of Coruscant and then we vanished into the eerie light of hyperspace.

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Coruscant had not changed much at all. It was as busy and as cluttered as ever. We cleared through customs with an ease that made Ged raise his eyebrows at me.

My answer was tart. "I told you so."

He nodded, "Yes you did so I owe you a drink."

For much of the trip he had questioned the plan I had put into place because it wasn't military or strategic enough. I had told him that the last thing we needed was anything that smacked of either military or strategy. Civilians in an old beat up civilian ship would not have any idea of military strategy of any sort. We needed to seem harmless and somewhat clueless. It was not so easy to convince a man with Ged's brilliance to act like a moisture farmer from Tatooine on his very first trip to the core. Eventually he gave up arguing, especially when I told him that the ship's various disguises had all be previously set up by the best there was. "Trust me, "I had said, "No one is going to look twice at us, they have bigger banthas to chase."

I navigated the ship through the traffic and landed quietly at the building Thrawn and I had once lived in. I had contacted Shiv to let him know I was coming for a visit and he had let me know that the codes had not changed but that both he

and Ynyth would be off world. I was sad to miss them but at the same time it would make things a lot easier for Ged and myself. At least I would not have to explain Ged's presence to Shiv because that would have been difficult.

As we stepped into the flat I was both happy and sad to be there. It had changed significantly. All vestiges of Thrawn's personality had been replaced by Shiv and Ynyth's and it was lovely. On the dining room table was a note which said *"Food in the fridge, spare room all set up you, useable cred chip the desk drawer for you if you need it, you know where everything is. Make yourself at home. Sorry we won't be there but it's a family thing so we can't get out of it. Have fun. – love Shiv and Ynyth"*

I watched as Ged dropped his pack on the floor and looked around. "Nice place."

I smiled. "Yes it is." I glanced around. There were a lot of memories tied up here and most of them were extraordinarily happy ones. I glanced at the chrono on the wall and took note of the time.

"We should eat before we head out. Where we are going doesn't have a decent cantina," I said as I unpacked my gear and laid it all out on the floor, looked it over then repacked it again. "We have two choices, we can order out or I can cook and I don't recommend option number two. If it's still around I knew a really great Zabracki place that delivers.

"I keep forgetting you used to live here and Zabracki sounds good," he said sitting down and hauling out his datapad.

"When are you meeting your contact?"

"In just over an hour."

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"Yes very. He's taking a risk meeting me as it is and your face was once splashed across all sorts of holo and news vids along with Grand Admiral Thrawn's and you have a memorable face Merly no matter what you might think or what your crazy uncle did to delete you from the records people here knew you so no you don't get to come with me," he said, "Now order us some food and we can finalise the plans. I do not want to spend too much time on this planet. If we can't find Behl or can't get him out within the next forty-eight hours then we need to make sure we don't get caught here ourselves."

"Why the strict deadline?"

He wavered for a second and then said, "Because I don't want to get caught and I need to get back to my ship." He spoke the truth but he was hiding something behind it. He watched my face carefully and knew that I had caught him out. He glared at me, "I don't know how Vader or Thrawn ever put up with you; just take my word for it we need to leave here in forty eight hours."

I sighed and his glare changed into a stern frown.

"Okay, okay," I said giving him a mock salute and went to order food, which felt familiar and strange all at the same time. While Ged checked his own gear and changed into clean clothes that would help him blend in, I set the table and tried to shake the weird sense of having done this all before as well as the feeling of impending doom. I was quite certain that Thrawn, Uncle Vahlek as well as Navaari would have some choice words for this plan and my involvement in it but they were not here and I was and, as Ged had pointed out, Jarack was someone I cared about, never mind all the other secret spy stuff that made it an imperative to get him back. When the food arrived we ate in silence, locked in our own thoughts preparing for what it was we were going to try and do.

On the flight to Coruscant we had discussed the plans so much I could recite them in my sleep. It had seemed simple on paper but not so simple now that we were here. We had an approximate time of Jarack's disappearance, and a fairly good guess about where he was being held but apart from that there wasn't much to go on. Ged's people on Coruscant had begun a search on the quiet, looking for clues and possible indications that the rebels, or better to call them, the New Republic government, really did have some sort of secret detention center and they found it or at least they believed they had found it. Now it was up to me and Ged to confirm it and rescue Jarack because anyone else going on this crazy hair brained mission was not something Ged would allow. Apparently a couple of agents had already attempted a rescue mission and had failed spectacularly. Ged would not give me any details which meant it must have been a complete and utter mess. These had been trained professionals who had failed at their job and now he had chosen me instead to back him up. I wasn't worried about this or anything, no not at all.

"How long will you be?" I asked as Ged got ready to leave.

"I don't know."

"You'll need this to get back in here then." I handed him a card-key.

"Thanks," he said with a nod and then he left.

I left out the breath I felt I had been holding since the moment we had arrived on the planet and sank down into the couch. It had been well over two weeks since I had said goodbye to Thrawn and now I was here on Coruscant, right back where I had started.

The last I had heard about Thrawn's campaign was that it was advancing. He had been successful in taking Generis and had been planning his next move which was rumoured to involve Bilbringi but I didn't know what that was and Ged had been taciturn about the entire subject on the trip to Coruscant. I had been kept out of the loop for most of the campaign and while sometimes I wished I knew more, for the most part I was almost glad I didn't.

Thrawn's entire campaign had been a series of hit and run style attacks. He knew he did not have the manpower to just come in and sweep the galaxy clear of the rebels so he devised a different tactic. It was only after he had recovered much of the lost Katarn fleet and found success with the cloning facility on Mount Tantiss that things started to speed up. Now I knew he was planning his final push although I didn't know when or exactly how only that he would be headed here and when that happened I hoped I wasn't on the planet or anywhere near it. I must have drifted off to sleep because it was late and dark when Ged came in.

"Grab your gear," he said shaking my shoulder. "We need to go now."

I woke up instantly, grabbed my satchel and before I even had time to really think about it we were out the door and on our way to catching public transport. We had dressed to blend in and we did, slipping into the crowds like ghosts. It was odd to be back on the planet, even stranger to see how much things had changed and yet had stayed the same.

The Emperor had been dead for over nine years and Coruscant had been under New Republic rule for six. There were remnants of the Emperor's rule to see if you really looked for them but they were far and few between. The government had changed and people had accepted the change and moved on with their lives. It was exactly as Thrawn had once told me, as long as things worked and people were warm and fed they didn't really care who was in charge.

We took one of the more crowded commuter shuttles that routed through the industrial part of the city before heading into COCO town and then onto what used to be known as the Imperial Center. It was a roundabout way to get to where we wanted

to go but if anyone was watching us Ged thought this would confuse them. I kept my senses wide open but I never got the feeling anyone cared about us or what we were doing. To the rest of the world we looked like two ordinary people heading home from work. I guessed it was a good thing I had gotten so little sleep on the flight to Coruscant, it added to that overworked, stressed out, all I want to do is go home and sleep look I was sort of going for.

We got off the red line shuttle a few blocks from where Lord Vader's residence had been and walked the rest of the way. I was surprised when we found the building still standing; I was even more surprised that it appeared to be unused. Prime real-estate on Coruscant usually did not lie empty for long.

"People think it's haunted." Ged whispered as though he had been reading my mind. "They tried developing the building for apartments and it didn't quite work out the way they had hoped."

"Good for us." I muttered under my breath and led him to the one door I hoped no one had bothered to mess about with much. I held my breath while Ged looked around us to keep watch and punched in my code. I nearly jumped out of my skin when the door opened with an audible thunk. Not waiting to hang around and see if we'd set off any alarms I grabbed Ged's sleeve and yanked him inside allowing the door to shut tightly behind us.

The place smelled musty and unused. I switched on a small flashlight and took a few seconds to remember the layout of this place in my head. "Come on, this way." I whispered.

If looters had ever come here hoping to find anything of value they would have been sorely disappointed. Lord Vader had lived sparsely in this place. It had been one of the things I had commented on when he had been in a sociable mood which had never been very often. Jix Wrenga, one of Vader's go-to guys, had also joked about the lack of decor with me whenever he was around, commenting that it was such a waste of space to not fill up with clutter like the Emperor. Now I was grateful for Vader's sparse decorating style it meant less to trip up on and fall over in the semi darkness.

We walked quickly and kept quite. Conversation could wait until we had reached the underground passageways that led from this building to the Imperial Palace. We did not want to attract any unwanted attention. I kept all of my senses open but felt nothing unusual or strange. No one had been here for a long time and somehow that made me melancholy. While I had never been overly fond of this place I had liked the man who had lived here and in that moment I suddenly missed him even though he had been dead for over nine years. Ged, who had the ability to pick up on my feelings, touched my hand lightly with his.

"Are you alright?" He asked in a hushed voice.

"Old ghosts." I explained and kept on moving.

Through a series of hallways and stairwells we eventually reached the entrance to the series of tunnels that led to the palace. I had always thought that calling them tunnels was a misnomer since they were more like back alleyways through a variety of hidden passages that went through parts of buildings no one knew or much cared about. At the height of the Empire, when Vader actually spent time here all, of the surrounding area was mainly used by imperial workers and housed offices, now I wasn't sure what they were but I was certain no one had figured out the incredibly labyrinth of passageways that utilized the entire area.

I guided us down through the one I remembered being the least used. It was small and over the years a lot of dust had gathered telling me that I had made the



right choice this time and after what felt like an eternity we found our way into the Imperial Palace.

To say that the Imperial Palace was huge would be an understatement. People had gotten lost in the building only to be found year later after having died. When I had lived here I had loved it but now it was like returning to a beloved home after many years to find it had been taken over by a new family and changed.

I led Ged through a series of maintenance tunnels which appeared not to have been used in a very long time. They had their own turbo lifts leading down into the basements and subbasements so that workers could go about their business without disturbing the palace dwellers or people who worked there. I had used this system of tunnels before and the memory of that wasn't an overly happy one. When we were deep enough into the building that I was sure no one would discover us we stopped to drink some water and rest a bit.

"Okay, so tell me what happened with your contact?" I asked as I studied the data-pad with the blue prints.

"He said they were planning on moving all the detainees tomorrow night. There have been some problems at the palace a break in or some such nonsense; attempted kidnapping of Leia Organa Solo's babies and security has been increased. The people in charge of the detention center apparently don't want anyone stumbling on their dirty little secret. So if we are going to accomplish the mission it has to happen now."

"Nothing like a deadline to make a person motivated," I said making a face. "You really think he's still alive?"

"I sure as hell hope so," Ged said with a snort. "The last good intel I had said he was, but of course that could have changed and totally accurate information is difficult to come by. The rebs have some good security here and already they've managed to ferret out three of my agents."

"Maybe your agents are just bad at their jobs."

"Well these days good help is hard to get." Ged replied flippantly. "Actually it's more like I still have traitor issues to deal with. Okay so what's next."

I tapped the data-pad. "We need to go here. Isard had her offices here and here there should be a small intelligence prison complex," I said, "But the problem is we'll have to actually cross some more open areas to do so but at this time of night and so deep down into the building I doubt there will be many people around. Then, if your people's information is correct, we should be looking at finding those detention centers somewhere here, if they still exist. All of the infrastructure needed to detain and interrogate people would be in place and not that many people would ever come down here. Isard made sure that this part of the palace was difficult to get to and well guarded."

"Okay, let's get on with it," Ged said and we did.

We walked quickly; keeping quiet and, as we crossed areas more open to scrutiny, we stayed in the shadows with our eyes open. I was surprised at how deserted the palace now felt. When the Emperor had been in place it had bustled with workers, droids and all manner of beings, now there was no one and nothing around, not even any cleaning droids to see and if the dirt and dust that lay around was anything to go by no one had cleaned down here in a good while. It felt as though we were gone for days, wandering around in circles although that was not the case. We knew when we'd found the right place because suddenly, according to the sensor readings on the data-pad Ged had there were people nearby and I had a really bad feeling about it all.

I studied the readout for a long moment and then looked at Ged. "Now what?" I asked.

"Now we go find our man and get him the hell out of here," Ged replied.

The detention area was large and complex and, in theory, full of security but nothing showed up on the scanners to indicate where any of the guards were, just there were life forms in what appeared to be cell blocks. We were in one of the small maintenance tunnels that lead to the detention area but from where we were hiding it was impossible to see anything clearly.

"There should be a main control console near the entrance to the cell blocks," Ged said quietly studying the layout from the datapad.

"It may be guarded."

He nodded, "Yes, probably, but they don't expect anyone to come barging in so we have an advantage. Looking at this there is probably only one life form guarding the area, though this won't tell us how many sentry droids there are."

"So what are you suggesting? We just storm the area like a couple of mad banthas?" I said crossly.

Ged smiled. "You're very cute when you're annoyed, you know that?"

I made a face, "I get annoyed when there's no solid plan with no solid backup. Look, something here feels off."

"Can you be more specific because I don't sense any danger and usually my instincts are spot on?"

"No, I can't. It just doesn't feel right," I shook my head. Wondering, not for the first time, what the exact nature of Ged's own force talents were, because while we both knew we were force users our exact abilities were something we had never directly discussed.

He sighed, "We're breaking into a detention area so of course it doesn't feel right. Look, I'm happy to listen to any suggestions you have but just having a bad feeling doesn't count as a suggestion."

"So then what, do you have a plan or are we just winging it?"

"If we can hone in on Behl's tracking chip then we could bypass all need for logging in to the system. The less invasive we are the less likely we are to trip any alarms but you know the risks as well as I do."

I waited with a nagging sense of annoyance and unease.

He fiddled with his datapad for far too long and then cursed softly.

"What." I demanded.

"I can't seem to find him. They must have disabled his tracking chip."

I frowned at him. "Ged, did you not check that before we left?"

He just shrugged. "I was rather hoping it was a proximity issue. My contact assured me that Behl was being held here."

"So we're doing this the hard way." I made a face. I pulled off my satchel and gave it to him. "Take this, keep it safe." It held my lightsaber and I didn't want to run the risk of getting caught with it in case I was right and this mission went south.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"To find out where Jarack is. The main console should be here," I said tapping the data-pad, "I think I can slice it, maybe, if they are using the existing mainframe or I can get into it through a backdoor using one of Lord Vader's codes. I'm happy to hang back here though if you think you can do this better. Can you do this?"

"Slice the data? No. I can do a great many things but slicing is not one of my big skill sets," he replied. "How is it that you can?"

"Well I had some help and it's a long story but let's just say that working for Lord Vader had its advantages." I nodded. "So I go, you stay."

"Don't get caught." He chided.

"That's not my plan but my plans don't ever tend to go the way I hope they will so if I'm not back in about five minutes then it's your turn. Just don't leave me here because Thrawn will kill you if you do."

Ged grinned.

"I'm not joking you know."

"Merlyn...", Ged started but then stopped because I had already slipped away from him into the shadows.

Isard's palace detention complex, while not as huge as the Lusankya facility had been, was still big enough to get lost in if one wasn't careful. Luckily for me the design had been based on the same sort of layout used on an ISD. One had to admire the Imperials for their streamlining of things. This meant a main room with a central computer to control all the cells, locks and live security camera feeds.

I moved quietly, the way I had been taught by Master Kjestyll, stretching out with the force to feel for danger but there was nothing. Whatever was happening here it was being done on the quiet by a pretty nonexistent skeleton crew. I drew a deep breath, finding my center, and then stepped into the main room. I had a rough idea where the spy-cams were and tried to stay in the shadows. I was hoping that if I actually ran into a real person I could manipulate them with the force power Lord Vader had called mind trick. It wasn't my best ability since I so rarely used it but it would do in a pinch.

The entire detention area was shaped like a fan. The main processing area, a large semi circular room which housed the computers and the offices had three long corridors branching off it with detention cells, interrogation rooms and other facilities lining them. I stood for a moment in the shadows trying to sense if there was anyone around at all, it all felt strangely devoid of life and I began to wonder if Ged hadn't made some huge miscalculation. Against my better judgment I stepped out into the main room and made my way to the central control panel. This was all way too easy.

I glanced around to make certain I was alone and started to tap into the computer system. The database was there but it was empty. There were no prisoners listed, in fact there was nothing listed at all. Puzzled I dug deeper using all of the tools I had been taught to slice. The coding was clever and I wasn't nearly good enough to wade through it all but what I did find was enough to know we had made a terrible mistake. I swore under my breath as I backed away from the console. Alarms suddenly sounded loud enough to make me jump. Two seconds later I stood face to face with a rather grim faced man holding a blaster aimed at my chest.

"This is a restricted area," he said, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I was looking for the fresher," I said slowly, reaching out with the force, sensing his mind and giving it a shove.

He frowned slightly. "This is a restricted area," he said again slowly, looking puzzled.

"I work here and I was looking for the 'fresher,'" I said again re-enforcing the force push.

The man shook his head ever so slightly as though he were fighting off a drug and I knew that he was fighting me so I did the next best thing I knew how and I kicked him as hard as I could in the groin. The blaster in his hand clattered to the floor as he sank to his knees in agony. I used the force to bring the blaster to my hand.

"Are there more of you?" I hissed shakily pointing the blaster at him but the guard remained silent and grim faced. I should have been more concerned that he didn't seem too worried.

"Ged! We're going to have company!" I yelled.

"No need to shout, I'm right here." Ged swore yanking the blaster out of my hand to shoot the man who was kneeling in pain on the floor in the chest. The blaster had not been set on stun.

"This is a trap." I hissed as Ged did a quick search of the dead man's pockets, pulling out a card key. "There's no one here. No prisoners, no people, no one. Wherever Jarack is being held it's not in this place."

"Your ability to state the obvious is brilliant," He snapped. He turned and blasted the lock at the main door. "That won't hold for long. Can you get anything useful out of that?" He nodded at the console I had been using.

"The program is too sophisticated for me. Someone really good set that up. The minute I sliced into it they knew we were here."

"So it's useless then?"

I nodded. He shot it sending sparks showering everywhere. I glanced as the entrance to the detention center began to open.

"Come on." He tugged my hand to lead us back into the maintenance tunnels. "We need to get out of here right now. And then we need to find a place to hide and rethink our strategy."

I was about to argue when the sound of a blaster fired very close by. They had found the service tunnel entrance. Ged shoved me ahead of him and turned to fire back. The smell of scorched metal and flesh filled the small service tunnel making me sick. He was an extraordinarily good shot and when it seemed he had managed to kill everyone who had entered the tunnel to follow us he yelled at me to run.

"Go!" He yelled. "There will be more on the way and they will have better scanning equipment!"

I wasn't going to disagree. Using my memories of being here before I led Ged through an impressive maze of small maintenance tunnels and secret passageways. It took longer than it should have. The entire palace was now on alert so there were many more open or easily accessed tunnels and areas we had to work hard to avoid. Eventually we found ourselves at a place I was all too familiar with. I pushed Ged through the force shielding and we slipped into the secret room which had once housed the Emperor's treasures. No one had been here since my last visit, touching the door panel had told me that. Once the door had shut behind us I let out a sigh of relief and sank down to the floor.

"Well that didn't go quite as planned did it?" I said trying to catch my breath. "What the hell happened?"

He looked at me angrily as he paced the room, "I do not know. This was not how things were supposed to go."

I shook my head. "They knew we were coming. How is that possible? I didn't tell anyone so who did you tell, who knew?"

Ged stopped and looked at me. "My informant was the only person apprised that I was here, who knew anything about this mission. No one else was told the exact nature of what I was planning. I didn't trust anyone else."

I nodded, sighing with heavy resignation, "And there's your double agent. Did he know about me, did he know I was with you?"

"No. I never mentioned you but if they caught your face on the security holos they know you are here now. If there is any record of you at all, they'll know who you are."

I didn't need him to tell me what that would mean if we were to get caught.

"Is Jarack even still alive?" I asked after a lengthy silence. "Or was that all a lie as well?"

Ged shook his head. "I don't know."

"This agent of yours, you trusted him?"

"Yes. Absolutely, I've known him for years, we were in the Academy together and," He added angrily, "we were friends."

"Who is he?"

"Lee Vander."

"Admiral Kel Vander's son?" I could not keep the astonishment out of my voice. "The ace pilot? I had heard that he had been killed at the Battle of Yavin." Jorae had talked about it a lot, Lee Vander had been one of his heroes.

He nodded. "Yes. That was the story fabricated so that he could move into the black ops service."

I sighed and scrubbed at my face with my hands. I could still hear alarms wailing away in the distance. I really hoped this room was safe. Only a force user would ever be able to get past the Emperor's strange force block and as far as I knew there were not so many of us around anymore but a lot of things had changed since I had last been here. I wasn't that secure about how secret this room was any more but it had been the only place I could think of to go. I looked at Ged and motioned for him to pass me my satchel. I dug out the water bottle I had and took a sip then handed it to Ged who shook his head.

"No thanks."

The silence in the room grew heavy so I broke it. "Forty eight hours you said." I drew a deep breath. "What happens in forty eight hours?"

"It was the amount of time I gave us to get in and out," he said evasively.

"Why?"

He sighed. "Because in seventy two hours, give or take, this planet will be under attack if all goes according to the Grand Admiral's plan. I wanted to be well away before that happened."

"Well, this is just great." I said, "Can I say I told you this was a bad idea now?"

"If it will make you feel better," he replied, "So where exactly are we now? I don't recall this room at all and I thought I knew a great deal about the palace."

"This is one of the Emperor's secret collection rooms. His private treasury." I said and then before he could ask I told him the entire story of how I knew this place was here.

"Wow." Ged breathed. "You do lead a charmed life. I thought you didn't like the Emperor."

"I didn't. He scared the hell out of me," I retorted, "But he seemed to like me."

"He took you under his wing." Ged said, "He must have seen something remarkable in you."

I stared at Ged for a long while and then realised what I was hearing in his voice was sadness. "I'm sorry. You were close to him and I am being insensitive."

"You didn't answer the question."

"I have some talents he felt would be of use to him. I was of the opinion that I did not want to be used. I was Lord Vader's girl not the Emperor's."

"What sort of talents?"

I stared at him for a moment and then using the force I pushed at him, invading his mind, showering him with a taste of the anger I was feeling at him for getting me into this situation.

He stiffened and then in a move so fast I did not see it coming he whirled around to come at me, grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet pulling me close to his body. "Get out of my head!" He snarled in my ear.

I just stared at him reinforcing the link until he slammed it shut with a brutality that reminded me of Lord Vader. It hurt.

"Ow!" I pushed him away from me and rubbed at my temples to try and ease the sharpness of the pain I had felt.

"Vader used to try that trick with me, trying to dig out information and while you have some talent you are nowhere near as good or as strong as he was!" Ged said angrily. "Palpatine taught me how to counter attacks like that easily. Do not ever do that again."

"So you were his student?" I asked sliding back down the wall to sit on the floor again.

He glanced about the empty room as if trying to decide how much to tell me. "He felt there was some merit in teaching me to use my talents wisely."

"You never speak of it in any great detail," I said, "I mean I know we're chatted about this stuff but we always skirt around the details."

He shrugged slightly. "What is there to speak about? Palpatine is dead and the force has been usurped back into the domain of the Jedi." He spat that last word as though it burned his tongue just to utter it.

"So what can you do aside from shutting me out and hurting me?" I asked.

"The usual, move things, get a sense of feelings and so on," he replied. "And this..." he smirked a little as he held up his hands and for a brief second blue electricity seemed to writhe and dance about his fingers.

I gasped. "Force lightning?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you use that in the tunnels?"

"It's very draining and I need all my energy to keep you in line."

"Ha very ha."

He looked at me for a moment and then asked, "So aside from what you just showed me what was it that made Palpatine so intrigued by you because I know it wasn't just the usual list of force powers that had you on his watch list."

I studied my nails for a long moment listening as the klaxons continued. "I can tell when someone is lying to me," I said.

"And?"

I sighed. "I can read the memories off objects."

Ged regarded me for a very long moment. "Well that might have been useful to know a few hours ago," he said digging into a pouch on his utility belt. He pulled out a small data chip and tossed it to me before I could say anything. I caught it out of reflex.

I sucked in my breath as I was bombarded with everything the datachip had to tell me. Once it was over I let out a gasp and swore in Cheunh loudly.

"I take it that means you saw something interesting?"

I nodded trying to sort out everything I had been shown. "Jarack is dead," I said not bothering to fight back the tears in my eyes. "Your friend killed him."

Ged stared at me for a second and then his temper exploded as he hurled the data-pad he had been holding across the room where it shattered against the far wall.

"What else did you see?" He demanded.

I shook my head. "It's too hard to try and put into words, it's all images and a lot of them I don't understand."

He drew a deep breath. "Share them with me then, with your mind, through the force."

"You told me not to ever do that again."

"I'm making an exception. Just do it," he said squatting down in front of me.

He opened his mind up to me and felt it as though the sun had suddenly come out from under a cloud. I gasped at the sensation and he hissed. "Hurry up."

I reached out, cupped his face with both hands pressing the datachip against his cheek, and drew him to me so that our foreheads touched and did as he asked and while holding onto the small data-chip I flooded everything it showed me to him in real time. He grunted with the weight of it and this time when I was done he severed the connection between us far more gently. When I handed him the datachip back he just slipped it into his pocket without looking at it.

"Oh Merly," He whispered, his voice husky with sorrow, "I do not envy you this talent."

I looked up at Ged, "He set you up and you walked right into his trap."

"He was my friend," he said simply as if that explained it all.

I just sighed, closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall, "I know, I'm sorry."

He nodded and stood up slowly. "Speaking of traps, Merly how do we get out of here? I get the impression that this place may not be as secure as it might have once been."

I got up and pressed the panel on the wall which opened the secret entrance to a turbo lift.

"I don't have the codes to make the lift go anywhere but all the way down," I said as we stepped into it. "At the bottom is a shuttle line that goes under much of the city. There are two stops still in the palace, one where Xizor's palace used to be, one at the museum and the one at the end, in The Works district, is the medical facility that the Emperor once used to ...fix...Lord Vader."

The door closed silently and we stood across from each other, leaning against the walls. He studied my face intently making me self conscious and shy all at the same time.

"Anything else at the bottom I should know about?" He asked eventually breaking the awkward silence.

I shrugged, "Last time I was here it was just the shuttle car and the tunnel."

"So we could be headed down into another trap?"

"We could be, if anyone knows about this room and all its secrets, though I doubt it."

"Are you certain of that?" He asked checking that the blaster he had taken off the guard still held a charge.

"No." I fished my lightsaber out of my satchel. He looked at it with a smile.

"Do you actually know how to use that thing without hurting yourself?" He teased.

"I can hold my own." I retorted crossly.

"Alright then, shall we see if there's a party waiting for us?"

I sighed and brushed my fingers against the control panel and the turbo lift moved down with a soft jolt.

"You know, I wasn't joking," I said, "If anything happens to me Thrawn will still kill you."

Ged gave me a look I couldn't read and reached out to stroke my face. "Then I shall not let anything happen to you, shall I." His touch was oddly comforting but I moved away from his hand anyway.

He just grinned, "Once we get back to the *Virulent*, you and I are going to have a long discussion about your force talents and I want to see just how good you are with that thing." He smirked as he showed me his own lightsaber that had been hidden beneath his jacket.

I just shook my head. "How can you be so calm after all that's happened?"

"I'm not calm, Merly. I'm angry but I'm saving the fury up for when we find Vander so that I can kill him with a minimum of fuss."

"Wait, we're getting off this planet! We are not going after anyone."

Ged's only answer was a feral smile and then the lift stopped.

The moment the turbo-lift door opened I ignited my lightsaber but the only things it destroyed were the speckles of dust floating in the air as we stepped out onto the platform. The area was empty and silent. The same shuttle I had used when I was last here was sitting, waiting as though we had been expected. I sighed and swore under my breath making Ged raise an eyebrow at me.

"Problems?" He asked as he looked around.

"No, but the last time I used this thing it wasn't exactly friendly to stopping when I wanted it to." I replied. "It was the Emperor's personal shuttle. He used it to traverse under the palace in secret. I don't have the codes and I can't slice it, I tried that once before."

"Well that's useful then isn't it." Ged muttered, stepping into the shuttle. I followed him, looking over my shoulder to make sure that no one was lurking somewhere behind us but there was nothing. As soon as I entered and sat down, the shuttle flickered to life, the door closed and it moved forward with a soft jerk.

"It appears to like you," Ged said. He was staring at the control panel trying to figure out how it worked.

"The system is automated with motion sensors, nothing more." I suddenly felt exhausted. "But unless you have magic codes or something to change how this thing works you might want to sit, it takes a while for it to get to the end destination."

"Hmm." He stared at the control panel until I thought he would burn holes in it and then he tried what I tried the last time I was here. He punched in various codes and he pushed all the buttons he could see. I just sat there watching him in sleepy amusement until he made a noise of disgust and hit the panel with his fist.

"Like I said..." I told him again, folding my arms across my chest and suddenly feeling exhausted. "You should just relax."

He gave me a look which I interpreted to mean something rude and then paced the short length of the shuttle car and back. When he returned he sat down across from me and took out his data-pad. "I found the fresher," he said without taking his eyes off the pad he was fiddling with.

"The Emperor spared no expense when it came to his comfort." I replied with a shrug.

"So where exactly is it we are headed?"

I gestured for him to give me his data-pad and I called up the map of Coruscant. "This is the palace," I said pointing at the dot on the map, "And this is the medical facility in the Works District." He watched as my finger traced a straight line from one point to the next. "The shuttle stops here, right under this building. The whole trip takes just over an hour; this shuttle thingy is very fast. This was the Emperor's private medical and research facility. It was here he saved Lord Vader's life after he was almost killed on Mustafar by General Kenobi. It also housed his cloning facilities and other laboratories." I explained.

"Why does it only go there?" Ged asked staring at the pad as it would suddenly give him better answers.



I shook my head. "I think that's what the Emperor had programmed it to do, all I know is that's where it took me when I was here last and there wasn't much I could do about it."

"I thought you said you could slice."

"I have some skills but I'm not a genius. I learned how to bypass and slice ship systems but not this stuff." I gestured in the direction of the control pad by the shuttle's door. "This is all protected by codes only the Emperor understood, I tried and I am not that good. Even the codes I have from Lord Vader can't bypass this stuff. The only reason I ended up here once before was because that was what the Emperor wished to happen."

That piqued Ged's interest so I told him what had taken place the last time I had come this way. I left out the whole conversation I had had with the ghost of my dead jedi mother because I didn't think that Ged needed to know that but I told him everything else. When I was done there was a lengthy, heavy silence between us and then Ged shook his head.

"I don't understand, he was already dead so why would he lead you here with these strange clues? I mean if he had wanted you he would have just taken you when he was alive, you obviously have skills he was intrigued by."

"It's complicated." I growled.

He gave me a look which said '*un-complicate it for me*'.

I sighed heavily. This was a conversation I didn't really want to have.

"Merly out with it, now!"

"He didn't think he was going to die at Endor. He thought he was invincible. He had this whole plan laid out about how he was going to destroy the rebellion, kill Lord Vader and take Luke Skywalker to be his new apprentice. He totally miscalculated the love between a father and a son, he completely screwed up." I retorted.

"Vader betrayed him." Ged spat.

I closed my eyes and bit back on the sudden sorrow I felt. "No," I said shaking my head, "Vader protected the last link he had to the woman he had loved more than anything else. Palpatine was the one who had betrayed Lord Vader."

Ged took a deep breath not wanting to get into this with me, "We can debate this at another time. Just answer my question."

"I think the Emperor waited before cornering me because it was more useful to have me where I was, doing what I was doing rather than trying to bend me to his will against my own. I would have fought him hard enough that he would not have been able to get what he wanted from me, the way he wanted it."

Ged just sat back and watched my face, waiting for more.

"Don't you see? He didn't want to break me in the usual way because I would have been useless to him like that. He wanted bend me in such a way that I had no choice but to do what he wanted; he wanted to use me, to twist me and warp everything I knew into something else and still have it feel as though it had been my choice to go down that path. That was his power, he manipulated everything and it was all just a game to him. I think he enjoyed the fact that Lord Vader had taken some sort of liking to me, there was an attachment there the Emperor could use and then when Thrawn ...," I choked on his name, remembering the bitterness of Thrawn's supposed disgrace and had to stop and take a deep breath. "Well he used that as well and it was all very public and messy." I stopped before anger overrode my common sense. "The Emperor had learned about what I could do earlier but he left it alone. Let's just say I was of more use to him as I was, at least until Endor and then things changed."

"Changed? How?"

I heaved a very deep sigh and then told him what had happened to me on the second Death Star and when I was done he was silent for a very long time. When he finally spoke his voice was gentle and full of sorrow.

"No wonder you hate him so much." He shook his head slightly, "I never understood why because to me he was like a father. He took great interest in my career from a very early age and he helped me often. He was my mentor in so many ways I can't even count them. I knew that he could be ruthless but I never experienced his cruelty first hand." He reached out and placed his hand over mine and I welcomed the warmth, "I'm sorry he did that to you but why at Endor, why wait so long to use a gift that would have been of great use to him?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. I'm sure he had his reasons," I said quietly. "It's not a talent I enjoy having and for a very long time I managed to shut it out. It was something that I had little control over and it wasn't a strong gift, or so I thought. Under the training I received that changed. As I learned more about how to control the force so this delightful little gift grew too. It's a trait found in the Kiffar people. My birth mother was from Kiffu and she was a powerful jedi. I inherited this from her. I kept it a secret for as long as I could and although Lord Vader and Thrawn eventually learned about it they did not tell the Emperor, he discovered it by himself. He set a trap for me and I fell right into it. I assume he was waiting until I was strong enough to control it properly before he decided to make use of it."

"So exactly when did he find out about this gift of yours?"

"Shortly after the battle of Hoth." I shuddered at that terrible memory and Ged didn't press for more. "A secret such as this is almost impossible to keep secret for long, especially from someone like Palpatine. It was only a matter of time and he wanted that time to perfect."

"Does the Grand Admiral find your talent of use?"

I made a noise of disgust, "Thrawn doesn't need to use my force tricks Ged, he's brilliant all on his own." I snapped, "And besides he knows what it does to me, he doesn't feel the need to put me through that just to find out information he can get from more reliable sources."

"He certainly has a different way of doing things, I will give him that but none of this answers why you were led here after the Emperor's death."

"I don't think he's dead," I said simply.

If I had ever hoped to see surprise on Ged's face that was the moment I had been waiting for. "What?"

I opened my mouth to explain about my dreams and my theories about the Emperor's cloning projects but before I could speak the shuttle car shuddered suddenly and began to slow down. Ged looked at me sharply. I just shook my head and shrugged.

"It didn't do this the last time I was here," I said.

"Hide." He hissed at me readying the blaster.

"What? No! I can fight, there's two of us and we can..."

He pulled me up from the seat and shoved me hard, "Go! Hide now. That is an order!"

He didn't need to tell me again but looking for a place to hide wasn't so simple. I ended up ducking behind one of the plush seats near the fresher, waiting what felt like forever for the shuttle car to finally screech to a violent stop. For the longest moment there was nothing then the shuttle doors opened. I heard blaster fire and shouting, the sounds of a fight and then silence. My heart thudded so loudly in

my chest I was certain the entire planet could hear it. I fought against the fear and calmed down as I had been taught but it wasn't easy.

"Come on out." An unfamiliar voice yelled. "I know there are two of you here so if you do not come out now I will kill this man and then I will kill you."

I hesitated to see if this was some sort of a trick and a bolt from a blaster seared the air above me. I didn't wait for the second one to maybe miss the air and hit me instead. I got up from my hiding place slowly with my hands up. There were two bodies on the floor, Ged was on his knees with two men flanking him, one held a blaster to his head, his hands had been bound in front of him and there was blood on his lip where someone had hit him. He stared at me without any emotion on his face and when I tried to reach him through the force I was met with resistance. I thought for a moment about fighting back, I had my lightsaber in my satchel but calculated that by the time I had fished it out Ged would already be dead and as much as he annoyed me I didn't want to see him hurt.

The third man of the group stepped forward and smiled as he watched me. "Well well, come here little bird, I won't hurt you," he said with a gentleness that didn't fit the situation then he looked down at Ged, "You didn't tell me you were bringing such lovely company."

I made my way down the aisle to stand in front of him, "Lee Vander I presume?" I said staring into dark blue eyes and sounding calmer than I felt. He was tall and shockingly handsome, even with the vivid white scar that ran diagonally across his right cheek and I remembered that at one time in his life he had been the poster boy for the Imperial Navy although then his hair had been shorter and there hadn't been any scars.

He smiled but it never reached his eyes, "You know of me? How delightful. I, however, do not know who you are. So why don't we start with your name?"

I hesitated.

"Name. Now." As he spoke I understood that behind the handsome face and beguilingly calm manner was a man who would give no mercy, take no crap from anyone and would kill without a moment's thought. Something in his life had changed him from grinning Imperial pilot to a stone cold killer. It made me sad and I was glad that Jorae was not alive to see what his hero had become.

"I will not ask a third time," he said softly.

"Amyshka," I said defiantly, pronouncing it with galactic basic intonation instead of how it should have been spoken. "Amyshka Pavjaska." Out of the corner of my eyes I saw a flicker of emotion on Ged's face. He had not been expecting this but the name Merlyn Gabriel had been known so I decided to use my Dantassi name instead. I could have sworn I saw Ged smirk, just a little.

"Well Amyshka you made the right choice. It would have been a shame to kill something as pretty as you."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Wow, you've been watching far too many Holloway holo-dramas."

Ged laughed and it earned him a smack to the head with the butt of a blaster rifle.

"Pretty and mouthy. Ged you bring me all the fun toys." Lee Vander replied.

"You bastard!" I swore at him.

Lee Vander just gave me a mirthless smile and then pointed his blaster at my chest. Before I could say or do anything else he shot me.

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I woke up slowly and wished I hadn't. I was lying on my side, curled up on a memory-foam mattress. My head pounded, my body ached and my hands were tied together in imperial binders. I was grateful they had not tied them behind my back but my shoulders ached anyway. I opened my eyes and blinked hard until the blurriness cleared. I was in a moderately sized, moderately lit room. Aside from the mattress the room was empty. I realised that there was no chem-toilet or wash-sink which meant whatever Vander had planned for us, it wasn't long term. I sighed, struggled to sit up and swore as my head pounded viciously. I could not believe that I had once again been abducted and locked in a room somewhere, at least this time I wasn't alone.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Ged said as he helped me to sit up beside him.

"What the hell..?" I asked trying to get past my throbbing head.

"Vander shot you," He explained, "The stun's effects should wear off soon."

"Lovely!" I rubbed my temples. "How the hell did he even find us?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. But the datachip he gave to me might have been trackable."

"Why did I not see that when I touched it?"

"Your little talent is not perfect?" He winced as he touched his head where he had been hit by the blaster butt. "And technology can be tracked easily enough."

I nodded, "Are you alright?"

"You were not the only one on the wrong end of a blaster stun and my head isn't immune to being smacked around either," he said tartly. "And don't ask me what time it is, they took my kit, chrono and your satchel."

"So you have no idea how long we've been here for?"

"No, but stun blasts tend towards short term not long term so I'm thinking only a few hours maybe, unless the stunned us more than once, then it's anyone's guess." Ged replied.

"Why did not he just kill us?" My mouth was dry and my chest hurt where the stun blast had hit me. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against his shoulder.

Ged shrugged ever so slightly, "Oh I'm sure he has his reasons. He's a black ops agent, Mer... Amyshka, nice name by the way," He turned his head to look at me, "He was trained by the very best and he's been in the field for twice as long as most of my agents. We're alive for a reason and you can be sure it's not a good one."

"Fantastic." I hissed. "What the hell does he want from us anyway?" I asked, "Because none of this makes sense."

"He wants something from me. You are just collateral damage."

I lifted my head up to look at him, made a face and a gesture of distance with my thumb and forefinger. "You know right now, I hate you... just a little bit."

Ged grinned and stroked the side of my face with the backs of his fingers which was not so easy to do with his hands bound together, "I know and it's really cute."

I made a noise of disgust, "Why are you not more concerned about this situation we're in?"

"Because nothing has happened yet that we need to be concerned about." He answered.

I stared at him for what seemed like forever. "He shot me!"

"Only on stun."

"This day just keeps getting better and better. Seriously, if Lee Vander doesn't kill you, I swear I will."

He just chuckled, "Well, that will be a lot of fun but it will have to wait," he said as he stood up. "Come on, you need to walk off the effects of the stun blast because I need you clear headed and focused, so get up." And before I could tell him to go away he had pulled me to my feet and I found myself walking around the small room in circles until I felt dizzy while he kept studying the walls.

"Ged...what are you doing?"

"Shhhhhh." He shushed me, leaned into me and whispered in my ear all the while slowly backing me into the corner furthest away from the door. "I'm getting us out of here so turn around, look at me and try to pretend you actually like me."

I did as he asked and before I could stop him he looped his arms over my head and pulled me to him in an awkward and uncomfortable embrace, uncomfortable because my hands were still bound in front of me. I pulled them up to my chest with my hands under my chin because holding them straight down would have been even more awkward and embarrassing. He smirked.

"Here is what is going to happen," he said in a hushed voice, glancing around, "I'm going to kiss you now, just so you know, and it would be a really good idea if you moved in tightly to me and didn't touch the wall. I don't want to hurt you," he whispered, "And it would also be nice if you would try to make it look like you enjoy kissing me back because I want the guards to think this is just what it looks like and not something else." Then before I could argue with him or ask what 'something else' meant he did exactly as he said he would except, instead of holding me tightly with his hands, he braced them on the flat of the wall behind us.

The last time Ged had kissed me he had taken me by surprise and the desire he had stirred up had been a shock. This time, even though I had been warned, the feelings that bubbled up inside of me still took me by surprise. I gasped at the rush of sensations that washed through me. Even with his warning I wasn't ready for this. Instead of just planning a big kiss on me, he teased me slowly, seductively with gentle lips, tasting mine with the tip of his tongue and it surprised me. I stared at him and a slight smile curved the corners of his mouth. For a split second the world stopped and then, seeing he had my interest he kissed me again but this time with heat and I gasped. It was so deliciously easy to get lost in what he was doing because he was good at it and I enjoyed it even though I knew this wasn't right. I could feel the force well up between us in a rush of lust that might have drowned me except that he suddenly nipped my neck painfully with his teeth bringing me back to my senses sharply.

"Stay focused." He hissed in my ear.

"That would be easier to do if you weren't shoving your tongue down my throat!" I growled back. "And I know I'm not the only one affected by this." I glanced downward and he grinned at me some more.

"A pleasurable side effect is all." He smirked, "And so much better than the alternative."

I raised both eyebrows in question, "Oh really?"

"Sweetheart, if you still want to play with me later I'm all yours but right I need you to stay focused and I need your help with what I am about to do so stop messing about and help me here." He smirked and before I could argue or retort he kissed me again but this time I mostly ignored the wash of sensations that were running rampant through me in favour of figuring out what it was he was actually doing.

I could feel my skin tingle but realised the sensation wasn't because of Ged's kisses but rather through his use of the force. He was drawing power around, through and from me. Once I understood what he was doing I stopped fighting him

and started to help him. I gathered the force through me and I fed it to him the only way I knew how and smiled inwardly when I heard him gasp. He wasn't the only one who could create desire and I knew for a fact I could pull up a lot of power with it. That was what he wanted; power and I did my best to give it to him.

"Is that being helpful enough?" I growled as wild energy surged through us both.

He sucked in a breath, "Oh I think it will do." His voice had taken on a warm husky tone, "Now shut up so I can concentrate."

I could feel the sparkles of electricity run through him as he took all of the energy we were creating and focused it to flow through his palms which were flat on the wall behind me. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck stood on end and everything prickled. Flickers of reflected pale blue light danced from his hands. I could sense the path of the force lighting flow through the wall and around the room as he directed it and one by one he blew out all the surveillance equipment. When he was satisfied the cameras were broken he let out the breath he had been holding, I could feel the power withdraw like a waning storm. It left me shaky and momentarily exhausted and I understood that what he had just done was very, very difficult.

"Wow." I whispered in awe when he relaxed against me for a moment to catch his breath.

He drew back to look at me and smiled. "Oh you have no idea what you are missing. We could be amazing together." Then he kissed me lightly on the forehead.

"I was talking about your little force trick!" I snapped tried to pull back from him but his cuffed hands were still looped around me trapping me in a tight circle. "Now what?" I asked trying to get myself back into some sort of normal. I did not like the conflicts he stirred up in me and I felt all kinds of guilty about what had just happened.

"Now we pretend to make out some more until the two thugs who are outside come in to see what happened to all their spy equipment. They'll see us still making out as though nothing had happened and hopefully believe we had nothing to do with it. Then we make our move, do you think you can handle one of these jokers on your own if I can't get a blaster in time?"

"I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

"Oh and I don't suppose you can use that delicious little trick of yours to distract one of them could you?"

"You need to buy me a little time," I told him, "That *little trick* also takes a bit of work and I'm a little out of breath."

"Oh you really do know how to make a man feel good about himself." Ged murmured in my ear then moved just enough to avoid the kick I aimed at his shin. "Feisty!" He grinned.

I made a face and hoped that the guards he was expecting got here sooner rather than later because I was getting a cramp in my neck and my chest hurt where the edges of the binders around my hands dug into me. Luckily for me I got my wish. I was already in a heightened state, tapped into the force along with Ged so when the two armed men came in to see what was going on with the security system I knew exactly where they both were in the room without looking. Ged nuzzled my neck using it as a pretence to see what was happening. He could feel me tense and his teeth grazed my skin, reminding me to wait. He shifted slightly lifting pulling his arms over my head so I was no longer trapped, "We'll only get one chance to get a clean shot at this." He whispered in my ear "After that it will be messy. I don't like messy."

I was about to give him a rude retort but he put stop to that with another passionate kiss. I felt as though I had suddenly been drafted into a very bad holo drama but it did its job. For a long moment no one moved or spoke and then one of the guards laughed in that slightly embarrassed manner people do when they walk in on a couple making out. He watched for a moment and then he started making jokes with his partner about taking turns with me next. This had been Ged's plan all along, sex put people off balance and turned men into idiots which was exactly what Ged had wanted.

I reached out with the force and showered the closer of the two guards with a blast of lust. I knew it had worked because I heard him suck in his breath and let his gun clatter to the floor. The change in mood took his partner's attention away from us for a moment, but a moment was all Ged needed.

He spun around, pushed me back, force pulled the gun to him and opened fire. The two men were dead before they even knew what had hit them.

"Well, I'm glad one of us knows how to use that thing." I told him.

For a second neither of us moved and then he was all business as he went through the pockets of the two dead men. He found what he was looking for, used it and the binders which cuffed our hands fell open with a soft snick.

"You really should learn, while they are not as elegant or beautiful as lightsabers they do come in handy sometimes." Ged replied as he removed the ID tags and key-cards and then started stripping off the clothes of the guard closest to his size.

"Thrawn said the same thing once. I don't like guns, they're too loud," I said taking one of the card-keys he held out to me.

"Too loud?" He just shook his head. "You never cease to surprise me, you know that?"

"Lucky me." I replied dryly. "How long before what you did gets noticed?" I asked watching him strip off and change into the clothes from the man he had just shot.

"I don't know but I don't think we have time to dance if that's what you are asking," he said once he was dressed. "What do you think?" He asked modelling his new look as one of Lee Vander's thugs.

"I think the colour is crap and that coat makes you look like a scoundrel from a Corellian smuggler bar."

He grinned at me. "What's the matter you don't like scoundrels?"

"No." I replied tartly. "I'm not a big fan of the scruffy and unpredictable."

This made Ged grin even more. "So what you're saying is I looked better with no clothes on?"

"You're impossible!" I snapped.

"I get told that a lot."

"So now what?" I asked picking up the second weapon, looking at it as though it might bite me.

"Here, that's a modified carbine, it's a good weapon. I guess Vander hasn't completely gone rebel, this was an Imperial issued weapon," Ged said and he showed me how to hold the blaster and where all the right switches were. "Safety, stun and kill. If you have this on kill try not to point it at me."

"I'm not taking this!" I said trying to give it back to him.

"Yes, you are. This is not a good place for close hand to hand combat, no one else here will have a lightsaber so fighting with one, especially in a place like this, is like bringing a butter knife to a gunfight."

I looked the weapon over. "Are you still taking the other one?" I asked hoping he wasn't relying on me to be the shooter in this game because if he was we were lost. He nodded. "It never hurts to have more weapons."

"Me with a gun sounds like a really, really bad idea to me." I grumbled. I turned the weapon over in my hands trying to decide where to put it.

"It goes over your shoulder, like this," he said showing me.

So I slung the carbine over my shoulder and scowled at it. It was extra weight and unfamiliar but he was right, you could never have enough weapons and this was a fight against unknown enemies.

"It could be worse," he said, "We could be facing an army. So far the only people who seem to know we are here are Vander's and I think he's gone rogue, running his own mission off any official grid."

"Okay, do you have more brilliant plans?"

He grinned, "Do you want to pretend to have your hands tied behind your back or do I need to put the binders back on?" He asked as he dangled a pair of binders from a single finger.

"If you try to put those binder-cuffs on me I will kick your ass all the way to Tatooine." I told him sweetly.

"So being tied up not your thing?"

"You'll never know!"

"It could be fun!"

"Keep that up and I'll actually learn how to use this thing by using you as target practice." I tapped the blaster in my hands.

He laughed. "Okay so pretending to transfer you as a prisoner is out but do keep it in mind because I'm not wearing these clothes for the fashion statement and we might need a ruse if there are people around," Ged said with a grin. "Come on, we need to go."

"You have a plan? A different plan? One that doesn't involve me in hand-binders backed into a corner making out with you?"

"As I said, doing that was better than the alternative."

"Really?" I raised my eyebrows at him but he didn't elaborate so I pressed the point. "So a plan? Do you have one?" I pressed.

"Yes, find that traitor Vander and kill him then get the off this planet before all hell breaks loose."

"How do you even know where to go to find him?" I asked.

"Because I know exactly where we are and I know him. He will probably find me," He replied as we walked out of the cell into the small detention processing area. He spent a few seconds at the computer then searched the small desk and smiled when he found my satchel along with his lightsaber and his chrono. He tucked his lightsaber into an inside pocket of the coat, put on his chrono and tossed the satchel to me. "This is yours I believe?"

I did a quick inventory and was relieved to see all my stuff was still there including my lightsaber. "Care to enlighten me?" I asked.

"This is the special operations command centre. It's hidden deep under the palace. It was part of the Ubiquitorate," He replied quietly as he checked to make sure the corridor outside of the room was empty. "I helped design this place when it was renovated."

I glanced at him in surprise, "What? You what? How?"

He smiled gesturing for me to follow him. "Did you not ever think about why everything I did was cloaked in secrecy? When you lived here did you ever wonder why you so rarely ever saw me on Coruscant or why neither I nor my people have



joined overtly with Thrawn's fleet? Or did you really just think I was the Emperor's pretty boy wonder?"

"Well, no, yes, maybe." I shrugged, "It sometimes crossed my mind, especially when I was on board the *Virulent*, but I assumed Thrawn and you had your reasons and he gets testy when I bug him too much about all this secrecy, cloak and sabre stuff." I replied. "Mostly though I just thought you were another annoyingly, arrogant Imperial Navy guy with a nice ass and a cute smile."

"You think I have a nice ass?" He shook his head at me in amusement then serious shifted in his features. "I ran a division of Imperial Intelligence that specialized in off the books black ops for the Empire when the Emperor was still alive."

"The Bureau?" I whispered in awe. "You ran the Bureau?" The Bureau of Operations had been a very hush hush part of the Ubiquitorate that specialised in covert and black operations. No one spoke about the Bureau, the people who were in it or what they actually did openly or in any detail. They were like ghosts in the machine. Suddenly I looked at Ged through completely different eyes.

"Not the entire Bureau, no, I headed up the infiltration and counter intelligence divisions. I helped design this facility to augment our operations, with the Emperor's approval."

"Really for real?"

Ged nodded, "Really for real. Now I run the secret operations aspect of what is left of the Empire, what we're now calling the Imperial Order. We had hoped to infiltrate the New Republic and deal with them on two fronts with Thrawn on the visible offensive and us behind the scenes" Ged explained while walking quickly with the security of a person who knew exactly where he wanted to go next.

"So what happened then, I mean you're here and Jarack is dead."

"Vital information started to get out from what should have been a closed system," he replied, "Behl was the agent on lead, trying to ferret out the leak. We thought it was a rebel spy who had somehow managed to infiltrate us not the other way around."

"So why did Vander turn against you?" I asked.

Ged's jaw clenched tightly as he shook his head and I understood that whatever it was it was personal and I would not learn about it now.

"Okay then, I have another question."

"Why am I not surprised." He looked at me sideways and offered a slight smile. "Shoot."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?" trotting to keep up with him.

"That's easy, it was need to know only and you did not need to know." He answered as we made our way quietly down the corridor.

"So if you're really this all important super spy master why couldn't you override the shuttle car controls?"

Ged just gave me a grin and waited for me to work it out.

I stopped dead in my tracks, "Oh I am so going kill you when this is all over! You let him capture us didn't you? You knew at some point he'd figure out where we were and he'd find us. You knew that chip was trackable!"

"He is a traitor and he needs to be eliminated. He knows too much," he said simply, his hand at the small of my back pushed me back into motion. "It was easier to allow him to take us than spending time to tracking him down."

I gave him a look and decided to try again, "We have a deadline to keep to, remember?"

"I am well aware of that."

"He should have killed you, killed us when he first had the chance but he didn't so what does Lee Vander want from you?"

He looked at me for a moment and then said, "Codes," he said, "He wants me and my command codes so that he can gain access to the mainframe. The mainframe contains all the information on everything we've ever done, all the missions, all the agents and double agents, everything. It would be invaluable to the New Republic and incredibly damaging to Thrawn and myself. He needs me and he won't kill you because he thinks he can use you as blackmail to get what he wants from me."

"Why doesn't he just slice it? I mean I thought you trained your super sneaky spies to deal with that sort of thing?"

Ged laughed quietly, "You do have a way with words," he said, "Because if he tries to do that the entire mainframe will self-destruct and he wants the information intact. When I designed the system I had the very best coders create it but the Emperor added something which no one else knew about to make sure it was virtually impossible to bypass the standard security."

I suddenly remembered what the Emperor had done with the entrance to his secret museum room. "He added a force activation element didn't he?"

Ged nodded, "Even the very best slicers in this galaxy would not be able to bypass the security. Only a force user can do that and only one with the right codes. And I am the only one left who fits these criteria. Vander is a brilliant agent but he is not force sensitive."

We came to a turbo lift. Ged punched a long code into the keypad and the door opened.

"Come on."

I shook my head, "No way!" I hissed. "This is a trap waiting to happen, a trap, men with guns, a hoard of angry fuzzy things with sticks and stones and sarlacc knows what else could be waiting at the other end of where ever that thing stops!"

He shook his head in annoyance. "Oh, we do not have time for this!" he muttered and grasped my arm, yanking me into the waiting turbo lift. "Get in and shut up," he said standing beside me in the lift, the door closed softly and before I could protest he punched in another lengthy code into the control panel and the lift jolted downward quickly.

"What the hell!" I snapped. "Did you not hear me mention all manner of nasty traps waiting for us?"

"I heard you."

"So what you like getting hit in the face, tied up and stunned?"

"Not on my favourite things to do list."

"Then why are you walking into a trap?"

"We're not."

"Are you sure?" I asked, "Because you didn't know your best friend and super duper secret special ops guy had turned against you!"

He rolled his eyes and smiled, "Good point, but this time trust me it's not a ...." He started but he didn't have time to finish because the lift door opened and we stepped out into a dimly lit room full of computers and we were not alone.

I turned to Ged and punched him hard on the arm. "See? Trap!"

I swung the blaster I had a death grip on upwards but before I could pull the trigger Ged grabbed a hold of the barrel with one hand and gently pushed it back down. "Oh no you don't," he said, "You're not so skilled with that thing and I would hate to see you hurt someone who is actually on our side."

The man who had been standing by the large row of databank and computer system stepped forward and saluted Ged smartly. "Sir, it is good to see you again."

Ged returned the salute and nodded, "You too Morrish."

"Morrish? The *Virulent's* captain?"

The man stepped forward and shook my hand. "Yes, although I'm no longer the captain of the *Virulent*, she's in Captain Wulfman's capable hands now. It's nice to see you again Miss Gabriel." He politely ignored the blaster in my hand and the fact that I had just aimed it at him.

Ged turned to me and smiled slightly at my shock. "You see you should learn to trust me a little bit more," he said then turned back to Morrish, "It's Vander and he's tracking us, how much time do we have?"

"About ten minutes unless they've changed how their tracking equipment works."

"Right then let's get started...", Ged began.

"Tracking? Tracking how?" I interrupted, feeling as though the world had just shifted sideways and I had been bounced into another universe with no road map.

"In the satchel you're carrying." Ged replied as he went to the computer consoles to study something Morrish was showing him. "You don't think they'd really leave our things so easily accessible without a reason do you? They put a tracking device in your bag."

I began a frantic search of my satchel but Ged's sharp command to stop halted me in my tracks. "Leave it! I'll need it to find Vander. They can't locate us here it's protected by a scrambling shield so they'll think we're in a service tunnel. We'll have about ten minutes before they will get suspicious."

"Your orders sir?" Morrish asked bringing us back to the problems at hand.

Ged didn't answer him directly. "Is the *Lightning* in orbit?" He asked.

"Yes sir, cloaked and waiting."

"Merlyn come here." Ged said. I did as he commanded. He had become someone I didn't recognise. Someone I didn't argue with.

"Put your palm on this will you?" He gestured to a number pad. I looked at him and he made a face which said *just do it we don't have time for games*.

I did as he asked and sucked in my breath. "Wow."

"You know?" He asked.

I nodded. "I do."

Ged sighed. "Damn it." He swore and took a deep breath, "Morrish, change of plans. We'll need a secure uplink to the *Lightning* and then I want the entire database uploaded as quickly as possible. Forget copying it. After that, wipe and destroy the mainframe completely and spider mine this place."

"Yes Sir." Morrish nodded as he started to work on the computer system, "Sir, if may ask did you find Behl?"

Ged glanced at me and then shook his head. "He is believed dead."

"How sir?"

Ged glanced at me and then said, "Lee Vander executed him and should you or your men see Vander you are to use extreme prejudice. He must not escape."

"Understood sir." Morrish nodded but there was sadness in his eyes. "I'm sorry about Behl sir, he was a good man."

"Yes, he was so do me a huge favour and get yourself and your team the hell off this planet in one piece on schedule. I do not want to lose any more of good people."

Morrish grinned. "Yes sir," he repeated, "The rendezvous point?"

"Remains as planned."

"And you sir?"

"The Grand Admiral has ordered that I escort Miss Gabriel home safely back to the *Virulent*. We have an alternate way off the planet. We will meet with the fleet at the rendezvous as planned."

I rolled my eyes.

Morrish gave me a grin this time. "Understood sir."

Ged looked at his chrono, checking the time "Okay, we need to go now," he said dragging me by the arm, across the floor to the wall opposite the turbo lift. He touched an invisible panel and a narrow opening appeared. "Come on." And before I could protest he pulled me into the narrow, dimly lit passageway.

"What the hell was that all about?" I hissed wriggling my palm at him.

He sighed slightly, "I would like to assume that Vander doesn't know what you can do, that he believes you're this Amyshka Pavjaska, which was a nice touch by the way, and that he doesn't know who you really are but I cannot take that risk. You saw the access code when you touched the panel right? You know how to get into the mainframe?"

"Yes." I nodded.

"If he had known, if he thought for a second you could get him what he wanted this would be a very different scenario right now and if there are more people who can do what you can then I am not taking any risks. The information on that mainframe is far too important for that."

"Why was it still here? I mean the rebels could have found it at any time."

Ged shook his head. "No, that room is not in any blueprints or plans. Unless you know what to look for and have the right access codes it is virtually impossible to find. Vander knew of the mainframe's existence but not its exact location or how to get there. This place is built like a maze for a reason. He was hoping I would lead him to it by letting us escape and tracking us."

"He let us escape just so you would lead him to a computer?"

"Didn't you think that our getaway was just a little too easy?" Ged asked giving me a look.

"You had to kill two men and what was that whole suck face with Merly make out session all about if it was so easy?"

"Well if it had been too easy..." He started to explain but I flapped a hand at him shutting him up.

I glared at him. "I really hate all of this spy stuff."

"You have so many wonderful talents Merly but being a covert agent is definitely not one of them," His chuckle annoyed me even more.

I ignored his insult. "Did you plan for all of this?"

"Plan is not exactly the word I would use, but I worked around some of the given eventualities. No plan is set in stone but probabilities can be calculated when one knows all the players involved, unless of course you happen to be with the party. I would not have found out about Vander until it was perhaps too late had it not been for you. You, my dear, are a wild card."

"You sound like Thrawn." I grumbled.

"I'll take that as a compliment, the man is a genius although how he manages to keep you in line is beyond me."

I wanted to argue with him but thought the better of it; this wasn't the right place or time, "So now what?" I asked with a sigh.

"Now I get you out of here and I go and wait for Vander to find me."

"Not on your life!" I said standing still. I suddenly had a very bad feeling about all of this and knew that whatever was going to happen it did not involve leaving Ged on his own, that was not an option.

"Merlyn come on!" Ged hissed. But I didn't budge.

I folded my arms across my chest and stared at him defiantly, "No, either I come with you or I stay right here take your pick but I'm not leaving you alone and nothing you do or say will make me. You brought me along for a reason and I don't walk away in the middle of a job."

Ged weighed his options and then shook his head. "Come on then but you have to do exactly what I tell you, no deviations. Are we clear?"

I nodded.

"No! I want to hear you say it. Our lives depend on it."

"Okay."

Ged made a face.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Yes sir. I will do exactly as you tell me."

"Alright then, now maybe we can get out of this alive. Let's go."

The small passage came out into a quiet hallway that looked as though it had not been used in some time. We walked quickly until we reached a set of stairs and another turbo lift. I didn't argue with Ged when he chose the stairs. We moved up them quietly, leaving through the exit door like ghosts. He led me through a maze of hallways until he found a room he felt was suitable and once we were there he dug the tracking chip out of my satchel and tossed across the floor.

"If you have to you use this," he said showing me again how to fire the blaster. "No messing around. Okay? Aim, pull the trigger just like I showed you just... try not to shoot me, okay?"

I held the weapon like he had shown me and nodded. I didn't like how it felt in my hands but I wasn't going to argue with him about it. I watched as he moved the table and chairs that were sitting in the middle of what appeared to be a small meeting room to one side. He picked up one of the chairs and placed in the corner on the same wall as the door. "Sit there and don't move until you have to. Watch for my signal or use your head but wait until the right moment." He instructed, setting the blaster he had carried on the floor beside my chair.

"How will I know?"

"You'll know, you've been well trained but you need to trust that I also am very well trained. Do not give your position away too soon."

"This is going to be messy right?"

"Hopefully not, I hate messy but it does feel that way," he said cracking the first grin I had seen since we had entered the mainframe room. "I just need them to not see you when they enter the room. There's a better chance of being noticed if you stand, when people scan a room they do so on a single plane first and they'll be distracted by looking at me. I am hoping they won't turn around to see you behind them."

"How many do you think there will be?"

Ged thought about it for a moment, "If he followed training he'd have had a nine man team with himself included, we've taken out four so that leaves four more and Vander. They will come in first protecting him so that he gets a better idea of our defences and where the enemy fire is coming from. He must not know you are there, he will suspect but he won't know for sure and I hope to keep him distracted enough that he'll be too busy to wonder, so please trust me when I say I can handle this. I'm very good."

I swallowed and took a deep breath. "Okay."

"Now let's make this place more comfy shall we?"

I nodded, sitting down on the chair in corner watching as he used the force to blow out all of the lights except the centre one leaving the corners of the room dimly

lit. Once that was done he took out his lightsaber and stood in the middle of the room, directly in line with the door. I watched as he seemed to almost transform. He drew a deep breath and, just like I had been taught, he started the process of finding his centre. It seemed like a good idea so I did the same, tapping into the force which swirled around us like invisible fire. It made the waiting easier and it helped that we didn't have to wait for long.

They came in hard. I suppose they thought rushing us would be better than being picked off one by one but they were wrong. Ged was right there were five of them in total. It was like watching a blurry dance on fast forward. As soon as the door opened Ged ignited his lightsaber and the brilliance lit up the room in a blaze of purple. The light from his weapon and the fact that he was right in front of them meant no one had time to look around, no one saw me at all as I sat in the darkened corner, my heart beating so fast I thought it would burst free from my chest and fly away.

Ged had not been joking when he had said he was good at what he did. He moved incredibly fast to deflect the blaster shots back against the first two shooters who went down very quickly creating obstacles right at the entrance. Two more armed men came into the room, shooting and managed to create a certain amount of chaos by ducking low and avoiding the initial reflected blaster bolts. I started to stand up but Ged, glancing my way, shook his head. 'No, wait.' I heard him push into my mind so I did the hardest thing in the universe to do, I waited.

He moved with a fluidity that was beautiful, reminding me of water in slow motion. The violet blade of his lightsaber and the brilliant white-blue of the blaster bolts mixed to create a stunning yet deadly dance of colourful fire that reflected all around the room. The air filled with the scent of burning ozone, dust and seared flesh. My stomach churned as I fought to get past the horror of it all. There were four armed men in total and when they were all dead Lee Vander stepped past the mess of bodies into the room to face Ged. He looked pissed.

"You always did like to show off," he said as he walked up to where Ged stood calmly.

Ged, who did not even seem winded, just stood with his lightsaber at the ready looking strangely relaxed and calm but I knew that was not the case. Lee Vander had been his friend, a close ally and confident and I understood from personal experience what a betrayal on that level could feel like. This fight would be anything but easy no matter how it appeared.

"You should have walked away from this Lee," Ged said breaking the silence between them.

"I can't. The Empire is dead, it died with Palpatine. You and that alien purporting himself to be a Grand Admiral cannot save it; I don't even know why you are trying, yet here you are, Ged Larsen the idealist." Vander spat.

"I am here because the alternative is so much worse." Ged replied softly sending a shudder down my spine.

"There is no phantom enemy coming to get us from far away!" Lee snarled, "That is a lie Palpatine fabricated to keep his power to himself and everyone else in the galaxy scared."

"You are an idiot if you believe that." Ged shook his head. "So now what, you want me dead? Will that make it all better? Will killing me help you find a place with your new friends?"

"You just don't get it do you? After all this time how is it that you still do not understand?" There was such anguish in Lee Vander's voice that it almost broke my heart to hear it.

"Then enlighten me," Ged hissed through gritted teeth. I could feel his ire and anger rising, stirring the force around him and it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"I should have been informed before you made the decision to slaughter hundreds of people. You should have given me access to the mainframe. I could have stopped them. I could have prevented their deaths. You should have trusted me to do what was right. You should have listened to me!" Lee yelled.

I saw sorrow flicker across Ged's face. "Is that what all of this is about?" He shook his head in disbelief. "All this time and you still carry the weight of a command decision that was never yours to make."

"I was right! You should have listened to me! Because of you hundreds of good men and women died. People I cared about, people who trusted you."

"You think the rebels you now serve were any better? They blew up two manned space stations and killed thousands. For people trying to assassinate one person they went a bit overboard don't you think?"

"They did what they had to do to get the job done. You had a choice, if you had only listened..."

"I did listen, Lee. I read the reports and I understood everything," Ged replied softly "I had all the information I needed but it wouldn't have mattered I could do nothing but let events take place as planned. And I'd do exactly the same thing again if I had to."

"Which is why I can't let you live or lead anymore," Lee said as they began to circle each other, looking for weaknesses and mistakes. Jyrki and I had done exactly the same thing but we had both been force users this was very different.

I listened to the conversation without context or understanding, hearing the undertones of regret, sadness and hatred in the words of both men. Suddenly I understood what Ged had known all along, there was no going backwards and every moment led us closer to whatever it was that destiny had in mind for us. It was unavoidable and suddenly my heart ached for Thrawn.

"I suppose you tried to turn Jarack Behl into betraying me as well?"

"He was there! He barely made it out alive. He had every reason to hate you but instead he chose not to. He simply could not see reason. He was blinded by his loyalty to you."

"So you executed him?" Ged said flatly.

Lee's answer sent chills down my spine. "He made his choice. It was the wrong one."

"So you decide who gets to live or die based on whether or not they agree with you? How does this make you any better than me?" Ged asked masking the sadness in his voice with anger.

Lee didn't have an answer instead he went for his weapon and I saw the surprise in Ged's eyes as Lee pulled out a lightsaber from an inside pocket of his long jacket and turned it on. It was a brilliant white-blue in colour and from the way he swung it around he had been well taught to use it. "You think just because you use the force you have exclusive right to this kind of weapon?" he asked. "You think you are special? You are nothing!"

Ged didn't answer. He just took a breath, using his fury and anger, drawing the force and readying himself. He let the fight begin as Lee Vander made the first move mistaking Ged's calm for hesitation.

The art of combat using lightsabers as weapons is a long and time honoured one. It was an intriguing weapon really, when one thought about it because there were no edges, only energy and all parts of the blade cut, sliced and killed. The

weapons had been in use for centuries, if the stories I had read were to be believed. Most Jedi made their own lightsabers, it was a sort of rite of passage.

Lord Vader had once shown to me how they worked, explaining that high levels of energy were generated by a power cell directed through a series of focusing lenses and energizers which converted that energy into plasma. This was directed through focusing crystals which lent the blade its properties and allowed for the adjustment of blade length and power output. Once focused by the crystals, the plasma was sent through another series of field energizers as well as modulation circuitry within the emitter matrix which focused it even more, making it into a coherent beam of energy projected from the emitter. For a fairly small weapon it was pretty complicated and I had been very happy that I didn't actually have to make my own.

It was, Lord Vader had said, considered to be an elegant weapon and it became a symbol of the Jedi who had been seen as peace keepers for centuries during the time of the Republic. After the fall of the Old Republic the Jedi fell into disgrace and the lightsaber became a weapon of myths and children's bedtime stories. I had never seen one until I had watched Lord Vader practice with his and that had been a delight. I could see the appeal of it when compared to more conventional weapons; it certainly had its uses, especially when it came to not making a mess. A lightsaber blade cauterized what it cut so there wasn't a lot of blood even when the wounds were grave; the down side was the stench.

I wondered as I watched Ged and Vander fight if that was what it would have been like to watch Jyrki and me, or Lord Vader and his son duel. The dance of whirling light must have been glorious to see. Not for the first time did it occur to me that using lightsabers was more of an art than anything else and watching these two men was more like watching a dance of light than a duel between enemies. The arcing of light as the blades swirled around in semi circles crashing together and then separating again was truly beautiful but every time the blades clashed together the sound set my teeth on edge.

It took a fairly high degree of skill and training to use a lightsaber well, well enough not to end up slicing one's own arm off or worse. Lee Vander was strong and had been well taught and as I watched him I realised I knew the style of fighting he was using with an intimacy that was unnerving. It reminded me so sharply of my Bunduki Master that I had a sudden and surprising pang of longing for a teacher who was long gone. Lee had been very well taught and I recognised some of the moves he was making.

They fought like caged tigers just waiting to let their true natures loose, both holding back to see when the other would make a mistake. They were surprisingly evenly matched. For every attack Ged made Lee had a counter attack and it went on and on until I could see Ged's anger flash across his face as he started to draw on his dark side powers.

The air crackled as Ged went on the offensive and began to hammer at Lee with a ferocity that scared me. With the combination of force power and skill there was no way that Lee could maintain his defence so he switched his own tactics and with his left hand he drew out a second weapon from his coat. I suddenly got a sickening feeling in my gut that things were about to turn. At first I thought it was a blaster of some sort but then I realised that was not the case.

It reminded me of a weapon known as a t'on-fa, a sort of rounded stake with a short perpendicular handle at one end, looking a lot like a nightstick that the Coruscanti police used to use. This one, made from a dark material, was unusual because one end had been sharpened to a vicious point. Lee braced the length of the



weapon against his arm like a shield and thrust it upwards defensively as Ged swept his lightsaber down in what would have been the killing blow.

The purple blade came crashing against Lee's arm but instead of slicing through the stake and cutting Lee's arm in two the lightsaber's blade spluttered and failed. I quickly covered my mouth to stop myself from yelling out.

Cortosis. Lee had a bunduki defence weapon made from Cortosis ore, a very rare, brittle and fibrous material whose conductive properties caused lightsabers to temporarily short out on contact. This lovely attribute made it an incredibly useful material for creating anti-lightsaber melee weapons even though the effects of cortosis never lasted very long, a minute or two at best, nor did it permanently damage the lightsaber in any way. Sometimes one of two minutes makes the difference between life and death.

I tensed watching as Ged, suddenly distracted, hesitated for just a second to look over at where I was, where the second blaster lay at my feet, leaving Lee enough time to swing his lightsaber around for the kill. Even if Ged wanted to he would not be fast enough to force pull the blaster to him and then fire it at Vander.

I didn't even think I just brought the carbine I gripped tightly in my hands upwards, aimed and shot, hoping I didn't hit Ged by mistake. The energy bolt blasted Lee's hand, hitting his lightsaber. It shattered, sending a shower of sparks all around, forcing him to let it go. Useless, it clattered to the floor loudly.

For a moment no one moved and then Lee snarled, swung the cortosis weapon around, point facing towards Ged and thrust it upwards just as Ged managed to ignite his own lightsaber again. He swung the blade around with all his might, stepped in as close as he could and drove the blade through Lee's chest. For a second the two men stayed in that eerie embrace then Ged staggered under Lee's weight before finding his balance to take two steps back as Lee's body crumpled to the floor, the cortosis blade rolled from his hand and clattered on the polished tile.

"Nice shot." Ged gasped, bending over to catch his breath.

"I was aiming for his head." I replied looking at the blaster in my hands as though it would suddenly bite me.

Ged shook his head and grimaced. "Either way, it was a good shot." He switched off his lightsaber and the room was plunged into dimness again.

"We need to get out of here." I told him staring at the body of Lee Vander.

He tucked his lightsaber back into the inner pocket of the coat and pulled it tightly around him. "There's a hidden service lift over there," he said nodding to the far wall. I suddenly understood why he had chosen this room.

I went to pick up the second blaster which had been sitting on the floor but he shook his head. "No, leave it," He nodded, "I'm hoping we won't need it and one should be enough now come on!"

And before I could ask him why he didn't want the gun, we were slipping into the small turbo lift, the ride down felt as though it lasted forever and when we stopped Ged winced. "Turn left, go straight. It should lead to a service entrance on the south side."

"Is everything alright?" I asked. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, fine. I pulled a muscle that's all." He hissed. "Quickly, we can't stay here."

I nodded and did not call him on the lie he had just told me because we had other problems to deal with. We made our way as quickly as possible to the door which was exactly where Ged said it would be. It was locked so I used my lightsaber to open it and we stumbled through the doorway into a small courtyard. I swore as the air filled with alarms.

I looked around, the courtyard was empty and quiet but I recognised this part of the castle and smiled. "Stay here." I told Ged and before he could argue I ran to try and find a speeder. It didn't take me long and luckily for us it was an open top, maintenance vehicle which was easy to slice into.

"We're going to have to do something about your criminal tendencies." Ged joked laughing to himself which turned into a coughing fit. I frowned at him but he shook his head.

"Come on, get in so I can get us to my ship and get the hell off this planet before someone comes to find out why this door triggered the alarm system!."

He moved awkwardly as if he were in pain. When I offered my hand he shook his head and drew strength from the force. I felt its pull and gave him a glare. Once he was seated beside me, I slammed the speeder on full, not really caring about traffic or anything else. We nearly crashed into several speeders and a taxi before I got into the right lane.

"Merly you drive like a mad rebel, slow down you're going to get us killed," Ged hissed as he gripped the speeder's sides with hands that showed white knuckles, "I can't believe I let you fly us here in that rattletrap of yours but you're even worse in a speeder."

"Complain, complain, complain!" I snapped.

The trip through the back lanes of Coruscant took us a little longer than I had wanted and by the time we made it back to the building where my ship was Ged was pale and quiet.

We ditched the speeder at the landing pad and made our way quietly to where my ship sat. The relief that flooded through me when I saw she was still there, intact and untouched was so great it almost made me physically ill. I unlocked the door and we boarded as soon as the ramp hit the ground. As soon as we were onboard I closed the door only to watch Ged suddenly slump against the bulkhead clutching at his side.

"It's nothing, a bruised rib or something. Just go!" He said through clenched teeth waving me off before I could see what it was that was wrong. "Move! We have to go. Get this bird in the air now. That is an order."

"You are not the boss of me, you know," I told him as I headed towards the cockpit with him in tow.

He chuckled. "I will try to keep that in mind. But trust me when I saw we need to get off this rock before anyone decides to track that speeder!"

I turned to look at him, "Tell me something I don't know!"

"Just get us in the air!"

With a shake of my head I slipped into my chair and fired up the manoeuvring engines. I skipped the pre check and ran the quick start procedure. The ship hummed to life. We slipped into Coruscant air space quietly, just one of many. I contacted the air traffic control and gave them our fake id and fake flight plan. The controller who gave me the ok to go sounded bored.

I listened to the radio chatter of Coruscant air space-control but nothing was out of the ordinary. I almost felt sorry for the New Republic, there was a storm coming and they had no idea what would hit them. Only once we had passed the Coruscant security grid and planetary shield marker did I let go of the breath I had been holding. The planet, a sphere of light and dura-steel, quickly receded as we pulled away. I should have admired its extraordinary beauty but the only thing I could feel was relief.

I looked at Ged who was standing behind me using my chair for support. He was pale and breathing hard. "Set these co ordinates," he said and I punched the

numbers he gave me into the nav computer. "How long until we can jump?" He asked.

I looked at the computer and the map, "At this speed we'll be out of the planet's gravity well in a few minutes."

He nodded. "Use the back ways Merlyn. I don't want to get stuck on one of the main Hyperspace lanes."

"That will add more time to the journey," I said setting the new directions into the nav computer.

He nodded. "I know. My people don't expect me to arrive the same time as the *Lightning*. Thrawn asked me to keep you safe and this is as good a way as any."

"Oki-doki," I said and as soon as the nav computer beeped to let me know we could jump into hyperspace I punched it. The stars around us swirled and spun, then elongated and vanished. I set the auto pilot on and then got up out of my chair just in time to catch Ged who sagged against me.

He let out his breath. "Okay now I think I need your help. I need to lie down." And he drew back the coat he was wearing to show me and I sucked in my breath. His shirt was soaked in blood. "The cortosis blade." Ged explained, "I couldn't avoid it."

I swore. "You are a bloody idiot!"

"You got the bloody part right," He grinned then hissed in pain.

I helped him up, got him to one of the crew bunks and helped him lie down. When I looked at the wound I winced for him. It was a nasty looking piece of business. Gingerly I touched the area around it he grunted in pain, laughing the way people do when they don't want to scream in agony. For a second his eyes rolled back into his head and the sudden whiteness of his skin scared me. I smacked his face.

"Ged!" I yelled at him.

His eyelids fluttered and he looked at me. "Ow!" he muttered.

"Don't you dare die on me!" I told him as I got out the med-kit.

"Not my plan." He grimaced. "Don't hit me again that hurts!"

"Stop being a big baby and lie still." I started to cut the shirt carefully and peeled it off him as gently as I could. The wound, just under his ribs, was ugly and there was a lot of blood. Unlike a lightsaber the cortosis blade had not cauterised the wound and all the movement from fleeing the Imperial palace had not helped the matter. I waved the small medical scanner over it and for the first time felt a sense of relief.

"How bad is it?"

"You must live under a lucky star Ged Larsen," I said digging through the medical kit for bacta injections and wound cleanser. "Lee's blade missed everything important. It looks a lot worse than it is and it's not as deep as I thought so we won't need to find an emergency medical ship. You'll have a lovely scar though."

Ged struggled to sit up but I pushed him back down, pinning him to the bed by as he fought against me. "I don't find this lucky at all. You're undressing me and I can't even enjoy it." He struggled against my hold on him and it made him wince.

I made a noise of disgust. "Men, don't you ever think of anything else?"

"Occasionally," he replied, still trying to sit up. "But it's difficult when a pretty woman is stripping you out of your clothes."

"Well make the most of it fly-boy it's the only time I'm doing this." And I said those words I realised it was the truth. As much as I liked Ged and as much as when he kissed me he could make me shiver, I did not want anything more from him and when, just for a moment our eyes met, maybe he understood this as well.

He gave me a smile and went to say something but instead he hissed in pain through tightly clenched teeth and writhed when I touched the wound with gauze to clean it.

"Stay still damnit! I need to clean out the wound and it will hurt."

"I can deal with the pain. Give me that I'll do it myself," he said reaching for my hand.

I rolled my eyes, slapping his hand away as grabbed for the gauze I was holding. I shook my head in disgust. "Men. You always want to play the tough guy. Just for once will you listen to me?"

"Oh Merlyn," he whispered with a grin, "You really are a force of nature."

With a sigh I sat back and stared at him. "And you are a bloody pain in the ass." I told him and before he could protest I pressed the hypospray to the side of his neck and sedated him. He fought it until the sedative won and sleep took him. I sat for a second to catch my breath.

It had been Navaari who had shown me the right way to treat wounds such as this. Out on a hunt there were no medical droids or facilities so one had to be self sufficient and animals tended to either bite or claw in a fight. I could hear his voice in my head, assess the damage, clean the wound, staunch the bleeding then repair everything you can and bandage it all up well. This was not the first time I had helped a wounded man but I really hoped it would be the last.

Once the puncture in his side was thoroughly clean I pumped it full of bacta. It never ceased to amaze me how quickly it started the healing process. For a moment I waited to be sure it was working then I closed and bandaged the wound. Once that was done I just stared at him, stroked a stray lock of hair from his face, and covered him with a blanket. Sleep softened his features making him look even younger than he really was.

Suddenly exhausted, I sat back with my head against the bulkhead listening to the thrum of the engines and the sound of Ged breathing, allowing myself a few moments of rest before I cleaned up the mess. I took one last look at Ged to make sure he was really just sleeping and then left him to rest. I made my way to the fresher to wash up then went to my cabin to change into more comfortable clothes. Once that was done I felt a lot better.

I sat at the little table in the galley with my hands cradled around a cup of hot tea wondering about everything that had happened. It felt very surreal and I did not understand the half of it. I hoped that when he felt up to it Ged would explain more but I somehow doubted it and in any case he would be sedated for a good long while, the wound needed time to heal and I knew him well enough to know if he was awake that would not happen. Weary, I suddenly found myself missing Thrawn above all else and a stab of guilt at what had happened in the palace detention room made me sigh. I didn't even know how to begin to explain any of what had happened and I was pretty sure Thrawn would be furious with me for getting into the mess in the first place, never mind the whole kissing part.

Since there wasn't anything else to do and nowhere to go I got up, poured another cup of tea, grabbed a book from the small book shelf near the table and made my way back to the cockpit. I settled into my seat with my feet on the dashboard but I couldn't seem to concentrate on the book in my hand. The slow route to the rendezvous point would take just over a week and I was glad I had enough fuel and supplies for a long run on board although we could stop at Tatooine if we needed to. I wasn't worried about that. I was more concerned with what would happen once we returned to the *Virulent* and eventually have to tell Thrawn that Jarack was dead

because one of the Empire's finest black-ops agents had turned traitor amongst other things. He wasn't going to like it. He wasn't going to like any of it at all.

My ship had been a gift or, better to say, a reward for a job well done. She was really the only thing that was truly mine and I loved her. Lord Vader had named her after his long dead wife and Thrawn had translated that name into his native language. I had lost count of many hours I had logged in space in this ship but she was my second home, I stored my most precious belongings in my ship and I knew almost every nut and bolt, shimmy and whine of her engines.

While Ged slept and recovered, I spent a fair amount of time in the engine room. It was warmer than the rest of the ship and it gave me something to do. There was nothing wrong but I liked to check and double check everything all the same. When I wasn't messing around in the engine room I was in the cockpit reading or studying star charts. Lord Vader had been almost an encyclopaedia of knowledge about star system and their planets and I had learned from his example. All knowledge was worth having Thrawn liked to say and he wasn't wrong.

I missed Lord Vader greatly. He had been unpredictable, bad tempered and often harsh but I had learned to see beyond all of that. I had learned to love him, after a fashion, and his death still left a gaping hole in my life which surprised me. It felt to me that my entire life had been marred by the deaths of people I loved and now I mourned for Jarack as well.

When Thrawn had confirmed that it was Jarack who had gone missing I had hoped for his safe return. Jarack had been a quiet constant in my life for years, delivering letters, playing messenger and becoming a friend whose presence always brightened my day. Seeing his death through the images from the data chip Ged had given me had been like a slap on the face and now that I had time to process it I cried for his loss.

As we travelled through the quieter hyperspace lanes it felt to me as though the entire galaxy was holding its breath, waiting for whatever was about to happen next to decide the course of history. It was a turning point and I sincerely hoped that Thrawn could accomplish because what he was trying to do. I had the feeling that if the Empire was not somehow re-established then chaos would ensue.

We were too far off the main hyperspace lanes to receive reliable holo transmissions so there was no way to know how things were going or what had happened on Coruscant with the arrival of Thrawn's fleet.

I wished I had known more about his plans but he had never one to let me in on his military secrets. I suppose it was his way of keeping his private life separate from his military one but often I felt very left out. There was an entire galaxy of things I didn't know about the man I shared my bed with and, mostly because I was nosey and wanted to know everything, I found this a little frustrating. I prayed that he could retake Coruscant and re-establish Imperial rule so that we could all have some sort of normal life, not that I really knew what normal was but I hoped I could get used to it.

In between the engine room and the cockpit was the tiny galley and it was here Ged found me when he woke up. His presence changed the atmosphere but I tried not to let it show.

He sat down stiffly and gestured to the cup in my hand. "Is there more of that? I'm thirsty."

"You should be resting." I told him as I got up to make him tea and something to eat.

"I've rested enough," he replied. "How long have I been out for anyway?"

"Nearly two days."

"You sedated me for two days?" He asked with an edge of anger in his voice.

"No, you really were just asleep for most of it. I pumped you full sedatives and pain killers so I could clean the wound and stitch you up because you were being a poo-doo head but after that I only kept up with the pain meds, not more sedation. You came out of it a couple of times but only for a few moments. The rest was all you, your body needed time to heal, it happens sometimes after being badly injured with pointed stick thing to the gut." He nodded and accepted the cup of mint tea I gave him. "There's honey in it, drink it all. You're dehydrated."

He cradled his hands around the cup, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said as I sat back down. "I hope you like it, it comes from Tatoonie."

"No I meant for fixing me up. I didn't know you were a medic on top of all your other skills."

"Oh." I shook my head with a laugh, "No I'm not a medic Ged, I just learned some basic first aid."

"You could have fooled me," he said, "I took a look at the job you did on me and it's pretty good all things considered."

I nodded. "I watched carefully as someone patched me up and I have a great memory." I lied a little, I didn't want to have to explain about my relationship with the Dantassi, that was far too private.

Ged raised his eyebrows at me. "Patched you up?"

I shifted around in the seat and hiked up my skirt to show him the still vivid white scar that adorned my thigh.

Ged swore. "How the hell did you get that?"

"It's a long story," I said smoothing out my skirt again.

"And you don't want to talk about it?"

"Do you want to talk about why Lee Vander went after you like that? Why he turned traitor?"

Ged made a face and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I see your point but you deserve to know some of it at least." He sighed and took a sip from the still too hot tea. "It was a command decision I had to make a long time ago. I can't go into details but it had to do with a ground op that went terribly wrong. I had a choice to make and regardless of how I chose, people were going to die. I had to choose how many died so I chose the smaller number."

"It was a mess. We all lost people we knew." He drew a deep breath.

"Unfortunately, among those who died were two of Lee's best friends and, although I didn't know it at the time, also his lover." He stared into the mug he was holding. "It never occurred to me that he couldn't handle it, that even though he was one of the best pilots and agents I ever had the privilege of serving with, he was trained for these sorts of incidents, trained to kill without impunity and yet he couldn't get past this one incident. How he must have hated me to have carried that hatred for so long and I never saw it. All that time he was lying to me and I never saw it once."

He was suddenly so sad and I didn't know what to do about it. Lee had been his friend but had also betrayed him and that was a difficult thing to reconcile with. I understood that probably better than most. "Sometimes it's hard to see especially from people we love and think we know. Most of the time I think they can be the hardest of all to read." I remarked.

He nodded. "You know, the Grand Admiral knew I planned on asking for your help, you know, to retrieve Jarack Behl. He told me that you were well suited for just such a job although I don't think he liked the idea much."

"I do know," I replied with a small nod, "He mentioned it to me but I wasn't in much shape to go gallivanting across the galaxy on some hopped up rescue mission and in the end maybe that's a good thing, after all now you know who your traitor was and he's been dealt with."

"I had no idea it would turn into such a clusterfuck though. I had not expected that at all. I figured it would be a straight forward in and out job because I trusted my source. I trusted Lee with my life, what a joke that turned out to be. If you hadn't been there I might very well be dead. Whether you like it or not, that little trick of yours in being able to pull the memories from objects saved my life, saved our lives."

I wasn't going to argue with him. "I'm sorry about Jarack."

Ged regarded me for a moment and then said, "So, the scar on your leg, how did you manage to get that because a bacta treatment shouldn't have left such a scar."

"I was on the wrong end of a hunt and a dip in a tank was out of the question," I said cryptically.

"A hunt?" He asked with a healthy amount of skepticism. "What the hell were you hunting?"

"I wasn't hunting anyone. I was the one being hunted," I said tightly. It surprised me that I was still angry over what had happened on Myrkr.

Perhaps he sensed that because he didn't press further, "Who patched you up?"

I mulled over my answer for a bit then told him. "Thrawn did." And then seeing the look on his face I decided that perhaps I had better explain a little more. "He was looking for something on a planet called Myrkr and we ended up being hunted by a lunatic named Ormante who thought he could outwit Thrawn. It wasn't pretty and that's where I got the scar on my leg."

"Myrkr? You've mentioned that name once before but I don't know much about the planet."

"No one does really, or at least mostly no one unless you count smugglers and thieves who use the planet as a hide out. The planet was removed from the Imperial Planetary database at Palpatine's request."

"Why?"

I smiled. "Because of what lives there," I said and then tried as best I could to explain about the ysalamiri and the vornskrs.

"The creatures that can repel the force? The ones he has on board the *Chimaera*?" Ged whispered, "No wonder Palpatine wanted that planet kept hidden but what did Thrawn want with them on Nirauan? I remember you mentioned the subbasement was full of them but you didn't say why. I thought he was using them to keep that dark Jedi clone of his in line"

"He needed them for his cloning project. It has something to do with preventing cloning sickness when a clone is grown at accelerated speed."

"That explains his success. I thought he was using pre existing clones while waiting for his own to mature but now I see he was growing his own at an accelerated rate. The only place I can imagine him finding such facilities would be at Wayland."

"Yes, but how did you know?"

Ged gave me a grin.

I sat back in disgust and made a face. "Yeah, yeah super secret spy for the Emperor. Where the hell were you when Thrawn was looking for the co-ordinates to that planet?"

"I didn't say I knew where it was just that I knew of its existence and it isn't as if Thrawn ever asked me about this stuff." Ged retorted, then said more quietly. "I

knew Thrawn had access to clones but he was very tight lipped about the details. So how do you know all of this?"

"Because," I said with a shrug, "He showed me his facility on Nirauan."

"He has cloning chambers on Nirauan as well?"

I nodded. "He called it his testing ground but I don't understand it much. All I know is the ysalamiri give me a hell of a headache and I can't think of anything worse than being made force blind by being around them."

"Force blind? Is that what you call it? It's an apt description. It's part of the reason when we meet in person he comes to my ship. I can't stand being in their proximity, that and he likes to keep our meetings somewhat clandestine."

I nodded, "The life of a Grand Admiral, secrets and more secrets followed by still more secrets."

"So how do you know about the cloning facility on Nirauan if it is supposed to be so... secret?"

I made a face and took a deep breath, "Because to satisfy my curiosity and prevent me from poking my nose where it didn't belong, he showed the facility to me." I replied, "But he was smart, he knew the ysalamiri would make me sick, he'd seen it before so he showed me the lab just the once, explained a little about what he was doing, I saw some of his work and then I got the hell out of there as soon as I could. It hurt to be rendered head blind like that. I never understood what it was that made being force sensitive so special until then. He could have told me all the lies in the galaxy then and I would never have known." I rubbed the back of my neck, all of my muscles ached. "It was quite the set up that he had and he was growing clones and not just human ones at that."

"Nirauan, well that makes sense. If he is accelerating clone growth then he would have needed a testing area. If I understand the science correctly from my discussion with the Emperor accelerating clone growth leads to madness, especially if there is any consciousness transference involved. It has to do with the force and its influence on all living things. Remove the force and you can manipulate the growth cycle without risking cloning sickness," he said, "That's very clever."

I made a face. "We are talking about Thrawn remember." I didn't ask what he meant by consciousness transference but it made me shudder and remember the dreams I had been having about the emperor reborn.

"How could I forget?" He said as he reached over to put his hand on mine but I pulled away, fiddling with my cup instead. Suddenly the galley felt too small and the silence that engulfed us was awkward and uncomfortable.

He nodded and toyed with his empty tea cup. "You look tired. When did you last sleep?"

I shrugged, "I napped here and there but ...."

"You were too busy playing nurse." He interrupted, "Well, I'm fine, the wound is healing well and I even put a clean bandage on it myself. I've rested enough for now so please go and get some rack time. You look like crap."

I looked at him and nodded. "Okay."

"Okay? Just like that okay? No arguing?"

"No arguing, you're right, I'm tired." I stood up and put my cup in the sink, "The ship is on auto pilot with all the proximity alerts set to maximum distance. We're in the middle of hyperspace on one of the quieter routes, I checked the engine about two hours ago and for the first time in ages there's nothing else to do, I do have one question though."

"I'm all ears."



"How did Morrish know you would be there, at the palace? I thought you told me no one else but Vander knew."

"Morrish had been on Coruscant for several days dealing with another matter."

"That room, the one that housed the mainframe? He was there for that right?"

Ged nodded. "He was to copy the data from it so that when we complete our move to the secondary Imperial stronghold we would have complete records of every op, every mission and agent that was available just in case the recapture of Coruscant doesn't go as planned. However, that plan had to change once you told me about your remarkable talent. As soon as I knew what you could do, I knew that no matter what precautions the Emperor had taken to safeguard the information on those databanks it would never be enough. So it became imperative to get to that room. I knew that Morrish would be there if he had stuck to the time frame of the plan we were all working on. That took precedence over everything, which is why we went there first."

"You took an awful risk."

"It paid off and I had a lot of help," he said giving me a sly, knowing grin.

"So the *Virulent* has a new captain?" I asked switching topics, suddenly feeling uncomfortable again.

Ged watched me for a moment then nodded, "A lot has changed since you were last stationed on board. Go and get some sleep we can talk about this when you are more awake."

I nodded. "You're not at all what I thought you were," I said over my shoulder.

"Is that good or bad?" Ged asked.

"I don't know yet." I answered and made my way to my cabin. Sleep when it came was without dreams and I was grateful.

## Chapter Twelve

For the next few days I spent much of the flight avoiding Ged which was a hard thing to do on a small spaceship but since it was my ship I knew all the best places to hide. I spent a great deal of time going over and over again what had happened on Coruscant, that Ged could stir me up and make my heart race with a kiss made me both angry at myself and worried. Even worse that he had pulled me into a situation which could have gotten us both killed. I didn't know how I was going to explain any of this to Thrawn and it ate at me like a wamp rat gnawing on a bone. I would have avoided Ged for the entire trip but he wasn't having any of that and eventually he cornered me in the cockpit.

"I thought you could use a cup of tea," he said handing me the cup before sitting in the co-pilot's chair.

"Thanks." I said, "I figured you were sleeping. I didn't want to disturb you."

He shrugged one shoulder, "Sleep is overrated and what I really want to do is talk to you."

I sighed and stared at the cup in my hands wondering if he would just get the hint and go away. He didn't. The silence between us hung in the air until seeing that I wasn't going to breach it he decided he would.

"Are you mad at me?" He asked bluntly.

Surprised, because it was actually the last thing I expected him to ask, I turned to look at him. "No," I said and was a little shocked to discover it was the truth. I wasn't mad at him at all, I was mad at myself.

"Then why are you avoiding me?"

Even if I had wanted to I could not have stopped the blush that coloured my cheeks.

"Oh," Ged said with a slight smile. "I see."

I wasn't sure he did. I sighed again, hating the fact that no matter what I did every emotion I felt showed on my face. The new silence in the cockpit felt heavy and he had made certain I had nowhere to run so I just sat there avoiding eye contact staring at my cup of tea which had suddenly become very interesting to study.

He watched me for a long, quiet moment and then he asked. "May I ask you a very personal question?"

I mulled it over, wary. "How personal?"

"Personal enough that I'm sort of concerned you might hurt me, but I need to ask it anyway."

I wasn't sure what to expect but I nodded cautiously. "Okay, but I reserve the right to hurt you."

"I'll take my chances," He said with a slight smile, "In all the time you have been with Thrawn have you ever slept with another man?"

"What!" I had not been expecting this and nearly coughed up my tea.

"It was a straight forward question," he said calmly, "So have you?"

"No!" I replied sullenly hating this conversation long before it even really got started, "No, of course not."

He considered this answer for a second then continued, "Have you ever wanted to? Really wanted to?"

I shook my head. "No." I didn't even have to think about this answer.

"But you've had ... chances? There have been other men interested in you, aside from me" He asked studying my face with great care.

"I suppose so." My answer was tentative which made him raise an eyebrow in question. "I take it we're not counting the ones who tried to take me by force." I replied.

An expression flashed through his eyes that I had never seen before and wasn't sure I ever wanted to again. "Take you by force? Are you telling me that someone....?"

I didn't let him finish. "They have tried," I said tightly and then because there was more concern and anger in his face than I liked I gave him the very quick and dirty rundown of some of my less than stellar encounters with the men who had thought I was an easy mark.

He sat very still for what felt like a very long time and when he finally did speak there was fury laced through his words. "I don't even know what to say to that."

I shrugged with one shoulder. "Some men seem to think they can just waltz in and take whatever they want whether it's theirs to take or not."

He blew out air noisily and shook his head. "Yes, sometimes men do and for that I apologise."

"I can take care of myself." I replied a little more hotly than I should have because it was not entirely the truth.

"I'm sure you can but this explains why the Admiral was so angry and why you reacted the way you did when I took advantage of the situation on the *Virulent*. You must think I am an absolute bastard."

I managed to smile. "Maybe just a little," I said jokingly but he didn't return my smile. I sighed loudly and then because I felt the need to I said, "Really, it's fine."

"No Merlyn it's not. I got quiet an earful from the Grand Admiral after you flew out of the *Virulent* in what can only be called fine dramatic style and trust me, now that I know a whole lot more about what has happened to you, it's not okay. Thrawn was so angry and while he held it in check I have never seen him like that before, ever. I thought he was overreacting but now I see he wasn't, he was being protective and rightly so."

I sighed noisily. "I forget sometimes that Thrawn is not human, he doesn't always react the way I expect him to. He *was* being protective and even though he claims he has all of his emotions tucked away nice and neat he doesn't. He can be passionate and jealous, a mix which is something he doesn't always handle very well, and it makes him...", I searched for the right word but couldn't really find it, "...abrupt. He's not always nice or polite about his reactions to some of the stupid situations I seem to find myself in." I sighed and thought *sometimes I don't mind that from him, oddly enough* but I didn't say that last part out loud.

For a moment Ged didn't say a word. I could tell he was angry but not at me. His jaw clenched and there was a hardness to his expression that hadn't been there before. When he did speak his voice was tight. "I am sorry never the less."

I shook my head at him. "Don't put yourself in the same box as men like Zaarin because you are not like them at all." I couldn't believe we were actually having this conversation, "I like you, you're a pretty decent guy for an Imperial Admiral but you complicated things at a time when things didn't need to be complicated."

"Complicated?" He asked. "How?"

"You gave me an option that had not been there before," I said honestly. "It cause a bit of a stir." Which was putting it mildly.

"An option?" Ged's eyebrows raised a notch in surprise.

"Yes. Once I realised you thought about me in that way it was an open possibility for something I had never considered before, that maybe I could like another man in a similar way." I nibbled on my pinkie nail, "As you see, I don't have a lot of good experiences with men and Thrawn... well he was different. I had never been courted before. I don't think he meant for things between us to become so serious but they did and then, suddenly, you came along and I like you, we get along so..." I shrugged again and tried to sort out my words before they became all tangled up. "Up until you no other man had managed to make me feel anything other than mild interest or revulsion. Thrawn didn't like seeing that very much, he isn't used to having to vie for my affections like that and he didn't deal with how that made him feel very well, though to be fair neither did I."

Ged smiled slightly and rubbed his chin.

I sighed. "Thrawn gets a little unpredictable when his emotions become riled up whereas I tend to run away and hide. We had one hell of a fight after you showed up at my quarters that night and it was kind of embarrassing, you know. I pushed all the wrong buttons and so did he. We tend to do that to each other when we're insecure. You made him insecure; you made me rethink my view on men. It scared the hell out of me as well as pissed me off, seriously you men you can be such morons some times. My response was to get as far away from the both of you as possible and hoped things sorted themselves out. I've never had the experience of dealing with two men that I actually like a lot who liked me back at the same time, in the same place. It was easier to avoid you lot altogether."

He sat back in the co-pilot's seat hard enough to make it rock a little. "Is that why you did not want to return to the *Virulent*?"

I smiled and shook my head, "No, I didn't come back because I found out I was pregnant and given the high risk nature of that pregnancy I wasn't going anywhere and please don't ask me for details it's still too difficult to talk about." I took a deep steadying breath.

"I'm sorry." He shook his head and I could see a bunch of emotions written on his face that didn't need to be there.

I glanced at him. "You keep saying that but I wish you wouldn't." I set my teacup down and scrubbed at my face with both hands. "Had I not been pregnant I probably would have returned. I like working with you, I like you. I just didn't know how to react to you liking me in *that* way but now I do," I said plainly, "I'm not exactly useful on Nirauan anymore and I tend to do stupid things when I get bored. Thrawn felt I'd be safer on the *Virulent* with you."

"After what happened he trusts me enough to send you back?"

"No Ged, he trusts me," I said then thought *and I blew it...again*. I sighed heavily and Ged read the expression on my face correctly.

"So after all this time, Thrawn really is the only man you have ever..." He paused, for just a second, so I helped him.

"Had sex with?" I suggested bluntly.

"Yes." Ged nodded.

"Yes, he is the only one." I replied hating the embarrassment I felt. I was more than a little puzzled as to where this conversation was going. "Why are you asking me this Ged?"

He looked at his cup for a moment then at me. "We've hardly spoken since we left Coruscant air space. You avoid me like the plague and I don't like it. I feel as though we have committed a crime when, in fact, that is not the case. I see guilt when you look at me and in your body language. I'm betting you've spent a good chunk of the time in here fretting about how to tell Thrawn about what happened on

Coruscant, especially what happened in the detention cell, getting more and more worked up about it all until it's this huge terrible thing when it is not."

"And your point?" I asked.

"Well my point is that you have nothing to fret about. I told you there was a reason for doing it that way."

I scowled at him, "I think your exact words were *this was better than the alternative*."

His grin was charming, "You have many force talents but you don't throw force lightning do you?"

I shook my head, "My talents lie in other places and the darker arts never appealed to me much. They tend to give me a headache." This was a big understatement.

"Does using the force tire you? When you read objects does that drain you?"

I nodded.

He drew a deep breath. "Using force lightning is very difficult at the best of times and it requires a hell of a lot of energy to call up, especially if one wants to direct it in specific directions. You showed me that you could transfer force energy with that little mind trick which meant we could work together and that I could pull more energy through you without hurting you." He paused to make sure I was following him.

I made a *get on with it* gesture.

"Okay, well three of the most powerful energy drives that I know about are lust, hate and anger and I figured it was easier to go with the lust and it's a lot more fun. I didn't want to waste time trying to make you angry enough and I don't want you to hate me. I knew after what had happened on the *Virulent* that there was enough chemistry between us that I could kiss you and that would stir you up enough to get the job done. While anger and hatred have their place, desire is a lot easier to manipulate."

I sighed. "Being manipulated into sucking face with you and then enjoying it doesn't make me feel better about it."

"Enjoyable as it was, it was a means to an end," He replied simply, "Look, both you and the Admiral have made it quite clear to me that you are spoken for and I don't have to be told twice to back off."

I made a face and was about to argue that point but he waved a hand to stop me from interrupting.

"I don't need to be a genius to know who it is that has your heart. Your loyalty to him is admirable and, quite frankly, amazing especially given the amount of time you two are apart and yet still you are his. Now I know nothing can change that, especially not a single kiss from me, for goodness sakes your whole being lights up whenever he's in the room and you don't do that for me." He took a deep breath, "Look, I'm sorry Merly, about what happened when you were on the *Virulent* before. I pushed even though I knew better, I pushed anyway."

"Why?"

"Are you really that blind?"

I glared at him.

"How is it that you can't see it?" He sighed. "You're lovely and unique and it isn't as though there's a dearth of beautiful, intelligent females in the Imperial Navy. I just...." He shrugged unable to finish his sentence.

"You just let the wrong brain think for you?" I asked snarkily.

"You could put it like that." He chuckled. "If you could only see yourself through the eyes of those who adore you then you would be overwhelmed and very

surprised that not more of us male idiots try to steal kisses from you in the hanger bay."

"Good that they don't, there'd be a lot of people in the med-lab." I grumbled.

"You are such a passionate person that I am guessing you have some pretty strong empathy talents lying hidden deep inside. It's easy to get physical and be stirred up by a kiss and, not meaning to boast or anything, I'm pretty good at what I can do in that department, however, it's a whole other thing to take it further than a bit of flirting."

"Is there a point to this speech?" I asked sulkily.

"Yes," He sighed, "Just because there is an attraction between us doesn't mean there is anything more."

"Are you so sure?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes," He replied without hesitation.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not the man you are in love with," he said simply.

Much to my dismay I blushed again and when I didn't have anything to say he continued with a shake of his head, "Merlyn, you are wonderfully chaotic and I would be lying if I said I had not considered the possibility of us together. You really have no idea the effect you have on us foolish men."

"I'm just an ordinary girl from Tatooine, Ged. I look in a mirror and see only me, usually with grease on my nose and my hair looking like wamp-rat tails. I don't see myself the way you or Thrawn do. I don't even know what it is I do that makes you men act like idiots where I am concerned."

"Perhaps that is the reason," he said gently.

My shrug was self conscious and I made a point of studying my hands closely. "So men like clueless, untidy and unpredictable women?" I said making a half hearted joke.

"Men like women," he replied. "Some men, smart men, will tend to gravitate more towards complicated and intelligent rather than vapid and beautiful. Except for vapid you are all of these things and to top that off you don't even seem to know you are all of these things so we can add naïve to the list as well which is a pretty heady mixture. You are a temptation that is hard to resist."

I hated being described out loud and the look I gave him told him I was not happy with this conversation. "You know if you have a point do you think you could get to it any time soon?"

He sighed, "Maybe, just maybe, if I seduced you hard enough you'd fall into a moment of madness and sleep with me but that's all it would be, a moment. Then after that there would be a lifetime of regret, guilt, resentment and eventually even hate. Betraying the man you love for a night of pleasure with another would break you and that's a guilt I don't want." He paused for a moment, "I see it already starting you know, I reach for your hand to comfort you, to express my thanks and you pull back all wary and mistrustful. You do your best to avoid me which is no mean feat in a small ship. I don't like that very much. I liked it better when things were easy between us, when we were friends and I screwed that up not you."

There was nothing I could say to this that wouldn't come out wrong so I kept my mouth shut.

He drank some tea then looked at me. "What happened on Coruscant was necessary. What I did takes a lot of energy, far too much for me alone unless I want a lot of wrinkles or an early grave, which I don't, so I used you as well. I. Used. You." He paused to let the words sink in and then continued, "You've never been really trained to contain your emotions so you are like an ungrounded power coupling; all I

did was direct that energy in a way I could use it quickly. It was the easiest way to get out of that situation with minimum risk. You can tell the Admiral if you feel you must but I don't think you need to." He sighed. "I know there is a spark between us and I enjoy it greatly but in this lifetime, in this universe your heart belongs to someone else, a man that, in spite of how it may seem, I respect greatly. I do not need to make enemies out of either of you simply over my libido."

"But that...." I started but he kept on speaking so I shut up.

"Men sometimes do stupid things and now I know you've experienced more than your fair share of this sort of stupid. What I did on board the *Virulent* was stupid and now that I see what it did to you I am really sorry," he said firmly, "I have never coerced a woman to my bed against her will in my life and I am not about to begin now. I overstepped my bounds on the *Virulent* and for that I apologise for that but what I did on Coruscant was just a fun way to get out of a bad situation. It won't happen again."

I stared at him feeling a bizarre sense of loss. He was right with everything he was saying and yet it made me sad. I fought back sudden and unwanted tears because I also felt insanely relieved and grateful. He just watched me in silence waiting for me to process it all.

"So now what?" I eventually asked.

"Well you try to forgive me for being an ass, I'll forgive you for being a royal pain in the rear and we leave what happened on Coruscant behind."

"Okay," I said after a moment of weighty quiet. "I guess I can do that."

He grinned. "And I have a favour to ask of you."

"What?" I asked crossly.

"Will you please stop avoiding me?" He said as though it were the most obvious thing to ask in the galaxy.

I sighed, trying to decipher my feelings and nodded, "Okay I think I can manage that as well."

"So we're friends?" He asked.

I looked at him, "Friends...?" I asked not quite believing this entire conversation had even happened, "Isn't that supposed to be my line? I thought most men hated that word."

"Well in case you haven't figured it out yet, I am not most men." He chuckled. "Merly, I've said this before but it bears repeating, you are gifted force-sensitive and that alone makes you special. You lived and worked in the same Imperial world I did but you are not under my command so I am free to talk with you about anything I wish which is rare, believe me. We have a lot in common. So yes, I hope that we can stay friends because believe it or not I could use a good friend and I think that you could too," he said sounding very un-Ged like, "If you're okay with that?"

I bit my lip and nodded feeling inexplicably relieved as though somehow he had managed to life a huge weight off my back. I didn't know what to say to him so I said the only thing that made sense to me. "Thank you."

"Now, for the love of Palpatine stop brooding."

"I don't brood!"

"Oh yes you do and it's very tedious. I honestly do not know how Thrawn puts up with you sometimes," he said getting up. "I'm going to make us some supper now, care to join me?"

"You're cooking?"

"Yes, new rule on this boat, I cook and you stay away from the stove," he said, "That stuff you call food would kill a hutt."

I laughed, which felt good, and just like that the rift that had been between us closed. "I've heard that before too but you can't banish me from my own ship's galley."

"Try me." Was his tart reply.

I decided it would be wiser not to.

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The rest of the journey was relaxed, nothing blew up, no one tried to kill us and nothing went wrong with my ship. In the quiet of the galley Ged taught me how to play seven card comet, a complicated and annoying game. After losing to him about a billion times finally I turned the tables around and taught him how to play Hutts and Scoundrels which was even funnier because the rules allowed for cheating and Ged was not nearly as good at that as he would have liked to believe.

"This is a crazy game, are you sure you're not making it up?" Ged laughed as he finally won a round.

"Nope it's real. I used to play it at Jabba's palace sometimes with Boba Fett. Actually I learned it from him." I smiled at the memory.

"Isn't that one of the bounty hunters Vader used to hire?"

"Yeah." I grinned grateful he didn't get all weird about me knowing Fett the way so many people had. "I knew him from before that though; he'd show up at the docking bay my father owned from time to time to get his ship fixed and then sometimes we'd meet up at Jabba's."

"Do you miss it?" He asked suddenly, peering at me from over his cards.

"Miss what?"

"Tatooine, Jabba's Palace and all that stuff?"

I shook my head. "Tatooine sometimes but not Jabba's palace, I don't miss that at all. It was another life in another time and when I think about it I wonder who that girl was because she's long gone. What I miss more is Coruscant and how it used to be, before Endor, when there was still some sort of normal." I smiled, "I miss my friends, the clothes, the excitement and a bunch of other things I never thought would matter to me. I know it's not the same now, and I couldn't go back there to live but for a while it was home and I loved it."

"Well it was a glamorous life, even if it did mean putting up with Darth Vader."

I smiled as I discarded one card and picked up another, "He wasn't so bad once you got to know him."

"Is that so?" He said with a teasing smirk.

I nodded. "He was brilliant. Did you know he built his own protocol droid when he was just a kid?"

Ged stared at the cards in his hand for a second and then took another card from the deck, "No I did not know that."

"Or that he had a wife who had once been the Queen of Naboo? That they got married in secret because the Jedi didn't allow love and that she died in childbirth but everyone who knew that lied about it to keep him away from his kids. I mean no wonder he went bonkers."

This time Ged stopped looking at his cards to look at me. "I didn't know that either. I mean I guessed there had to be a woman involved somewhere; he had a son, but a queen of Naboo? That's news even to me and I thought I knew a lot about that man."



I nodded, "My point is that most people never really saw him as a man. They saw him as some sort of evil monster and he wasn't, well okay he could be but he was more than that." I sighed returning my focus to my own hand of cards. "I hope that when this is all said and done people won't see Thrawn the same way."

"Well the Grand Admiral isn't dressed from head to toe in scary black armour and he doesn't force choke those who displease him, I'd say he's off to a much better start, wouldn't you?" Ged asked and then laid down a hand of cards that trumped mine winning a round.

"Hey!"

I watched as he gleefully removed a couple of cards from his sleeve and tossed them on the table. "I'm a quick study and you are easily distracted."

I laughed. "I suppose a secret agent should be good at slipping cards up his sleeve though I never did learn the trick of it."

"Make some tea and maybe I'll reveal some of my secrets."

I got up to put the kettle on and stood with my back leaning against the small counter while he reshuffled the cards.

"So what about you?" I asked.

"Oh there's not that much to tell." He gave me a one shoulder shrug.

At that comment, I grinned. "Which means there is lots to tell, so give it up fly-boy."

"Well let's see, my family has called Coruscant home since the dawn of the Old Republic. I grew up there when I wasn't trailing around with my father in space. We have an estate out in the Sah'c Town area, two apartments in the coco district, and one not so far from the flat where your friends live. I used to call that home when I was on planet."

"So we were actually neighbours of a sort."

"Yes, I suppose so, though I wasn't there very often," he replied .

The kettle boiled and I busied myself making a pot of tea. "Do you miss it?"

"I used to but then, when I would be back on Coruscant, I would miss being onboard an ISD and it turned out that I missed space more in the end. I still have the properties though, I rent them out."

"Nice," I said with a nod. "Thrawn is like that you know, happier in space than on world."

He nodded, "The navy is my life. The intelligence stuff came later. But for as long as I can remember I wanted to be a pilot, I wanted to fly."

"I heard you got started young," I said sipping my tea. "They called you the Emperor's Boy Wonder, did you know that?"

"I did. I used to find it annoying now I just shake my head at the fuss," he said with a grin, "I can remember pretending to be a TIE pilot as a little kid, playing make believe with toys and then later I graduated to simulators which I had access to when I travelled with my father." He smiled at the memory, "I was good too, I even managed to outscore some of my father's best pilots in the simulator. It was only natural that I end up at the Academy. I know a lot of people thought that I was given a free hand because of who my father was but that wasn't the case. My father would never have had a man serving under him who had not pulled his weight at the Academy. I passed with more than flying colours because I worked at it. It was my passion."

"You're force sensitive that must have helped."

"Perhaps it did but I never used it intentionally," he said thoughtfully.

"Did they know about your talents? Your family, did they know?"

"The majority of my force abilities manifested much later in life and the small talents I did show we didn't speak of it much." His reply was quiet. "My parents lived through the Clone Wars, the Jedi purge. I had gifts that should have gotten me killed so we kept it ...."

"...dark." I finished for him.

He nodded, "Yes, well you would know that wouldn't you."

"So if you kept it a secret then how did Palpatine find out?"

He drew a long slow breath and folded his hands around the cup of tea. He stared at the contents of his cup as though it held all the answers to the universe and then he looked at me and smiled slightly in that beguilingly boyish manner that I was sure made teenage girls weak in the knees. "Because I lost it," he said with a shake of his head. "I just lost it."

I frowned, not following. He swallowed and I suddenly understood that I wasn't the only one carrying around battle scars. "If you don't want to talk about it I understand," I said.

He gave me another smile but this one was softer, held a hint of sadness and was far more intimate, "After all those terrible secrets you've shared with me, I think you deserve to hear at least one of mine."

"Well then tea just won't do it," I stood up and dug two glasses and the emergency brandy out of the cupboard, then sat back down. Without asking him, I poured a generous shot and we touched glasses.

"Impressive! This is really good stuff," he said savouring the taste.

"It should be I steal it from Thrawn and he's a snob when it comes to this stuff." I said with a tentative grin.

He nodded and then became serious, "It was unusual but not unheard of for members of the same family to be assigned on the same ship. When I graduated from Carida I was lucky. I got to work under my father on board the ISD *Thunderer* as a Commander and a flight leader. It was great, the Old man was cool about it and I pulled my weight, did well and got promoted. Things were good. Things were really, really good." He studied the glass in his hand, "I'm guessing you know all too well that just when the world seems perfect things tend to go very wrong."

"That's generally been my experience," I nodded.

"We had a good crew, a great ship. We had a decent sector to patrol in and my father was a well respected man. We had all heard about the rebellion, that there was unrest and fighting but it hadn't really touched our lives in any great way. Then one day we were patrolling a non hostile sector, just a routine patrol, and suddenly things weren't so routine anymore." He stopped to down the rest of the brandy in his glass and didn't refuse when I refilled the glass.

For a long moment he studied his glass thoughtfully, "I thought we were the good guys. I thought that the galactic worlds loved us. We kept space safe; we kept a lid on the smugglers and the war lords and made life easier for everyone. We did our jobs and we risked our lives every single day and for what? So a small group of ungrateful haters could swoop in and rewrite history?" He shook his head and sipped his drink. "I liked history so I read all about the Clone Wars, about the Jedi and what happened. I read about how the Old Republic Senate had become so corrupt that they would not even help planets being blackmailed by thugs like the banking clan unless it was in someone's best interest and the credits were high enough. Did people just forget all of that?"

"Yes." I nodded, "They did."

He shook his head and continued, "I also read reports that some people thought that Palpatine had engineered the entire thing, the war, the breakdown of

the senate, his rise to power just so he could destroy the Jedi but you know what? That's garbage. People are corrupt and all Palpatine did was show it. He didn't start the war, he ended it. My mother was in the senate the day he declared us a galactic empire. She told me it was one of the most glorious things she had ever seen, that everyone cheered because they wanted Palpatine to lead. He was a good leader." He looked at me. "I know things were not perfect but nothing ever is but these rebels, they came in thinking they were going to save the universe and in the process they destroyed so many lives and they called themselves heroes for doing it." He stopped to consider his next words carefully. I could feel his anger and his sadness all around him and it made me ache with an all too familiar sorrow. This memory was painful.

"It was just another ordinary patrol. They came out of nowhere, a fleet of 5 MC-90 Heavy Calamari Cruisers and seven corvettes all carrying full compliments of squadrons. They jumped out of hyperspace practically on top of us. Oh how they must have congratulated themselves, a lone Imperial Star Destroyer with no reinforcements within a hundred light years, it was a gift, even armed to the teeth as we were, we were no match for their numbers."

"My father didn't waste any time. We launched the TIEs and we fought back with everything we could, we gave them a damned good fight. My father was brilliant, he used every trick in the book plus a few more that hadn't been written and he held them off for a long time but in the end he was out numbered, we were outnumbered. The *Thunderer's* shields eventually failed leading to a catastrophic hull breach." He clenched his teeth against the bitterness of the memory which he could still see clearly in his mind. "When she exploded it was the most extraordinary and the most horrific thing I had ever seen. This huge, beautiful ship so full of people, so full of promise was suddenly gone in a brilliant flash of light and a shower of sparks. I watched it from the cockpit of my TIE, too far away to do anything else. That explosion took out three quarters of the rebel fleet along with my father and a good many of my friends." He stopped and swallowed hard. "A part of me died that day and another part of me woke up."

I sat with my hand covering my mouth and tears welled up in my eyes, I blinked them away to roll down my cheeks without me even realising it. "Oh Ged, I am so sorry. I had no idea."

He reached over and touched my face, his fingers tracing the tracks my tears had made. "Tears for a man you never even knew, you really are extraordinary." He spoke softly, as though he were talking more to himself than to me.

I brushed my tears and his hand away roughly, I was angry but I didn't know why. We stared at each other for a very long moment and then he remembered he was telling a story, gathered himself and sat back against the back of the chair, distancing himself from me with a shake of his head. I understood then that, even with his pretty words and fine intentions of just being friends with me, it wasn't quite so easy to completely shut off the feelings that lay beneath the surface. I wanted to reach out, take his hand to somehow give him comfort but I didn't. He drew a breath and continued.

"They told me, after it was all over, that it was like watching a man gone mad but I don't recall it much to be honest. I remember the explosion and that bizarre sense of disassociation. It wasn't real, how could such a thing be real? My father, one moment he was there giving orders, the next he was stardust. How was that even possible? So I did the only thing I could, I stuck with my training and we went after the rest of the rebels with a vengeance. We shot them down like animals, every last one of them. By the time the battle was done the first of the reinforcements had begun to arrive. The next thing I know I'm back on Coruscant being awarded a

bloody medal for my *valiant effort*." He spat the last words with distaste and shook his head, "They said the Empire needed to see its heroes, but I didn't understand. How could I be a hero when so many good people had died? Later, after the ceremony, the Emperor sent word he wished to speak with me alone in his private audience chamber, the small one, you know the one I mean right?"

I nodded. I knew it all too well and the memory made me shudder.

"He seemed so benevolent, like a kindly old uncle and not at all like the powerful man I had been used to seeing give speeches and so on. He told me he had heard about what had happened and he was curious as to how a mere boy could have done so much damage. I told him that I could barely remember what had occurred after my father's death but he managed to get it out of me in that strange way of his. It was painful when it all came flooding back."

I sighed loudly and drank a large gulp of the brandy. I had been on the receiving end of the Emperor's ability to pull information out of thin air and I hadn't enjoyed it very much.

"It turned out I had an aptitude for the darker side of the force. I had fed off my fury and hatred and let the force take over. I had been guided by it and because of this power we had managed to destroy our enemy or what was left of them," Ged said with a slight shrug, "I resigned my commission after that meeting and I took some time to figure things out. I travelled, met people, studied and when I returned, well let's just say the Emperor saw to it that my education did not get left by the wayside."

"He trained you personally?"

"He had a hand in it," Ged replied evasively. I didn't push instead I let him continue; "He promoted me, gave me my own commission and sent me to take care of business in the Ryloth system, at least officially. Unofficially I began my work with the Bureau and followed in my mother's footsteps."

"Your mother?" I asked in surprise.

He nodded, "I thought for the longest time that she was some low level bureaucrat but it turned out she was working with intelligence as a signals expert. I used the front of being an Admiral and having an ISD at my command for missions and that was that until Endor. I should have been there but we had been delayed on another mission, perhaps if we had been there things might have gone a different way."

"Everything changed at Endor," I whispered.

He nodded. "I felt it you know, Palpatine's death. I was on the bridge of my ship and it felt as though someone had suddenly sucked all the air out and I was suffocating. It was painful and bitter and I knew, in that moment, I knew that he was dead."

"I think the whole galaxy felt it," I shivered.

"Probably they did." He nodded and we both sipped our drinks in silence.

"So, you studied the dark side of the force."

He nodded, "As I said, I had an aptitude for it. Once I had broken through that barrier I was able to tap into it whenever I wanted and once I got the training I needed I could control it." He studied me for a second, "You know, I don't understand, why Palpatine didn't just take you into his fold as soon as he found you what you were? He took many young force users and helped them to discover their full potential, so why not you? You would have made a perfect agent, one of his Emperor's hands, with that gift that you have."

"I grew up on Tatooine thinking I was the daughter of Docking Bay owner and an Alderaanian art historian. Who the hell comes to Tatooine looking for force sensitive children? Certainly not anyone from the Core. I kept my talents hidden and

so did my family. It wasn't until I got drafted to be Lord Vader's office girl that it came to the forefront and by then I suppose I was too old and it was too late for the Emperor to find me of use."

Ged shook his head. "No, I don't buy that. You're too good at what you do and you have too much talent for him not to want to put it to use."

I thought about it all for a long moment, "I don't know, to tell you the truth, really I don't. It was Lord Vader who figured out what I was and he didn't tell his master. Palpatine probably knew anyway but he liked to play games with Lord Vader and somehow I was caught up in the middle of that." I shrugged, "The first time I met Lord Vader there was a connection, I don't know how else to describe it. We connected. I wasn't terrified of him, more curious at first. The fear of his temper came later and even then I didn't mind so much. I suppose I imprinted on him the way a baby bantha will on the first being they see after birth, he was the first person not to treat my talents like some awful dirty secret. He embraced it, he nurtured it, he taught me and I guess I saw myself as his. He used to try and teach me the dark side, push me into anger, get me all riled up but it didn't quite work the way he wanted to. I wasn't interested in being powerful. It used to piss him off, eventually he got fed up and Palpatine saw that as well. After that it was the Emperor who guided me, nudged me in a different direction but it was done so subtly that at first I had no idea it was even happening. He didn't even try, he knew couldn't safely break whatever bond it was between Lord Vader and myself, and yes I know how ridiculous that sounds but it's true. I suppose looking back now the truth of the matter was that I liked Lord Vader. I didn't like Palpatine and when I don't like someone I can be pretty stubborn about it."

Ged laughed, "Stubborn is putting mildly."

"I think that Palpatine figured he could wait it out, whatever it was. He even told me once that to try and break this connection I had forged with his apprentice would damage me and he was right. It took a long time to recover from Lord Vader's death and sometimes it still hurts. I know I came very close to madness on the Death Star at Endor. I'm sure that Palpatine's methods eventually would have broken me completely but that didn't happen and in the end it was my connection to Lord Vader that saved my life." I stopped for a moment remembering the exact second Lord Vader had died. "It still hurts, you know, I still feel it the moment when he severed the mental link between us with the force, letting me go, it felt as though someone sliced through my brain with a rusty knife. I suppose that given enough time Palpatine would have bent my mind to his will but I'm glad he didn't get the chance. I might not have been a good dark side adept but I am sure he would have found other ways to twist me. I know he used me and my relationships in a subtle sneaky way to get to Thrawn and even to needle Lord Vader on occasion. I'm not sorry he's dead, I hated him."

"Funny how we can see the same person in such different ways."

I nodded thoughtfully then after a lengthy silence I said, "I am really sorry about your father."

"Thank you," He replied and I suddenly found myself wondering, just for a moment, what a life with Ged would have been like.

We had so much in common, and were alike in so many ways that in spite of our differences I felt sometimes as though I had known him all of my life. He was both handsome and intelligent, not to mention interesting and perhaps if I had met him before Thrawn things would have been radically different. My life would have changed and maybe he would have been able to deal with Jyrki better and less people I loved would have died but then I shook the thought out of my head. You cannot live

a life on what ifs, my father would have said. And if I had thought tying my heart to that of a navy admiral was difficult then what would life be like with someone who ran an entire intelligence and black ops division. Being with Ged like that would be fun for a while but eventually all the secrets and the lying would drive me crazy. As if he could sense my thoughts he looked up at me questioningly.

"I'm sure he's fine, you know," he said and I was grateful he had misread my expression, or at least pretended to.

I took a deep breath and nodded, "I hope so as well because so much is riding on it."

"Do you have reason to believe otherwise?"

I paused for a moment and swirled the brandy in my glass around and around. "Sometimes I have dreams where I see him dead."

Ged snorted and set the cards in his hand down on the table. "I would think that this is normal given the job he does."

"Probably," I agreed, "But sometimes my dreams come true."

That caught his attention. "Force visions?"

I poured two cups of tea and then sat down across from him again. "Maybe, I've had them for years. Thrawn brushes them off as nonsense."

"Really? Describe them to me."

I opened my mouth to refuse but the look on Ged's face told me that would not work and he wanted to hear these dreams described. So I told him about the vision I had seen while in the Nona Shyr Gallery. Ged listened and when I was done he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Are they all like that?"

"Mostly."

"And the Admiral brushes them off? Really?"

"Well not so much brush them off, he keeps telling me he has it all well in hand."

Ged rolled his eyes at me, "So you're being a drama queen."

I couldn't think of a suitable retort fast enough so I resorted to sticking my tongue out at him.

"Seriously, you should trust him a whole lot more than you do. I've never known him to ignore good advice or stay a course that would get him or his people killed. That's part of what makes him such a brilliant leader."

"Me either but there is always a first time." I was feeling particularly gloomy after this conversation.

"Don't suppose you dream about me do you?" He teased to lighten the mood.

"You wish!" I gave him a grin and hoped it came out mysterious. He just laughed and picked up the forgotten deck of cards.

"Pour me another shot lady and I'll teach you how to play Aces High, one of the TIE pilots favourite games."

He made it easy to forget about everything that had happened and by the time we rendezvoused with the *Virulent* I no longer felt as though the world would end. I was no longer laden down with guilt and although I would probably still tell Thrawn about what had taken place on Coruscant, because he definitely would want to know about what happened to Jarack, I no longer feared the consequences, after all he didn't need all the details. I was just really looking forward to seeing him again.

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We reached the rendezvous point slightly ahead of schedule and I was almost sad when we landed on board one of the *Virulent's* smaller docking bay. Once we had established boundaries, I had enjoyed getting to know Ged better and having someone to share stories and secrets with. I had forgotten what it felt like to have a friend like him. There were precious few people left who knew what life had been like at the height of the Empire it was almost a relief to be able to share my tales with him.

"Will you be okay on your own for a while?" He asked as he packed his things. I was loitering in the doorway to the small cabin he had used. "I mean do you have something to keep you occupied and out of trouble?"

"Funny." I made a face, "Yes, I need to sort my ship out." I told him. "I have learned not to trust anyone when it comes to taking care of my baby." I patted the hull beside me for emphasis. "I like to give the engines a good looking at after a run like this and the ship needs to be cleaned."

"This bucket of bolts is not at all what she seems to be." Ged smiled. "Just like her owner."

"Everyone underestimates my ship, even I did at first," I grinned ignoring his dig at me. "She takes care of me so I take care of her right back."

"I would expect no less." He nodded, "You're a damn good pilot. Any pilot worth their salt takes care of the ship first before and after the run. The deck officer will make sure you get whatever you need. If you have any problems just let me know."

I followed him to the ship's exit, "Thanks."

He hesitated for a moment then said, "I will be very busy for the next little while, I'm afraid. I have a great deal to catch up on and I..."

I raised my hand to stop him. "I'm not going to suddenly start acting all clingy just because we called a truce and played cards. It's okay, I know the fly-boy drill," I told him. "Anyway, I'm also exhausted. And you should get the ship's medic to look at the wound." I gestured at his chest. "While it's healing okay I'd feel happier if Dr. Pakhia gave you the okay."

"Aye aye." He grinned giving me a mock salute, "As soon as I hear anything I will let you know but don't hold your breath. The Grand Admiral isn't always very forthcoming about his plans and right now the holonet is not the place to be broadcasting them."

"I'm used to that as well," I replied making a face, "Really, I'm fine Ged, stop acting like a mother bantha." I flapped my hand at him, "Go command something and get off my ship. I have stuff to do!"

He laughed, "Very well, I'll leave you to it."

I nodded, watching him disembark, and then got down to business with my ship. We had a good relationship and I wanted to keep it that way so my first order of business was the engine room. Time passed without me knowing it and by the time I was done it was late. I headed back to my quarters feeling at ease but filthy. I was deeply grateful to have peace and quiet to soak in a hot bath and then go to bed. I was more tired than I thought and I slept for nearly thirteen hours straight. If there were nightmares I didn't remember them, if there were any emergencies I slept through them. When I woke up the ship was well on its way to Bastion, the Imperial stronghold and we were in a communications lockdown with Ged running ship wide drills. Some things never changed and oddly enough I was glad for it.

I spent most of my time in the hanger fixing anything I was allowed to get my hands on just to pass the hours. If there was one thing I had learned it was that time on an ISD passed slowly if a person had no specific tasks. While I had been taught to

do many things in my life nothing was more useful than being a certified mechanic and I had Jyrki and my father to thank for this. Working on the ships and being in the pits meant I picked up tidbits of gossip from the pilots and the other mechanics but there was nothing concrete. It was all just supposition and rumours. Ged, true to his word, kept me up to date although, according to him, there wasn't much to tell but two days out of Bastion we received word that Thrawn's fleet had come out of hyperspace near Coruscant and the battle for the planet had begun. I learned more details over a late dinner with Ged.

"He has cloaked asteroids in low orbit around the planet, creating a hazard that forced the planet to put up their defence shield. Right now nothing can get in or out." Ged told me after the steward had poured the stim'caf and discretely left the room.

"A siege?" I asked as I nibbled on a piece of sweet ijnalla fruit. "What does he hope to accomplish by that?"

"Keeps them busy." He laughed. "The cloaked asteroids are undetectable to Coruscant's sensors, it's impossible for the New Republic to distinguish an actual asteroid launch from a false one."

"A false launch?"

"Over two hundred to be more exact," He replied with a brilliant smile that lit up his whole face.

"Oh," I grinned. "That's so clever." Thrawn's ingenuity never ceased to amaze me.

"They can't drop the energy shield around the planet and run the risk that an asteroid might hit any part of the cityscape and they cannot allow space traffic near the planet in case of collisions. So now you see why we had to get the hell out of there when we did?"

I nodded, "So what is next? Do you know?"

Ged shrugged slightly, "My last report said the next move is to head to Bilbringi but we are on a communications black out so I have no idea how that's going."

"Why are we not joining them in the fight?"

"We are protecting the rear line." Ged replied. "Defending Bastion is important." He added although he didn't seem very happy about it.

"Why?"

"Because it's the Empire's greatest kept secret and it is vital it remains that way."

"So let me guess, the data you took from the mainframe on Coruscant will now be housed here?"

"One copy at any rate," Ged acknowledged.

I nodded and sipped my drink thoughtfully. "But what if Thrawn needs more ships?"

"Then we'll be called to the fray but according to my last briefing with him he has enough ships and he doesn't expect a large amount of resistance. The New Republic are already stretched thin it isn't likely they'll suddenly come up with a new found fleet to add to what they already have. They are already beaten. They just don't know it yet is all."

I didn't say anything to this because it seemed to me that the rebels had been beaten at every turn for the last ten years or more and still they had managed to claim victory against all odds. Those small odds worried me but I kept my fears to myself.

"So when we reach Bastion, then what?"



"Then the really difficult part begins, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" I asked.

"We wait and there is nothing harder than that."

"My favourite thing, hurry up and wait." I sat back against my chair and toyed with my cup.

"It's the mantra of the navy fly boy," Ged said with a grin.

"Well at least I can keep busy in the pit." I replied with a slight shrug.

He leaned back and regarded me with an expression I couldn't quite read, "You could return to Nirauan if you wanted to, if it's too dull around here."

I shook my head, "There's nothing to do there but sit and brood. Even Syal isn't there right now and Thrawn must have had a reason for wanting me here. While I don't always like it, he usually knows what he is doing and when he wants me safe there's usually a good reason for it. He usually has a plan set in place. He wanted me here with you not on the base and not with him," I sighed. "So here I am."

"Well I, for one, am glad of your company," he said truthfully.

I looked at him and then I gave him a smile, "Me too." and I meant it. There was a moment of comfortable silence and then we moved on to other less weighty topics. I was grateful for whatever wisdom or reason had made Thrawn send me back to the *Virulent*. I would have gone crazy on Nirauan and I would have driven everyone there up the wall.

We reached Bastion quietly. There was an exchange of supplies and information and a dinner with the Moff in charge which I politely declined to join. I knew the Moff by reputation and I didn't want anything to do with him at all. Ged did not push and I was grateful. Three days after we had arrived, word came that the *Virulent* was to head to a set of co-ordinates at the edge of the Unknown Regions to await further instructions. If Ged knew more he wasn't saying and I didn't ask.

The journey out to the meeting point at the edge of the Unknown Regions was fraught with tension. Rumours had started flying around the ship that Coruscant had fallen and Thrawn had reclaimed the core world in the Empire's name, other rumours whispered that he had defeated the New Republic's fleet near Bilbringi but nothing had been confirmed. When I was able to get some time with Ged I asked him if any of it was true but he just shook his head.

"The orders were short and to the point. Rendezvous at the given co-ordinates and await further instructions. We've not heard a thing since and the entire holonet grid in this sector is out. Even if we wanted to learn more long range communications are down."

So we waited, the hours passed slowly turning into days which dragged by. Ged sensing the general mood of the ship ran surprise drills and spot inspections. He kept everyone so busy that they didn't have time to think let alone start yet more rumours. I stayed out of his way exhausting myself with work and sport so that I would sleep. Even then, rest didn't come easily. The nightmares which had left me alone returned with a vengeance and I found myself waking up screaming in terror and shaking with an inexplicable sorrow which left me sobbing for no reason at all. Strangely enough I could not recall what I had been dreaming about but I suspected they had to do with Thrawn and were brought on by stress. I was driven to distraction by the waiting. It made me waspish and snappy so I generally tried to stay out of the way of people. So, I worked in the pits repairing anything I was allowed to touch or I hid in the upper gantries of the ship's massive landing bays, it was amusing to observe the comings and goings on of pilots and mechanics alike. In an odd way it reminded me of home.

I was under a skiff, trying to sort out its faulty repulsor when the news came that the *Chimaera* had just jumped out of hyperspace and was on its way to meet us. I scrambled to find Ged.

"Is it true?" I asked after eventually tracking him down in one of the smaller war rooms.

He nodded not looking up from the data-pad he was studying. "I don't know any more yet, but their ETA is a couple of hours"

"Wow." I had not been expecting that. I had expected to hear days not hours.

"They came out of hyperspace a lot closer than expected." He looked up at me and then he grinned, "You have time to go get cleaned up which you really should do because you have grease on your nose and you smell like a pit monkey."

I wiped at the offending grease spot in annoyance and surreptitiously sniffed near my armpit, wrinkling my nose in disgust. He was right I smelled bad.

Ged chuckled, "See? I think more girl less mechanic is in order." I scowled at him but he was right, I probably looked like a refugee off a garbage transport. "Go, I'll send someone for you as soon as they arrive." He shooed me out of the ready room. He had long given up trying to reach me by comm because I usually had it turned off or I'd forgotten it.

I returned to my quarters and ran a bath. It was a wonderful luxury to be able to soak in a tub full of hot bubbly water and I was deeply grateful that my quarters had a bathtub. I was excited and nervous and tired all at the same time. Thrawn could still make me quiver like a silly teenager and I marvelled at the sandjiggers which wriggled in my belly as I stepped into the almost too hot water.

I lingered in the water until it turned cool then I got out and dressed in something long, sleeveless and pretty but not too special. I did my hair up with the beautiful Zenji sticks, his first ever gift to me, added one of my favourite ma'arilite pendants and then sat restlessly waiting to hear from Ged but I didn't need to be told when Thrawn's ship had arrived because I got a perfect view of her as she slid into formation above the *Virulent*. It was almost as if he had known I would be watching for him and had approached the Ged's ship this way to make sure I saw him return to me safe and sound. I gazed in awe at the *Chimaera*. She was beautiful.

Much to my surprise my heart thumped painfully in my chest setting me abuzz with anticipation. I hoped that we would be able to have even a small amount of time alone with each other and I hoped that he would be happy to see me. While the last time I had been with him had been sweet, this past year had seem him shift moods, becoming distant and strange with me, almost as if he had two different personalities, mercurial and unpredictable. He had blamed it on the stress of running this campaign but I blamed part of it on myself. For a second, my thoughts went to the child we had lost, absently I touched my belly but then I shook the negative thoughts from my head. After all we had been through he had proven again and again that he cared deeply for me. Whatever doubts or worries I had they needed to be pushed away. In the end I was just grateful that he had returned safely.

I looked forward to his news, hoping that we would finally get to hear about how the campaign was going but as I made my through the ship rumours where whispered that Coruscant was not the great victory it was supposed to be. I ignored them, there had been no confirmation and we were still running on a communications black out. I had wanted to press people for more news but I was certain that if anything had gone wrong Ged would have let me know, so I waited which wasn't easy.

I knew it would take a while before all the formalities were sorted out and that bugging Ged would only annoy him so instead I made my way to the secondary

landing bay and sat in my favourite spot up in the gantry to watch the comings and goings. When Thrawn arrived on board the *Virulent* it was here where his shuttle would land. It was here I could lose myself in thought without driving myself frantic with the entire constant 'what ifs' that ran through my head. I was at home with the sound of engines and the smell of fuel fumes in the air. It was a comfort and it always had been.

The upper gantry perch was my second home and Ged knew this so the crewman he had sent to fetch me found me without a problem. I didn't need to be told twice to go with the young man and he was hard put to keep up with me as I all but flew to Ged's ready room. I tried to calm down a little. It was unseemly to feel and act like the skittish young girl I had been when Thrawn and I had first met. We had known each other far too long and far too well but still my heart fluttered and it made me smile.

I allowed for a moment of giddy joy and then fought to calm down a little. I didn't think that Ged needed to see me act like a love sick bantha but the anticipation of seeing Thrawn again was overwhelming. I marvelled at the sensation and then swallowed it back. While I was certain Thrawn would be amused with my jitters the rest of the people who would probably be in the room did not have to witness this side of me.

"You can go in now Miss Gabriel." The young officer said.

I grinned, "Thanks!" I said and I walked into the ready room. I expected to see Thrawn and most likely Captain Pellaeon but I was surprised to see only Ged.

"Wow, there's a real person under all that grease! You clean up nice," He said with a slight smile, "However, it seems that any meetings are to be held on board the *Chimaera*. Apparently the *Virulent* is not secure enough any longer."

I smoothed my hands on my dress trying to mask my disappointment. "You could have told me this via comm, you know. I had it with me." I assumed this meant I wasn't going with him.

He smiled and shrugged, "I could have but as they wish you to accompany me I figured this was just as easy. It was requested that we use your ship. It is only the two of us so I have no objection although it's highly irregular. Whatever is going on is very hush hush."

I rolled my eyes, "This is so typical. Thrawn's probably planning on sending me to Nirauan or somewhere else which is why he's insisting on my ship. Why does everything with that man have to be cloaked in secrecy?"

"When you get an answer can you pass it along to me?" He asked as we left the ready room and made our way down to the landing bay to my ship.

"For a small fee, I'll think about it," I grinned.

I started up the ship's engines while Ged cleared us through the *Virulent's* traffic control and then contacted the *Chimaera* to let her know we were on our way. It was a short trip and the *Chimaera's* people were ready for us when we arrived. I landed my ship as daintily as I could, showing off, and Ged just shook his head at me. I gave him a smug smile.

"You are incorrigible Merly," Ged said getting up and brushing imaginary lint off his uniform.

"And you wouldn't have it any other way," I retorted back.

"Probably not," he said as he waited for me to open the ship so we could leave.

I followed him down the ramp from the ship and smirked at the fuss the men waiting for him made. There was a lot of saluting and some curious glances at me before we were escorted swiftly and silently to what I assumed wrongly would be Thrawn's ready room.

"Captain Pellaeon is waiting inside for you Sir, Ma'am." The pinched faced young man said as he opened the door.

"Thank you crewman," Ged said and there was some more saluting. As soon as we walked into the small but comfortable room I knew instantly that this was not Thrawn's. I looked around expecting him to be there but instead there was only Captain Gilad Pellaeon.

I remembered how kind and warm he had been to me at that disastrous dinner where Ged had pushed and Thrawn had not taken too kindly to it and found it funny how far away that all seemed now. I looked at Pellaeon and smiled as though I were seeing an old friend again but he didn't return the smile, instead there was a sadness in his eyes that I had not noticed the last time we had met and suddenly I felt a chill run down my spine.

"Admiral Larsen, it is a privilege to meet you again." The Captain saluted Ged smartly and I rolled my eyes as Ged saluted him back. All this military formality was getting on my nerves. "And you as well Miss Gabriel, it is lovely to see you again," he said, and then he paused for just a second before continuing with, "I just wish it were under better circumstances. Please, I think perhaps you had both better sit down."

Ged ignored his suggestion and remained standing so I did the same. I looked from one face to the other trying to decipher what wasn't being said.

"Where is the Grand Admiral?" Ged asked, breaking the terrible silence.

I watched as he stared at Captain Pellaeon who shook his head almost imperceptibly. My heart started to pound in my ears and my mouth was suddenly dry. Something was terribly wrong.

"Captain?" Ged Pressed.

Pellaeon drew a deep breath, looked at both Ged and me and then said bluntly, "I regret to inform you both that Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead."

White noise.

There was white noise in my head.

There was only white noise all around me.

The room spun violently and I lost my sense of balance. Ged moved quickly, his hand warm around my waist, anchoring me to his side as gravity twisted bringing the floor up to meet with me with a sickening blur.

"Okay, you're okay," He spoke quietly and gently as he eased me backwards to sit on the small couch near the wall. He put his hand on the back of my neck and guided my head down between my knees. "Breathe deeply and push back against my hand."

I did as he instructed. When I no longer felt as though I would pass out I moved his hand off my neck but I gripped his fingers tightly. He looked at me for a moment then he let go of my hand and turned around.

"What happened?" Ged, suddenly all business, asked Captain Pellaeon.

"It was Rukh." Pellaeon replied, "He stabbed the Grand Admiral with his knife, through the back of his command chair. The blade punctured the heart. The Grand Admiral was dead in seconds. There was nothing we could have done."

I shook my head slowly. I heard his words and I watched his lips move but nothing he was saying made any sense. I had seen what he was describing in my dreams but I couldn't grasp the reality of it at all. "No," I said quietly because saying this word would undo what I had just been told.

Ged looked at me, touched my hand to still my voice and then turned back to Pellaeon, "Captain, when I ask what happened I am requesting a full report not an obituary or a litany of excuses." He ordered coldly. "Where is the rest of the fleet? What the hell went wrong?"

"Yes sir, of course." Pellaeon nodded, collecting his thoughts, "At the Grand Admiral's command we arrived at Bilbringi to set a trap for the enemy. Thrawn had instructed the Interdictor Cruisers and Interdictor Star Destroyers to activate their gravity well projectors in anticipation of their arrival. As he predicted the New Republic assault fleet jumped out of hyperspace outside the system perimeter. Once he saw this, he had the Interdictor Cruisers *Constrainer* and *Sentinel*, who were stationed the farthest from the main fleet to prevent anyone from escaping the trap to return to the demarcation line, where they would be protected. Then, the Grand Admiral gave the word and we engaged the enemy."

"Go on." Ged ordered.

"We had them sir, we had them hemmed in and we were winning the battle but suddenly an entirely new fleet of ships jumped in and began an offensive against us."

"A new fleet? Who were they?" Ged asked.

"I believe they refer to themselves as the Smuggler Alliance, sir."

Ged nodded and Captain Pellaeon continued.

"They turned the tide, managed to overwhelm and breach the defensive line. I thought we should retreat but the Grand Admiral assured me that the battle was far from over. Perhaps he might have been right, sir, but we'll never know because he was murdered before he could give any further orders, just as I received word that the cloning facility on Wayland was also being attacked." He swallowed, "That alien, Rukh, struck the back of my neck before he stabbed the Grand Admiral; I was incapacitated, unable to do anything to stop him." The Captain paused to catch his breath. He shook his head in denial, "It was chaos, complete and utter chaos, so I did the only thing I could think of to keep as many of our ships from being destroyed as possible. I ordered a tactical retreat and we jumped to a secure location. We locked down the bridge and I've tried to keep the news of his death contained but it's a difficult secret to lock down, word will get out that he's gone and I'm afraid I don't know what to do about it."

He stopped speaking and the sudden silence in the room pushed at me, taking the place of the white noise in my head. I looked up at both men who were staring at each other in an almost hostile manner. "How...why?" I struggled with my words. I couldn't think straight.

Ged turned to look at me as if suddenly remembering that I was also in the room and the hardness around his demeanour fell away from him like rain off a stone. "Oh Merlyn," He murmured and sat beside me. "I am so sorry."

His words hit me like a sharp backhand to the face and I reeled inwardly from their impact, shaking my head I just kept saying, "This is not...it's not possible."

Captain Pellaeon looked at me, "I assure you, Miss Gabriel, it is. Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead. He was stabbed through the heart from behind by his bodyguard, Rukh. I saw it with my own eyes. There was nothing I could do; there was nothing anyone could do. It was over so fast. He is dead and I am so very sorry."

His words made me angry, "Shut up!" I hissed through clenched teeth. "Just shut up!" I could feel the force shift around me as my emotions began to spin out of control.

"Shhhh, Merly," Ged said gently and it was enough to bring me back from the brink, the touch of his hand on my shoulder grounded me.

"Why?" I demanded again, "Why would Rukh do this? He swore to protect Thrawn not murder him!" I could not wrap my head around what I had just been told. I had trained with Rukh, learned to even like him in spite of his fierce warrior

nature. I could not imagine what would make the Noghri turn against the man he had sworn to give his life to keep from harm. "Thrawn trusted Rukh!" I cried.

Pellaeon shook his head. "We don't know yet. The Noghri was killed before we could get any immediate answers."

"Rukh is dead too?" I asked in utter disbelief. Tears blurred my vision and coursed down my face. I didn't know how to react. I didn't know what to do. I had never imagined for one moment that it would be Thrawn's trusted body guard who would kill him. I had not seen this coming. My head swam, I couldn't catch my breath and my stomach rebelled. I clapped my hand over my mouth and tried to recall how to breathe but that wasn't working suddenly I needed to vomit.

"Fresher?" I heard Ged ask urgently and then he all but carried me to it just in time. I made it to the toilet where I violently threw up the contents of my stomach which thankfully wasn't much. I knelt there, trembling, trying to remember what my lungs were for while Ged poured me a glass of water.

"Here," he said placing it in my hand as he crouched down at my side. "Drink," He ordered, "slowly."

I did as he instructed, rinsing out my mouth a couple of times before drinking the rest. When I was sure that I wasn't going to vomit again I let him help me up. I know he wanted to comfort me, to hold me but I stepped back from him. I didn't want his kindness or his pity. These things would break me and make me even more useless than I already was. Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, I washed my hands and face in the small sink. He wordlessly handed me a towel which I used then handed back. He tossed it on the counter and watched me without a word. I braced myself against the sink fighting to keep from falling apart, my knuckles turning white from the effort of it.

"Merlyn...?" There was a question in Ged's voice but he didn't finish it.

I turned around to look him in the eyes, shaking my head as I did so, "Don't," I said raising my hand in a gesture to keep him back, to keep him from getting to close to me, "Please."

There were a myriad of expressions that flashed across his face, but the one that cut me to the core was compassion. He nodded and swallowed down whatever words he wanted to say and stayed where he was letting me have my space. We stood like that a few moments until I couldn't stand the silence any more.

"This isn't real," I said with my heart aching. I was freezing cold and I couldn't stop trembling. "It just can't be real."

Ged didn't answer me instead he just wrapped an arm about my shoulder. When I didn't fight him this time he led me back to the couch. "You're in shock," he said, "Sit."

I kept waiting for someone to tell me this was a sick, cruel joke but all Ged did was to ask if the Captain had anything to drink that was stronger than water.

"Brandy." Captain Pellaeon said and he poured a glass from the small bottle he had procured.

"This will help a little," Ged offered me the glass.

I gulped the drink down but it didn't make me feel any better. I set the glass down on the table shaking my head when a refill was offered. Captain Pellaeon paced the room, he was uncomfortable and also mourning the loss of his mentor and friend but he didn't know what to do with his own grief let alone mine.

"There are instructions, he left ... well he was prepared. You know the Grand Admiral always ready for any contingency."

I looked up at him, frowning, "Instructions?" I asked dumbly.

The Captain stopped pacing and looked at me directly, "Yes Miss Gabriel, for you, which is why you are here."

"What instructions?" Ged asked.

I laughed and cried at the very same time as I looked from one man to the other. I felt as though I had suddenly been transported into a mad house. "He left instructions? He died and left instructions?" I sounded hysterical.

"Yes, very precise orders in which he made it clear that you and only you are to return his body to his home world." Pellaeon placed a large sealed courier pouch on the table in front of me. I just stared at it. I didn't want to touch it. I didn't want to see what memories it held. Ged, understanding this, picked it up for me. "It was his last request." The Captain said, "There was a file; it was activated after his death stating that this was to be given to you."

"He what?" I whispered, wiping away the tears that would not stop rolling down my cheeks. "Give this to me?" I asked stupidly. I stared blankly at the Captain. His mouth was moving but all I heard were sounds I couldn't decipher.

I felt as though someone had eviscerated me. The news of Thrawn's murder left me empty and breathless in the worst possible way and I shuddered under its weight. Looking up at Ged and then back to the Captain I despised the pity I saw in their faces. I knew that I was not the only one reeling from this terrible loss but how could either of them understand mine?

Captain Pellaeon watched me for a moment, reading my face and then he said more gently, "I am so sorry to bring you this terrible news. He was such a private man, he rarely spoke of anything personal but I do know that he cared for you."

I blinked at that statement in surprise. "Cared for me?" I asked, "He cared for me?" My jaw clenched as I gritted my teeth as hard as I could. Suddenly, amidst the terrible shock and emptiness, I knew an anger so ferocious it threatened to choke me. "Cared for me?" I asked for a third time shaking my head in utter disbelief. "If he had cared for me he wouldn't be dead." I growled.

"I don't think he could have known...." Captain Pellaeon started to say but I didn't let him finish.

"No!" I snarled through tightly clenched teeth, "No, he did know, he did!" I shut my eyes tightly, fighting it because part of me wanted to simply let this fury go, to give in to its madness and destroy everything around me. I wanted to tear the world apart. It was a rage unlike anything I had ever experienced before and it was terrifying.

Ged crouched down in front of me, "Merlyn look at me." He spoke gently.

I shook my head unable to meet his eyes. He used gentle fingertips to raise my chin, bringing my focus to his face. "Look. At. Me." He commanded as he took my hands in his. His touch was warm and I could feel it as he drew the fury out of me. His eyes met mine, holding my gaze. His handsome features were made hard by the new weight upon his own shoulders and I had an overwhelming desire to reach out and offer some comfort but instead I stayed very still on the couch. He was worried, worried for me and worried for the Empire.

I shook my head and took a deep breath, "I'm okay now," I said even though it was very far from true. "I'll be okay." He needed to hear this from me even though we both knew it was a lie.

He nodded, accepting my answer with a squeeze of his fingers. I pulled my hand from his, wiped the tears off my face angrily and then I stood up. Ged mirrored this action and stepped back from me, waiting.

"I want to see him," Both men just looked at me as though I had just spoken in a foreign language and no one moved so I repeated my request.

"I hardly think..." Captain Pelleaon started to say clearly uncomfortable but I cut him off.

"Where is he? I want to see him now, right now!" I snapped with as much command in my voice as I could muster.

The Captain looked to Ged who nodded slightly. I might have been insulted but I understood. Ged was Pelleaon's superior officer so he had the final say in this matter, not me.

"As you wish," he said quietly after a moment's hesitation, "His body is being held in cold stasis under lock and guard. I'll take you both there myself."

I knew that the word had spread and as we left the ready room all eyes turned to watch us. Curiosity mingled with uncertainty was starting to spread around the ship like sand in a storm. I walked stoically, never glancing left or right. I dared not look anyone in the eye; I did not want to know their sorrow because my own was so great I had no room left for more. I needed strength not kindness or sympathy because those things would break me into a thousand shattered pieces. Only hardness would get me through the next moments. After that it was anyone's guess.

The way to the ship's med-lab was too long and we travelled there in heavy silence. There were no words to be said and the grief was too great. The morgue was cold, colder than I had expected and I was wearing a light dress with no sleeves. I shivered as we entered the sterile looking room faltering amidst the scents of cleansers and disinfectant as well as the remnants of other chemicals I couldn't identify that were strong enough to make the gorge rise in my throat

Once Captain Pelleaon had made the request to view the body, the doctor, pale faced and tired looking, unlocked the doors and led us through to the small, secure cold room where Thrawn had been placed. I watched as he punched in the code for the magnetic seal and we walked in shivering as a blast of almost icy air caressed my skin. The doctor keyed in another security code and the lid to the cold-stasis body box opened. I swayed and Ged's hands steadied me. I was surprised at how warm they were against the bare skin of my arms.

"You don't have to do this," He told me quietly but he was wrong, I did.

The doctor stepped back allowing me to approach the cold-stasis box alone. Completely naked, Thrawn lay as though asleep. His eyes were closed and his face had a slack expression that I had never seen before, as though someone had stolen all his personality away and left an empty shell behind. His hands had been folded over his abdomen below the fatal knife wound which seemed far too tiny to have caused his death.

Rukh had been a trained killer. He had known exactly where to strike, driving his long knife directly through Thrawn's command chair right into his heart from behind, stabbing Thrawn in the back quite literally. There was no blood because everything had been cleaned and if it hadn't been for the small wound on his chest where the knife tip had pierced through I wouldn't have believed he was dead at all. I covered my mouth with both hands and forced my grief down. Then because I had to, I reached out to his body and ran my fingers through his beautiful blue black hair. It was still silky and soft.

"Merlyn..." someone spoke my name but I ignored them.

I stroked Thrawn's face, following his jaw line with my finger tips. His skin, an even paler shade of blue than usual, was ice cold. A sob burned my throat but I did not make a sound as I cried. It was as though I were in a different world. When I blinked tears splashed onto his body, tiny sparkles of warm salty liquid on his cold blue skin. I picked up the hand nearest to me and traced the length of his fingers with my own.



His hands, which had once been so warm and gentle, which had known and caressed my whole body, bringing me to life in a way I could never have possibly imagined were cold and limp. I traced over the palm of his hand that I held and stroked up his arm stopping at the crease of his elbow. I laid the arm back down and caressed the length of the other one feeling the subtleties of his skin. Once upon a time these arms had held me tightly, comforted, and cradled me. Never again. I took up his hand again, as if to be certain of his death, and for a moment I stood holding it against my cheek, trying to warm it while my tears ran over his lifeless fingers. I shut my eyes tightly, squeezing out the overwhelming sense of loss that engulfed my soul. This wasn't fair, it just wasn't fair.

It was Ged who moved first, touching my shoulder but I shrugged him off. I got the message that it was time to let go. I set Thrawn's hand back to its resting place and then with a deep breath I leaned over the edge of the cold-stasis coffin and I laid one last kiss on Thrawn's icy lips, tasting the salt from my own tears.

"Ariathe'ka Ia." I whispered in Cheunh.

It was the very first time, the only time, I had ever told him that I loved him and now it would also be the last. In all the years we had known each other, been with each other, laid with each other we had never once said these words out loud. I thought I had understood our reasons for this but now I wondered why.

"Merlyn, we need to go now," Ged said softly in my ear, "The cold-stasis chamber must be re-sealed," And before I could answer him he pulled me back letting the doctor move back into to reseal the chamber and lock the doors.

I stared at Thrawn's body through the clear dura-glass until Ged put his hands about my shoulders and led me away.

"Wait," I said as I pulled away from Ged's grip. "Where are his things? His clothes?" I asked.

"Why?" Ged asked puzzled.

"Where are his things? What he was wearing?" I repeated. "Please?"

"Doctor Evram?" Ged asked knowing there would be no peace with me until I had an answer.

"As per the Grand Admiral's last request they were destroyed," The doctor replied.

"Destroyed? Why?" Surprised, I blurted my questions angrily.

"His instructions said it was in accordance with his people's customs. All that he was wearing at the time of his death was to be incinerated, his body was to be cleansed and then sealed. The only exception to this was that if you requested to see his body you would be allowed to do so." Captain Pelleaon said softly from behind me.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Everything he was wearing? Everything?" I asked not caring that it came out sounding more like an accusation.

The doctor didn't like me very much and I wasn't making it easy for him. "I assure you Miss that everything was done according to the Grand Admiral's wishes. Everything he was wearing at the time of his death was removed from his corpse and destroyed. His body was examined to determine the cause of death, cleaned and laid to rest in the stasis chamber exactly as he requested be done in the event of his death. We run a tight ship and nothing was done without the Admiral's request and Captain Pelleaon's authorisation, now do you mind telling me who you are and what this is all about?"

I opened my mouth to speak, to say something indiscrete and stupid but Ged stepped in front of me and pulled rank. "That will be all Doctor. I am sure that everything was done according to regulation. Thank you." He manoeuvred me

towards the door, signalling Captain Pellaeon to come with us. "Captain I think Miss Gabriel could use some quiet, could you please take us to the Grand Admiral's quarters?"

"His quarters Sir?"

Ged nodded, "If you would, Captain," he said in such a way that Captain Pellaeon understood it was not a request but an order.

"Of course sir, it's this way." He nodded and began to walk in the direction of the turbo lifts. "When the Grand Admiral came on board he had the luxury entertainment suite converted for his personal use. It was his secondary command room. He meditated there and it was where he would display holos of art so that he could study it."

"He did love art," I said softly to no one in particular.

"He used to tell me that if you understood a species' art you understood the species." Captain Pellaeon replied to me.

"I know, he has..," I corrected myself, "... had an amazing art collection. It used to be in the flat on Coruscant but he moved it," and my mind flashed back to the exquisite ma'arilite stone carving he used to have there. "Some pieces were on Nirauan and now I guess the rest ended up here." I was babbling now but no one seemed to mind.

"Oh he only had one real piece that was not in hologram form. I wasn't aware he had an entire collection." The Captain replied. "Right now his command center is in command lock-down because of the nature of information stored in the data banks, I'm sorry Miss Gabriel but you cannot have access to that however right next to it is his personal living space."

I nodded, "I understand."

He didn't say anything else as he unlocked the door to what had been Thrawn's private sanctuary and let us in just as him comm beeped, "I'm afraid I am needed on the bridge, there is too much to do and we have had little time to deal with this crisis," he said, "Admiral? I would be grateful for any assistance you might care to provide."

Ged looked at me. "I need to attend to this, do you mind if I leave you here on your own?" He asked as he glanced around and set the courier's pack that he still carried down on the nearest table.

"Go, I'm fine," I said, repeating the earlier lie but the numbness that had spread through my body made it an easy lie to tell. "They destroyed his things." I added to no one in particular.

"Why are you so upset about that?" Ged asked in a hushed voice.

I just shook my head. "It doesn't matter. He's gone, so now it doesn't matter anymore." I shook my head. Ged was puzzled but he didn't press.

"I will have a crewman stationed outside if you need anything." Captain Pellaeon said, "All you have to do is ask."

"Thank you Captain, you're very kind."

He nodded and then he paused, weighing his next words with great care. "I don't mean to be forward but you were in a serious relationship with the Grand Admiral weren't you, I mean the two of you had something remarkable?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

The Captain watched my face for a moment and then he said, "The Grand Admiral was an incredibly private man but he had a holo-capture of you which he kept on his desk. It's an exquisite image. He caught me staring at it one day, sometime after the dinner we all attended on board of the *Virulent*, and told me it had been taken at your first Grand Ball on Coruscant. I asked him if you and he were close, because I recalled how familiar, how at ease you both seemed to be with each

other at that dinner but did not want to presume anything. I suspected there was much more to your relationship than met the eye but it isn't my way to ask about his personal life. I wasn't certain he would answer me but he did." Pellaeon paused and the room became very still. Lost in memory he spoke softly, "Thrawn picked up the holo capture and looked at it then he said to me, '*She is the most extraordinary creature in the entire galaxy and she graces me with her presence, reminding me that not everything is war or strategy and that sometimes even men, such as myself, may know what it means to be touched by such grace in spite of our faults.*'"

I looked up at the Captain who had the beginnings of tears in his eyes and I had to look away for fear of losing the little amount of self control I had on my own emotions. My fingernails dug into my palms, the pain helped to steady me. He took a moment to collect himself and then continued.

"He was the most brilliant tactician and strategist I have ever had the fortune to know. I watched him forge such bonds with the men and woman under his command that not one of them would hesitate to give their lives for him but until that moment I never saw the man beneath the uniform or the rank. That moment was a gift, Miss Gabriel, and I have you to thank for it." His voice wavered for a second and he breathed deeply to steady himself. "I don't claim to understand the exact nature of the relationship between the two of you but I do know this, he cared deeply for you. I don't have to be a genius to know that you felt the same for him. I am sorry, truly, truly sorry for your loss."

All I could do was nod, covering my mouth with my hand because I didn't want to fall apart, not here, not now. I just looked at Ged and hoped he understood.

"Captain, I think it's time you showed me to the bridge," he said.

"Of course Admiral," Captain Pellaeon replied.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Ged told me.

I just nodded and without further conversation the two men left me alone so that they could attend to the business at hand. The silence left in their wake was heartbreaking.

Thrawn's living quarters on board the *Chimaera* were surprisingly sparse. I walked about the small suite of rooms aimlessly, careful not to touch anything at first. The place was well kept and very tidy, nothing was out of place. I stared at the rooms and took note of the lack of decoration, there might have been art here once but nothing was here now. He had worked here, and slept here but he had not lived here. Gingerly I opened some of the drawers in the bedroom but they were mostly empty aside from the basic items of clothing that were neatly folded. Nothing I touched spoke to me.

On the desk in the small ready room sat a holo-image in a plain frame. I guessed it was the one that the Captain had spoken about. I looked at it not knowing who that girl was anymore. She seemed impossibly young and far too happy to be me and slowly the shock which had stripped away my ability to feel receded leaving unbelievable grief in its wake.

I had known death my whole life. Each loss had brought with it a pain so great I had not believed I could ever find my way back from it and yet I had. I had nearly lost my sanity when I had miscarried but even that nightmare had passed into a strange kind of strength I never knew existed. Each death had been a shock to my system yet I had somehow been able to work through the darkness but not this one, not this time.

This one I should have been prepared for and this made it all the more terrible. From the very first waking vision at the Nona Shyr gallery until this moment I had subconsciously known this day would come and yet I had not, and could not

believe it would ever happen. I had been warned over and over and still I had dared to hope. Now I had to cope not only with the fact that Thrawn had been murdered by his trusted bodyguard but also the loss of all hope that he had somehow found a way to prevent it all from happening and I didn't know how.

Alone and not knowing what else to do I made my way to the small couch and sat down, hugging my knees close to my chest. I tried to bring Thrawn's face to mind but all I could picture was him lying in the cold stasis box. The ache in my gut grew so unbearable I thought it would choke me to death until finally I broke. Deep ugly sounds wrenched from my throat and I was powerless to stop it. I could not wrap my mind around a galaxy without him and it broke me completely.

I cried so hard it almost made me ill. I was grateful in this moment to be alone and when, eventually exhaustion took over from grief, I fell into a dreamless sleep until Ged woke me gently.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled as I sat up slowly, "I must have dozed off. How long have you been gone?"

"About six maybe seven hours," he said. He looked shattered.

I sat up feeling like something a bantha had dragged in. I was stiff and achy from sleeping in a strange position. My eyes were swollen, sticky and sore from crying, my throat was raw and I was quite sure something had died in my mouth. He had a cup of tea in his hand, when he offered it to me I took it and sipped the warm, sweet liquid gratefully.

"I'm sorry, things took a lot longer than I thought they would but you slept, that's good," he said, "I had them bring you something to eat as well." He gestured to the tray on the table in front of me, beside it sat the unopened courier packet from Thrawn.

"Thank you." I nodded knowing I wouldn't touch the food. I wasn't hungry. "How are you holding up?" I asked as he sat down beside me.

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Honestly? I'm exhausted, angry and frustrated," He replied after a moment. "We lost one of the greatest military leaders this galaxy has ever seen and we lost one of the single most important battles ever fought. Now we have to decide what to do about it. It won't be easy."

"Was he wrong to withdraw?" I asked. "The Captain, was he wrong?"

Ged shook his head slightly. "No. Under the circumstances he did the very best thing he could do and he saved a lot of lives as well as ships. Thrawn always knew when to withdraw and it seems he taught his protégé well."

"What happens now?"

"Now you and I will have some food and drink some tea and then you will open that." He indicated the pouch on the table. "I know you don't want to but you have to. That's why I felt it would be better for you to have some quiet space. No one will come in here."

I stared at it for a long moment then put my cup down and picked the sealed pouch up. I braced myself for a barrage of memories but nothing happened. I put my thumb on the seal to open it and emptied the contents on the table, four small sealed packets and another envelope, this one smaller and made from fine paper tumbled out.

I picked up the envelope as it had my name on it also expecting to see the memories it contained but again nothing happened and then I understood that when he had put this package together Thrawn must have worn gloves. He had known what would happen to him and he had known about my gift so he had protected me as best he could. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

I opened the letter and sat back to read it but there wasn't that much to read. His last instructions were clear and concise. When I was done I handed it to Ged so that he could read it as well. Thrawn had written in basic.

I looked at the four slender packets, all secure-sealed, identified and encoded for the person they had been designated for. I picked up the one for Ged and handed it to him. One was for me, one for Navaari and the fourth one was to be delivered to a member of the Chiss Aristocra named Chaf'orm'bintrano with whom I was to meet with when I returned Thrawn's body to his home world of Csilla.

"I can't allow this," Ged said as he set the letter and the data-disk case down on the table.

"You don't get a choice in the matter," I told him wearily.

"It's dangerous and stupid to travel right now," He replied angrily.

"Thrawn's instructions are very clear. Timing is everything to the Chiss and I'm the person he has given this task to, no one else may interfere. Not even you." I was amazed at how detached I sounded.

"I won't let you." He was fierce and I understood he was just being protective.

I looked up into his face. "You have to," I said gently, "I need to honour his last request and you have work to do here. He's given you the fleet, now you need to decide what to do with it."

Ged sat back hard against the couch and ran his fingers through his hair. "Oh, I didn't sign up for this," he said with a short bark of a laugh. He reached out to pick up the packet marked for his eyes only, turning it over and over with his fingers. "All I ever wanted to be was a pilot." It was a half truth but I let it slide.

"You mean you don't want to be supreme warlord of the Empire?" I asked with a small, tight smile. It wasn't a job I would ever have wanted and I understood Ged's reticence to take on the mantle himself, though I thought he would probably be good at it. "You could always give the job to Captain Pellaeon and go back to being Ged the super spy in charge of the Imperial Order."

He looked at me for a second and then he leaned over and kissed my cheek, "You know, you're brilliant. Who better to lead the fleet right now than Gilad Pellaeon, Thrawn's protégé? I can promote myself to Grand Admiral and then do the same for him. It's not as if anyone is left to argue about this is it?"

I just shook my head and fought the immense lump of sadness that had suddenly welled up to the surface. "No, not anymore," I said and finished drinking my tea. I set the cup down and looked around me, then picked up the pouch and stuffed the remaining packets in it along the Thrawn's letter. Ged never took his eyes off me and I knew what he was thinking.

"Don't say it."

His jaw clenched. "You should return to the *Virulent* and rest, properly. Make the decisions on a clear head."

"There is no decision to make; it's already been made for me. Now I have to prepare for the journey to Csilla. I need the cold stasis chamber taken to my ship. Do you think you can arrange that? I'm not up to arguing with anyone or explaining the intricacies of Chiss mourning rituals and ceremonies plus you outrank them all."

"Right now?" He asked. "Merlyn it's..."

I cut him off, "I have a deadline to meet. The Chiss have a strict burial code and if I am to comply with that I need to leave as soon as possible. Please don't argue with me on this because you won't win and I don't want to have to fight with you." I paused to get a grip on my grief. "Please Ged, just don't...", My voice wavered and I had stop and take a deep breath to get myself back under some sort of control.

"I'm sorry, Merly, I'm sorry. Just tell me what you need, I'll see to it. "

I nodded, pinch-faced and utterly bewildered at how calmly I was able to make the requests. "Do you think you can get the *Chimaera*'s crew to fuel my ship and set me up with food and supplies as well?"

"I'll arrange for everything including an escort." He answered.

"No escort." I told him firmly.

"I insist!"

I shook my head. "No. Trust me, you need all the pilots you've got and I am far safer travelling in my own ship alone than with a formation of TIEs at my side. Such an escort might be seen as an act of aggression and believe me when I tell you do not want a war against Thrawn's people. Please, you have to do this for me. You have to trust me and you have to let me go."

"Let you go...." He murmured and then swallowed hard. "How can I do that knowing you might be killed?"

"I don't know, you just do," I said quietly.

He shook his head and sighed, "This is against my better judgement so you had better return in one piece. Don't make me come after you just to tell you I told you so."

My resolve gave out and I couldn't answer him so I gave him a kiss on the cheek before laying my head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around me and when I broke down and cried he just held me more tightly without saying another word. We sat like that for a very long time.

Eventually I pulled away from him. "I had better get ready; I have a lot to prepare for and not much time," I said wiping the last of my tears from my face. "Once Thraw...once his body is on board my ship I have to head over to the *Virulent* to pack my things. I'll take you back over, if you like."

"Let me know when you're ready to go," he said, "I will have to brief my people on what has happened and then need to start making some plans for the future."

And because there really wasn't anything else to be said about it I nodded and with that we set into motion the last journey Thrawn would ever take; his journey home.

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The *Virulent*'s docking bay was cold and I didn't want to linger making sorrowful farewells. It was hard enough to go without the pain of saying farewell to one of the few friends I had left in the galaxy.

"You don't have to leave for good, Merly."

I gave him a look. "It won't be for good. I might have cleared out my quarters on board this ship but I still have a life of some sorts on Nirauan. You make it sound as though I'm dead too." I instantly regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth but he just shook his head.

"That's because I'm concerned for you," he said, "I don't like you going off all alone to do this thing. You shouldn't be alone."

"It's what he requested and I'm sure he had his reasons." I gestured vaguely towards the cargo hold of my ship and we both knew what was stored there. "I'll be fine. I'm not as fragile as you like to think I am." There was strange anger in my words and I didn't understand where it was coming from.

"That doesn't stop me from worrying," He took a step closer and brushed away a lock of stray hair which had fallen into my face. His gentle gesture undid the angry knot in my gut and tears welled up in my eyes. I nodded, feeling that awful sensation of loss rush through me like a freshly open wound, raw and full of pain.

I didn't like saying goodbye so instead I said, "Thank you. You're an extraordinary man and I am grateful to have you in my life." We stared at each other for a second too long then I looked away and the moment between us wavered and vanished.

"Once you do this thing, once you've completed this task then what?" Ged asked after taking a deep breath.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I really have no idea. First I just have to get through this. I can't think beyond that." I looked at him, "I'd like to say maybe I could go home but honestly I don't know what or where that is any longer." For such a long time now my home been with Thrawn and now that he was gone I wasn't sure where I belonged anymore.

Ged moved suddenly, cupping my face in his hands, "There will always be a place for you with me wherever I am no matter what, no matter where, no questions asked. Always. So when you have completed this task, delivered his body and passed on his secrets and have done whatever it is that you need to do then come back. Come back."

I didn't know how to answer that so I flung my arms around him and held onto him as tightly as I could hoping he would understand all the words I couldn't say to him. I didn't care what anyone looking at us might think. He kissed the top of my head making me all the more terrified of what was to come. I didn't know how I was going to do this task Thrawn had set out for me, I had no idea how I was going to face it on my own and just for a moment I seriously considered taking Ged up on his offer but that moment also passed. I was tired, scared and beyond sad and Ged was a light in the dark. I didn't want to let him go but in the end I did.

"Merly...", He started but I stopped him with a fingertip on his lips.

"Don't...don't say it. I know you want to wrap me up in a protective blanket but you can't. It's done. He's dead," I shook my head and blinked fresh tears from my eyes, "You have to let me go. I have to do this and you just have to let me."

He took a really deep breath and nodded, "It's against my better judgement," he said unhappily. "I hate him for making you do this."

"I know," I nodded. I understood because I also felt the same way.

"I'm here for you, whatever you need you only have to ask." He stroked my face gently.

"Thank you," I said again blinking tears out of my eyes. "Just promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Please, please stay alive."

He smiled ever so slightly, "That's my plan."

"It was Thrawn's plan as well and look at how that turned out. Stay alive Ged Larsen I mean it."

This time his smile was genuine, "I shall do the very best I can Merly I can't promise more than that."

I nodded.

He paused for a second, "I meant what I said, no matter what ship I am commanding you have a home on board it. You have pass codes from Vader use them and I will find you. No matter what, remember this!" Then suddenly there were no more words to say. We stared at each other just a little longer before I turned to go up the ramp into my ship without looking back. It was bad luck to look back and I had already had more than my fair share of it.

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The trip to Csilla was long and lonely. Time stretched out the way uncharted space did and it never seemed to end. I spent much of the journey in the cockpit, staring out into the whirling void while paying attention to Thrawn's last instructions which he had carefully laid out on the data-disk that had been in the packet for me. He explained in excruciating detail how I was to approach Chiss territory, what I should tell them and what I would most likely expect. I listened to his words over and over again with a dull sort of rage that ate its way through me. When he had told me again and again that he had taken care of things, that he had planned against the visions I had seen and had warned him about this was not what I had imagined and I was angry, so very, very angry. It was an unexpected emotion mixing into my grief making me almost ill.

When I wasn't gazing mindlessly out of the cockpit window, or sleeping fitfully I spent time in the cargo bay sitting on the floor leaning against the cold stasis box which held Thrawn's corpse. I had triple checked that the seal had not been reopened since my visit to the morgue. There could be no mistakes. Alone and beyond caring I often found myself talking to the body in the box and, when I wasn't holding angry, one sided conversations with the dead, I wept. The sense of loss was overwhelming and where I hadn't been able to cry for the death of my child it seemed I could not stop when it came to the death of my mate.

I had plenty of time to think about all the people I had loved and lost but none of their deaths compared to this. There were so many things I had wanted to say and should have said to this man which would now never be voiced, never be heard. Never in my life had I known so many regrets or so much unfinished business. Why was it we did not say what we felt to one another when we had the chance? Why was it we did not take more time to be with the ones we loved? Duty, honour, war what were these things compared to love?

Our lives, from the moment we had met, had been wound together like threads on a Dantassi blanket until I could not fathom a life without his presence in it. From that very first meeting on the balcony of the Imperial palace we had connected in a way that had been magical and terrifying. I had known even then that he was dangerous to me, that he could and probably would break my heart I had just not ever imagined he would do it in this way. I could not come to terms that he was dead even though I stared at his body for hours on end and I didn't know what to do with the knowledge that he really was gone. With no idea how to think or feel all I could do was cry. This was a sorrow that knew no end and by the time I finally came into Chiss space I was nothing more than a shell of a human being.

Csilla was well guarded and not at all easy to reach. Thrawn had left specific instructions on how to enter Chiss space, what to broadcast and where to send the proper signals when I came into contact with his people. I followed his instructions to the letter. I was met by Chiss Defence Forces and my ship was escorted to a landing pad in the capital city of Csaplara. That I had spoken to them in their native language had confused them, the news I brought with me had only seemed to make this worse. In the end I didn't really care. I wanted to carry out Thrawn's last wishes and then somehow try to salvage what was left of my life.

I did as I was instructed by the small defence task force that had been sent to escort me and marvelled at the sheer beauty of a world totally hidden by ice and snow. The Csilla sun gave off a cold light with little warmth and in turn bathed the planet with a pale bluish tint. Three moons, Arista, Cserce, and Scerac, orbited Csilla, each with their own legend. Thrawn had told their stories to me once in the quiet of



the bedroom we had shared on Coruscant, weaving their tales for me as he caressed the pale of my naked skin with his gentle fingertips. I could still hear his voice, warm and husky, in the aftermath of our love making. The memory was as painful as it was sweet.

I knew a great deal more about Thrawn's home world than most people. He had made certain of that through his stories and gifts of books containing legends and histories but none of these things had prepared me for actually being on the planet. The Chiss were a stoic race, bound up in formalities and traditions. Their strict non aggression policies were something Thrawn had disagreed with and it had gotten him exiled in the end, although he had hinted that this had been an outcome he had desired. Being exiled allowed him to work for Palpatine with no political repercussions from his own home world and I sometimes wondered if there were not people on his planet who also welcomed this.

The Chiss were governed by an oligarchy of extended Ruling Families. The actual seat of power was a building known as the House Palace, located in the city of Csaplur, and headed by leaders known as Aristocra who wore particular colours to indicate their clan and family loyalties. The system of clan colours was complex and intricate and I had not managed to memorise them all.

Their system of rule was democratic; day to day decisions were made by a democratically elected parliamentary body from each of the twenty-eight colonies. When things became more complicated they were channelled up through the parliament to a cabinet of appointed governors, and then to the ruling families, where a decision made by the parliament and or the cabinet could be approved for action. It took a while for things to get done on Csilla with each decision being carefully considered. The Chiss did not like their politics messy nor did they like to make mistakes. They were an exacting and careful people.

Each of the extended ruling families were responsible for a set of government affairs to manage and the house that Thrawn had been adopted into, House Nuruodo, was responsible for military policy and foreign affairs and was considered to be the second highest in their ranking system. They had an amazing, well trained military and in spite of the non aggressions rules which governed them, the Chiss were a force to be reckoned with but as long as you left them alone they would not attack first.

They were enigmatic and mysterious to the rest of the galaxy. No one even knew the Chiss origins although it was a popular belief that they had descended from a colony of humans lost thousands of years prior and Doctor Thracer had once told me there were enough genetic markers to indicate this might well have been the case. The planet had once been lush and warm although just like the stories that Tatooine had once held oceans I kind of found it hard to imagine.

Careful not to deviate from the instructions I was being given by the escort ships who had accompanied me as I set my ship down. The landing pad was on the surface of the planet but it didn't stay there. I watched with some fascination as the whole landing deck sank under the ground, into an enormous cavern like structure. I followed the instructions given to me and when I had shut down the engines and opened up the ship I was given leave to disembark.

I walked down the ship's gangway and was met by black uniformed, well armed military guards who did not say a word. From behind the armed guards came a tall elegantly dressed man, a little older than Thrawn and from his clothes I guessed he was a member of the eighth ruling family. I executed a bow and remained silent. Thrawn's lessons and discussions about his people and their formalities had not gone amiss.

The man did not smile but I sensed a small amount of surprise in him. Tired, gaunt and drawn looking, I was not what he had been expecting. He studied me for a few moments and then in a rich voice he spoke to me in Cheunh. "I am told you speak our language."

"I endeavour to do so but I hope you will forgive my errors." I replied. His accent was far stronger than Thrawn's and I suddenly became self conscious of my own.

He nodded but made no further comment on my language skills. "I am Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano. You will follow me now," he said.

I hesitated for just a second, looking back over my shoulder at my ship's entrance ramp which was wide open. He followed my gaze and answered my unasked question.

"I assure you no one will enter without your permission but leaving the entrance hatch open will signify you have nothing to hide." Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano said, "Please, if you will come."

I let him know I understood with a nod of my head and did as he had requested. None of this felt real. I was led down through a series of wide, open and well lit tunnels to a small but comfortable room. Two guards stationed themselves outside the door way and two more entered with us and took a place to stand behind the Aristocra. While I may not have been treated as an enemy, I was also not a friend.

He was graceful in his hand gesture as he motioned to one of the two comfortable chairs by a low ornate table. "Please sit. I understand that your journey here has been long and arduous, that you come under the most grievous of circumstances. I know that you must need to rest and refresh but we must first talk. May I offer you something to drink, tea perhaps?"

I sat as ladylike as I could and perched on the edge of the chair. "That would be very kind." I replied.

He took note of how tense I was but said nothing. I watched as he keyed a small comm device to make the request. We waited in a neutral silence until tea had been brought, served and I had taken a drink. It was sweet and soothing. I cradled the delicate cup in my cold hands grateful for its warmth.

The Aristocra nodded and spoke, "Shall we get down to business?"

I nodded and without further ado or fuss I told him everything that Thrawn's data disk had instructed me to tell him.

The Aristocra listened without interruption and when I was done he merely nodded and then said, "Do I have permission for my people to retrieve the cold stasis casket from your hold?"

"Yes," I said swallowing my sadness down hard, "Of course."

He nodded again and with a slight hand motion signified to the two guards behind me that they could go. His instructions to them were clear. *Go in, remove Thrawn's body and leave the rest of the ship untouched.* They would obey him without hesitation and only once they were gone did I feel a slight lift of the tension in the room. The guards were uncomfortable with my alien presence but the Aristocra, surprisingly, was not.

"Please, be at ease. No harm will come to you here," he said gently once more gesturing to the chair I very nearly wasn't sitting in. He waited patiently until I visibly relaxed and sat back into the comfort of the chair.

"More tea?" He asked, breaking the silence. I nodded and let him refill my cup. Once that was done he looked at me carefully as though I were a book or a work of art to be studied. I had seen Thrawn regard me in much the same way sometimes

and my heart ached sharply. I held his gaze for a moment then with a deep, deep sigh I looked away and still the Aristocra studied me.

"Do you fear me?" The Aristocra asked after an eternity.

It was not a question I had expected. I glanced up at him. "No, do I have cause to?"

"I have already assured you of your well being," he replied. "If you are unafraid of me then I can expect the truth when I ask you a question?"

I frowned a little, "The truth?"

"It would be appreciated," The Aristocra nodded.

"Do you *expect* me to lie to you?" I asked more than a little surprised.

"My experience with humans has been interesting with regards to their abilities to bend the truth to their advantage."

"Ah," I said quietly. "Then I shall endeavour to be honest."

"Did you know Mitth'raw'nuruodo well?"

I drew a deep breath, "Yes, probably better than most people," I replied carefully, "Although, he was not one to share himself easily."

For a moment the Aristocra regarded me, "You must have been close for him to teach you our language and customs."

He was digging for something specific but I wasn't sure what, "I had an aptitude for it and he felt it was a talent worth exploring," I said, "I think that he was ... happy to have someone to share a little of his private life with."

He nodded, "And what of your relationship?" He asked, again dancing around what he really wanted to ask me.

I sighed and swept imaginary lint from my dress. "Our relationship was...complicated." Now who was dancing around the topic I wondered.

He nodded slowly and studied me some more, trying to read underneath my words and when that didn't work he decided it was time to be more direct. "It is perhaps impolite of me to ask this but duty dictates I must, were you mate-bound to him?"

I wondered where this was going so I gave the standard line that Thrawn had used so often on me, "If you are asking if I was married to him then the answer is no, not in any official capacity." It was the truth. Thrawn may have bound himself to me under Dantassi law but he had left me free to do whatever I wanted and he had made certain to tell me this many, many times.

"I see," He replied with a satisfied nod. "Then you are not his wife in legal terms?"

"No, Aristocra, I am not," I said frankly. "I am not his bound mate or wife by Chiss laws or my own. Thrawn was quite insistent on that." I decided to leave any reference to the Dantassi out of it. "May I ask why this is relevant?"

"Especially as a non Chiss, had you been his legal wife, there would have been some difficult complications that I do not think you would have liked or have been prepared for." He did not elaborate and I didn't ask. "I am grateful it is an avenue we will not have to contend with and perhaps with this we shall let this particular matter lie." He added.

Once again I was left in awe at Thrawn's ability to plan many steps ahead. He had never made me his wife and although I had never asked or expected it, I had sometimes wondered why. All this time, he had known, had foreseen this as a possible path and he had prepared for it. A tiny part of me hated him for it.

"Does he not have any family here?" I asked wondering if I would get to meet anyone related to him.

Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano watched me steadily. "He had a brother who went missing in action many years ago and is presumed dead. His birth parents are also long dead and his sister passed away from a sudden illness last year. His ties as trial-born to the House Nuruodo were severed when he was exiled. He has no other family that I have been made aware of." He paused for a moment then went on, "Under normal circumstances it is usually a member of the family by blood or by marriage who accompanies the body of a fallen one to the hall of remembrance and speaks on their behalf. You are neither so this rule does not apply. I hope you will understand."

I felt a pang of sorrow on hearing about the death of Thrawn's sister and wondered if he had known about it. He had said nothing to me if he did.

I nodded, "I see, yes, thank you." And once again the room was silent as we sipped our tea politely until the comm. on his desk peeped softly and a voice let him know that Thrawn's body had been transported off my ship.

He looked at me and said, "Once the body is certified to be that of Mitth'raw'nuruodo through simple DNA testing we can proceed with the formalities that will end with the remembrance ritual. It will be a small affair, with far less ceremony because he was exiled, but he is still of the Chiss, his life will be honoured as is our way. You returned his body to us so you will be granted leave to attend but you will not to speak on his behalf. You are not Chiss and you have no marital claim to him so it is not permitted."

"Of course," I replied deeply grateful not to have to get up in front of Thrawn's peers and talk about him. There was a moment's hesitation then I took the package I had carried with me in my small satchel out. "I apologise, I do not know the correct formality here but Mitth'raw'nuruodo left instructions for me to give this to you."

I handed him the sealed packet which he took from my hand and studied for a moment before opening the packet and to pull out several data discs.

"Are you aware of what information these hold?" he asked as he studied each disk with great care then slipped them back into the little hard-shell packet.

I shook my head. "No, my task was to deliver that packet to your hands not to open it."

He regarded me for a moment then sat back, relaxing slightly, "While you are not the first outsider I have ever heard to speak our tongue, you are the first to speak it almost flawlessly and your accent is not at all what I would have expected," he said, "It is quite remarkable."

"Thank you, that is gracious of you to say. I had a very good teacher," I said suddenly having to control the unexpected surge of sorrow that welled up in me like a tidal bore. I set the tea cup I had been clinging to down on the table and rested my hands in my lap so he would not see how much they had started to tremble.

Another long silence settled over us again and then the Aristocra rose from his seat. "I apologise for the awkwardness of the questions I had to ask."

I looked up at him and nodded. "I understand, I was briefed on how matters would be handled here," I replied also getting to my feet.

A slight smile touched the Aristocra's lips as if I had confirmed something he had suspected but not asked about. "Of course," he said, "I'm afraid I have work I must attend to. Preparations for the remembrance service will take some time. If you do not mind me saying so, you look a little fatigued."

I sighed and nodded. "That is very polite of you to say, I'm quite sure I look more like death warmed over, Aristocra. It has been a difficult...", I stopped for a moment to quell the sudden wave of aching sadness that rushed through me. "...a difficult time." Gritting my teeth I fought my emotions back and then realised that it had been almost three weeks since I had been given the news that Thrawn was dead.

The journey from Bastian to Csilla had taken that long but I had no idea where the time had gone.

"I understand. Please allow us the honour of providing you with some comfort. We have prepared guest quarters for you in one of our finest suites."

"That is very gracious, thank you," I said, looking forward to sleeping on clean sheets and having a really hot shower.

"I am afraid I must ask you to remain in the guest quarters and not wander around this facility. If you require anything there will be someone ready to aid you. If you require anything from your ship then I suggest you retrieve it now and after, if you still need anything, one of the guards will be happy to accompany you, I am sure you understand our need for security."

"Of course," I had expected this as well and, oddly enough, welcomed the chance to do nothing, to be free from any responsibility. "I am most grateful for your kindness and hospitality," I replied relieved that I no longer had to deal with any of this and that it was now out of my hands.

The Aristocra raised an eyebrow and gave me a slight smile, "He did indeed teach you well," he said softly not bothering to hide his surprise.

I acknowledged the compliment with a slight nod but it made me sad. With the interview at an end, the Aristocra summoned one of the guards who stood outside. I was escorted by to my ship and allowed to fetch my travel pack which held some clean clothes and toiletries among other things, after that I was taken to a different part of the vast complex and shown to one of the most elegant suite of rooms I had ever seen and then I was left alone. The Aristocra had been right, I was exhausted. I unpacked a few items of clothing and then I found the 'fresher and was grateful to see a deep bathtub. I ran the water and pulled out the half full bottle of brandy from my pack and found a glass. As I sank into the too hot water I felt a bizarre sense of *déjà vu* but I drowned it away with a large gulp of my drink. I laid my head back against the rim of the bathtub and closed my eyes just grateful to be somewhere where no one expected anything from me.

Waiting in an unfamiliar place was difficult at the best of times but now I also found myself in a strange netherworld between despair and depression. I was listless. I picked at the food that was brought me, causing concern amongst my hosts that it was not to my liking and I had no way to assure them this was not the case. I tried to eat but I simply had no appetite. If I had thought I had no more tears to shed I was wrong and when I wasn't crying, I was sleeping fitfully, too weary and heartbroken to care about anything else at all. The time passed strangely.

The remembrance service was held the morning two days after my arrival on the planet. It was a small sombre affair with only a handful of people in attendance. I kept forgetting that here Thrawn was in disgrace. I wore one of the dresses that had once belonged to Navaari's daughter. It was a deep, dark blue colour and it had felt right. I had wrapped a similar coloured shawl about my shoulders because I was freezing cold. If my clothes were out of place I didn't care, no one had given me any indication of what was appropriate to wear. When I entered the hall I was silently escorted to a place up front. I ignored the stares and the whispers as I passed by people. Now I just wanted to get through this so I could leave.

They had moved Thrawn's body from the stasis box I had transported him into an elegant rounded coffin. It was opaque except for where his head and shoulders were so that everyone could see his face. They had dressed him in a black uniform and I guessed this was also tradition, a cloth of house colours had been draped over the rest of it, even though he had been exiled. I didn't ask why but I was grateful, after all he had done it felt only right he should have some honour amongst those

who stood on ceremony. The mood in the room was solemn. It was hard not to break down but I used every ounce of training I had ever been given and managed to keep a hold of my emotions. If anyone took insult at my tears well that was their problem not mine. It was unusual enough that I, a human, was allowed to be here and view this, tears were just part of the package but I wept as silently as I could.

The entire ceremony was formal and aloof. A spiritual guide spoke over the body and after that there was a listing of Thrawn's accomplishments. They ended with his exile which made me even sadder because he had done so much more. I listened to what was being said but it was meaningless to me. An accumulation of words that had nothing to do with the man I had known and loved. When the death rites were done I was grateful it was over. We all stood to honour him as the Spiritual Guide walked with the repulsor lift that held Thrawn's coffin to leave the hall. As it passed me I reached out to almost touch it and said goodbye for the last time to the man I had loved more than anyone else in the galaxy.

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The small reception afterwards was held in a warmly decorated room. There were delicate finger foods and drinks served by silent, aloof wait staff. The chatter amongst the attendees was appropriately muted and sombre. I declined the offer of food but took a glass of what tasted a lot like ice-wine and sipped it politely. A few of the Chiss glanced at me and there were hushed whispers as I walked past them but no one came near me and no spoke to me either. I didn't belong here and it painfully obvious. Eventually Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano took pity on me came over to where I stood gazing at a live-time view screen of the outside world.

"It was a ... lovely... ceremony," I said for lack of anything else to talk about.

"I am grateful you feel we have honoured him appropriately," The Aristocra replied, looking around the room, "You must forgive my people; they are not used to outsiders and are very wary of humans who return our dead."

"There is nothing to forgive, Aristocra I understand," I said quietly.

"I want to thank you for all that you have done. The information on the disks you delivered to me is most... invaluable and will be of great use. I am also grateful to you for bringing Mitth'raw'nuruodo's body home. We may not appear to be a caring race but we honour our fallen just the same. He served his people well in his time."

I nodded, "More than most will ever know I suspect."

The Aristocra raised his eyebrows in slight surprise at my forward statement, "Indeed."

"What will happen to him now?" I asked suddenly.

"As we speak his body is being cremated and his ashes will be scattered in space, as you can imagine burial is difficult on this planet."

I had to swallow down the sharp sting of grief that washed through me, "How fitting an end for a man who had stars in his blood."

"You certainly do have a way with words." The Aristocra said quietly, regarding me for a long moment before asking. "If you do not mind me asking, what will you do now?"

"I have one last task to complete for Mitth'raw'nuruodo and then, well, then I do not know but I have a friend waiting for me to return, perhaps I can begin again working with him." I answered with a slight shrug. I knew Ged would be there for me as he had promised and it was a small comfort in time that felt bleak and empty but I wasn't sure I was ready to return to the Empire's service or what was left of it, not yet at least.

"One last task?" The Aristocra raised an eyebrow, "I would have thought there would be no more business to conclude and traditionally once the body of the deceased is brought home for the remembrance ceremony it signifies the end of anything unfinished."

"Well, Thrawn never did anything the traditional way," I retorted more sharply than I had intended to, forgetting my manners for a moment. The Aristocra let it slide.

"If I may inquire, what it is you must do?" He asked, genuinely interested.

This open curiosity was not, according to everything Thrawn had ever told me about his people, a trait usually common in the Chiss, it made me regard the man standing at my side with new eyes. "I am to travel to the planet of Hjal."

The Aristocra raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Hjal?" He asked. "That is home to one of the colonies of Mathäd'antass'Iyantha, is it not?"

I smiled at hearing the formal use of their name, "Yes. It is."

He paused to consider this information for a moment, "That is most unusual, why, if I may ask yet another personal question, would he send you there?"

I faltered trying to answer the question diplomatically, "We...I have family there, people who will need to be told what has happened to him if they do not already know. I also have a data packet to deliver. I think he planned it this way so I would end up in a place where I would not be alone or considered an outsider, a place where I could grieve in peace," I answered not knowing how else to describe what Navaari was to me.

"Family?" He asked taken aback. "He, excuse me, you belong to a clan there?"

I nodded, "It is a very long story Aristocra and it is not all mine to tell."

He regarded me quietly for a long moment then nodded more to himself than to me, "There were whispers that he had strong connections to the Mathäd'antass'Iyantha here but he never spoke of it to anyone that I was ever aware of. It would explain a great deal about a great many things surrounding him and his ideals," he said more to himself than to me, then he returned his gaze to me and continued, suddenly understanding a piece of the puzzle I was to him, "And it explains your name. You did not give a Basic name when you were asked to identify yourself but one that had Chiss syntax and yet was not a Chiss name. You must be a remarkable woman to have been adopted into a clan of the Mathäd'antass'Iyantha."

"Being remarkable had very little to do with it," I replied with a shrug. Using my Dantassi name had been something Thrawn's instructions had been very clear about and although I hadn't understood why I had done as he had suggested. As with almost everything else he seemed to have mapped out how things would fall into play. Why should this be any different?

The Aristocra was silent for a moment and then said, "You are free to leave Csilla whenever you wish but I would very much appreciate it if you would share my evening meal with me. I have not met many of your kind and my experiences have been less than stellar. Humans are remarkable in their wide range of emotions and temperaments most of which we Chiss find unpleasant. You have been a rare gift, with your knowledge of our manners and customs and I should very much like to learn a little more about you as well as your time with the Mathäd'antass'Iyantha if you would acquiesce to this small request it would please me greatly."

What he was asking was an immense honour and I could not turn it down. I felt almost as if the future of something great depended upon it so I nodded, "I would like that very much Aristocra. Thank you"

"Then I shall make the necessary arrangements. Now I am afraid I must leave you, I have unavoidable business to attend to and forgive me for saying this but you do look as though you could use some rest."

He was not wrong in his assessment and I gratefully accepted the escort back to the guest quarters where I was staying. I showered and then I decided to lie down but I couldn't sleep or still my mind instead I lay there pondering everything that had happened. It felt as though a lifetime had passed and I had lost track of time since I had been given the news of Thrawn's death. The days had blurred together strangely but now that the memorial service was over his death felt final, not real, but final.

Now I was facing my life without him and it was all I could do to put one foot in front of the other, living from breath to breath and moving forward because there could be no going back but I would never be the same. I discovered that I had no more tears to cry, at least not now. I didn't know what to think but I knew how I felt and I was inexplicably furious at Thrawn.

He had made all of these plans for his death knowing it would happen because I had told him over and over again. He had known and yet he hadn't done a damn thing to prevent it, instead he had simply made all the right arrangements to get me to cart his body to his home world, planning meticulously each step of the way. The instructions he had left for me had been clear and very precise yet somehow cold and devoid of anything personal. I suppose he that while he had known of his death the exact timing was not anything he could foresee. If he had left me any personal messages of love or farewell I hadn't found them and I was grateful for it. All the instructions he did leave made me feel like a puppet and I hated him for it. I wondered how he could have done this to me and then I wondered if he had ever really cared for me at all or if our time together had all been some convoluted elaborate ruse to get me to be a part in some greater scheme he had mapped out. I had no answers only far too many questions.

I would be glad to leave here and be with Navaari. On Hjal I could express my emotions freely, whatever they might be, and there was a support network there for me. Maybe one day I would take Ged up on his offer but for now all I wanted to do was hide from the galaxy, hide from my pain and grief and be with people who would keep my life simple and expect nothing from me. Until then I was trapped on a planet far from anything familiar with a people who saw me as utterly alien and treated me as though I were both dangerous and beneath them. I lay on the bed, sad, bewildered, and angry staring at the ornate ceiling until I was sent for to dine with the Aristocra.

It was a nice meal and I tried very hard not let my emotions leak out. I was surprised when he broke with standard Chiss protocol to talk with me while we ate and the discussion all throughout the meal was lively and interesting. He asked me a great many questions about the Core worlds and my life and he seemed genuinely curious about the fall of the Empire and all the events which had led up to it. I did my best to fill him in without getting too bogged down in the details. I also tried to be as impartial as I could but it was hard not to spit some anger when speaking of how the rebellion had managed to unhinge everything I had known.

In turn he told me about some of his earliest encounters with humans and learned how Thrawn had captured a smuggler's ship that had somehow found its way into Chiss space.

"Dubrak Qennto, the captain of the ship, was not a man I would like to spend much time with ever again. I found him rude and abrupt. His greed ruled him and he was a most disagreeable example of humanity. His first mate and I believe also his, how do you say...girl-friend; Maris Ferasi was far too idealistic to be entangled with



such a rough man. I believe she was rather attracted to Mitth'raw'nuruodo which also might also have caused some friction."

"Really," I said flatly. "Thrawn failed to mention that."

The Aristocra smiled, "It was a many years ago, I'm sure Mitth'raw'nuruodo had long forgotten about it, he had many other things on his mind at the time. The only member of the crew who seemed to be in any way truly interested in us was a young man by the name of Jorj Car'das. He was instrumental in teaching Mitth'raw'nuruodo basic and he was able to somewhat learn our language although I must admit it was painful to listen to him sometimes.

"Jorj Car'das?" I smiled at the name.

"You know this man?"

I shook my head, "By name only I'm afraid. He is a well known smuggler with a reputation for being quite ruthless, the other two I've never heard of."

"Given their personalities I am not very surprised. They did not seem too interested in much beyond their own needs and comforts. They were our first real contact with your kind though and for us they are known as the Visitors. It is through them that we learned basic although most Chiss choose not to study it, some have, finding it of use every now and then. Mitth'raw'nuruodo was one of these people and I see his foresight served him well, as it always did."

"Yes, if there was one thing Thrawn excelled at it was thinking many steps ahead," I agreed.

"It was a gift of his, I think. I have not seen too many others who have been able to do what he could with such accuracy."

"You sound as though you admire him but he was an exile to you and your people."

The Aristocra looked at me for a moment and then he smiled, "Is that so strange?" He asked. "He was a brilliant man but he was unconventional and he disregarded our rules. While I am capable of admiring his skills in the areas of tactical and strategic thought I am also honour bound to uphold the laws of my people. He broke the law in such a blatant manner that it could not be forgiven or ignored. Now I have a better understand of why and that makes my admiration for him all the more great."

"He was one of the very few people who dared to go against the wishes of Emperor Palpatine. I think he enjoyed the jax and mouse games but he didn't like court life very much although he was also very good at it," I said.

"No, I do not imagine he would enjoy it much, he never had much patience when it came to political intrigue although, yes, he played it well enough when it suited his purpose. Whatever else he was, first and foremost, he belonged in space. We knew this about him from a very early age which was why he was chosen to join house Nuruodo as a merit adoptive. Had he not been exiled he would have added to the house bloodline with a suitable marriage and eventually offspring," The Aristocra then smiled, "Perhaps this is another reason he wished to leave Chiss society. Arranged marriages are not always to the liking of the people involved and he was never one to do something just because he was ordered to. For many, love plays a significant role when it comes to choosing a bond-mate and not all arranged pairings ever have that aspect."

I gave an uncomfortable shrug, "This is not a topic he discussed with me much. In fact, he rarely spoke about his life before working for the Empire. Although he did teach me much about the Chiss in general, I know very little about his life here," I said by way of an answer, "And I don't think that love ever influenced anything he ever did. I am quite sure that had it been required, had he not been

exiled, he would have complied with your traditions in this matter." I had trouble keeping the sudden flare of bitterness out of my voice and shut up before it got the better of me.

The Aristocra raised both eyebrows at my words. "I would not presume to know better but I think both he and I would disagree with you on this point. That you are here, that he taught you so very much about us and our ways speaks volumes. I think he must have cared a great deal for you."

I clenched my teeth, still angry, "Well if he did, Aristocra, he had a funny way of showing it."

There was a lengthy moment of weighted silence and then the Aristocra sat back in his chair, "Perhaps if I might ask, how did the two of you meet?"

I was surprised at his question and for a moment I wasn't sure how to answer but then, because he had asked, I told him about my very first meeting with Thrawn on the balcony at the Imperial Palace. It seemed a lifetime ago. He listened without interruption, prompting further memories and stories from me as though by hearing my accounts of Thrawn's life in Empire somehow gave him a much better understanding of the man his people had chosen to exile. He smiled when I was done.

He seemed to weigh his next words with great care before speaking, "There were several women here who found him attractive, you know, who vied for his attentions and affections. Young, handsome and in a position of authority, he was a very desirable candidate for marriage but he refused them all. I am sure, as with all young men, he had dalliances on occasion but he was discrete if that was the case and nothing further ever happened as a result. We, who watched his career with great interest, assumed it was because he was concentrating on that career and when the time was right he would accept a mate and breed but of course that did not happen." He paused, "I now understand that he was looking for something, someone extraordinary, someone who could both learn from him and teach him much at the same time, and someone who complimented his personality instead of blandly standing at his side. I believe he found it in you."

I gave him a slight smile, "He always told me that I was a complication he didn't need in his life."

"And he was probably right about that yet here you are. From all that you have told me you were closer to him than anyone else," he said mildly, "And I for one am grateful."

I had to swallow down the sudden tears that sprang to my eyes and I was thankful that the Aristocra ignored it when I brushed them away discretely. I didn't really know how to answer what he had just said so instead I gave him a polite nod and smiled, relieved when the wait staff returned to clear the dinner plates allowing me to change the direction of the conversation in a less difficult direction. When I commented on the various paintings that decorated the walls the Aristocra seemed only too happy to discuss them at great length taking delight in the fact that I enjoyed art and even understood a little about it. When the desert came I found myself liking this man who did not match the short description that had been on the data disk Thrawn had left for me. Over tea he asked me, finally, about my time with the Dantassi.

"They are a people of great mystery for us." He explained. "An intriguing dichotomy of wildly primitive mingled with technologically advanced. They do not have much time for us, I'm afraid. They see the Chiss as soft, weak because we chose to hide from the ice rather than learn to live with it."

I smiled. It was a strangely apt description. "What would you like to know Aristocra?" I asked.

"Everything you can and are allowed to tell me," he replied.

So I did as he had asked and I told him as much about my experiences with the Dantassi as I dared beginning with my first encounter with one on my father's ship, to my naming on Myrkr and then my first encounter with Navaari without revealing Thrawn's story or giving any of the Dantassi secrets away. He listened intently only interrupting to ask a question or get me to clarify some detail. When I was done he smiled a little and let the silence between us settle for a few moments.

He sat and regarded me with an expression I couldn't read for a long time before he spoke. "Mitth'raw'nuruodo did indeed choose well when he requested that you be the one to return his body. You are the perfect bait."

My eyebrows shot up. "Bait?"

He gave me another enigmatic smile, "Yes. If he intended to prove that not all outsiders, not all aliens are barbarians then he has accomplished his mission. How could I resist you? You are, as I said, the perfect bait."

I didn't know what to say to this. Had Thrawn been grooming me all these years just for this? I would never know. It was probably a good thing he was dead because in that moment I wanted to kill him myself. "I'm sorry Aristocra," I said trying to get a grip on my anger, "If I have offended I meant no..."

He cut me off with a slight hand gesture, "Please, you misunderstand me." He folded his elegant hands on the table and paused for a moment. "We are a terribly remote race of peoples and we eschew contact with other alien races as a matter of course. It makes us appear xenophobic and cold both of which we are. We teach our children the value of all things strategic and logical. This makes us insular and I wonder some days about the wisdom in such a way of life but it is incredibly difficult to get the Chiss people to change their ways or see things from a different perspective. We feel very superior to the rest of the galaxy and I fear sometimes this will one day be our undoing. When Mitth'raw'nuruodo was a young man, still living here, he questioned these things as well. He felt that what we considered our strengths to be were also our greatest weaknesses. It was the opinions of those who out ranked him at the time that he was wrong. So he found a way to escape the chains we placed up on him."

He paused for a second and then said, "We felt that no one could learn our customs, our language to our great satisfaction. Yet here you are. An alien who has not only mastered our very difficult tongue to speak it beautifully, eloquently even, but one who has also been adopted into an offshoot of the ancient Chiss society that we ourselves are shunned from. Thus he has proven us wrong. We are not the perfect race and if we could open ourselves up a little we would perhaps learn a great deal more about our galaxy and all of its various peoples and in turn learn more about ourselves." He stopped and regarded me for a long silent moment. "I know that he had Chiss working with him and for him somewhere out in what you call the Outer Rim but they are considered renegades. They have sided with an Exile and are seen as also being exiled but perhaps things will change and maybe one day the knowledge they have gained will be of great use and we shall have need of them. Perhaps even, at some point we will allow outsiders to live among us. I know now that it is possible for a non Chiss to learn our ways so perhaps it is possible for the Chiss to learn how to become less rigid in these ways as well. Certainly I see that possibility when I sit here and converse with you."

I just watched him not knowing what to say. I had taught many of the Chiss warriors he had called renegades how to speak basic, some of them I even counted among my friends.

The Aristocra nodded and then continued, "As I said before you must be a remarkable woman. I can see why Mitth'raw'nuruodo would desire you to be his companion. He chose well and I am deeply saddened by your loss. He was a most resourceful man and had he not gone against our basic rule of non aggression he might very well have gone on to be a great military leader of our people, instead he became a great leader to yours. His ability to adapt, accept and learn from all things new and different astounds even me. If he were alive today, and still you and I had managed to meet and speak as we are, knowing what I now do I, for one, would welcome him back without question. I think that we will need men such as him in our future and we will suffer for our own lack of vision. I also think his death is one of our greatest losses but of course I can only say this here in private to you. He was a remarkable man and the galaxy is a lesser place because of his death."

I detected a note of regret in the Aristocra's voice and once more the ache of loss overwhelmed me. I nodded sadly, "Yes he was, although he was also greatly under utilised by my people as well. The Chiss are not the only ones who have issues with alien races and in the end he was betrayed by someone he thought of as trustworthy."

"Did you know his murderer?"

I nodded as words choked in my throat. "Yes, I suppose I did, though not as well as I might have liked and he is also dead."

"Such a betrayal must cut you deeply," he replied, "It is a sad ending to what was a rather unique career for a man we exiled and one whom your Emperor desired to have work for him."

I could only nod slightly in agreement, "Indeed."

Perhaps it was my sorrow or maybe he was just tired of talking about Thrawn but whatever the reason the conversation drifted to small mundane things and when the evening was over I declined a tour of the great library in favour of finishing the last of the tasks Thrawn had given me.

All I wanted to do was leave, go to Hjal to be with Navaari and An'jast'a, to be somewhere safe with people who loved me unconditionally. The Aristocra did not protest and made certain that my ship was refueled and well stocked for the long journey across the galaxy. I packed up the few things I had with me from the guest quarters and was escorted by two silent Chiss to the landing bay where the Aristocra was waiting for me.

"Your ship is ready. I hope and trust you will find everything in order," he said politely.

"I am quite sure I will." I told him. "Your people have a reputation for being exacting."

He smiled and then much to my surprise he switched to Basic and said, "I do have one question to ask you."

"Anything."

"Why did you not ask to use my core name? I was under the impression that your kind did not like our rather long complicated names?"

I smiled. "And I was under the impression that the Chiss did not offer the informality of such an honour to non family members or outsiders until a deep bond of friendship has been formed. I was waiting for you to offer as is your custom, is it not?"

"Yes, yes of course." The Aristocra nodded with a sigh, "He taught you so very well. Your manners are indeed perfect, how could I ever resist?" He said with an expression that bordered on sad and then he switched back to his native language so that everyone nearby and listening could understand him, "Know this, you are welcome here, Akiana'myshk'apavjäska, should you decide to come again to our world or our territories. You and your kin would be granted all the privileges afforded an honoured visitor, you would be my personal guest under my protection and it would honour me greatly if you were to address me by my core name. I hope that you will take these words to heart and that you will return one day."

I was so surprised at these words I didn't know what to say. I gave him a small bow instead, it seemed fitting.

The Aristocra placed a hand on my shoulder and I could have sworn I heard someone gasp from behind me, "Perhaps next time when you visit it will be under much better circumstances and we will have more time for discussion. I hope that your sorrow will have eased and the loss you feel now will have lessened. I have greatly enjoyed your company and I hope the feeling is mutual."

"It has been. Thank you." I replied touching his hand lightly with my fingertips. He had just given me a great honour and I wasn't sure why but I was grateful none the less. "Thank you for everything. Until the next time we meet may you know only serenity and peace."

He smiled at my use of very traditional parting words, "The same blessing upon you also." He inclined his head slightly and I returned the gesture then I boarded my ship. It was time to leave and I did not want to over stay my welcome.

So, I left the planet, just as I had arrived, with an escort of Chiss making sure I did not deviate while in their space. I made sure to follow their instructions to the letter and when they turned around at the edge of Chiss territory I was not sad to see them go. It was a little unnerving to have a fighter escort that was purported by Thrawn to be even better than the Imperials.

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The journey from Csilla to Hjal was very long and meant jumping hyperspace lanes more than once. I considered stopping at Nirauan to pick up some of my things but in the end decide not to. I wasn't moving to Hjal, I was just visiting. I knew that the base would be in turmoil over the Grand Admiral's death and I didn't want or need to be in the middle of it all. I was quite certain that either Ged or Captain Pellaeon would fill them all in and I would return eventually to get my stuff although what I would do next was anyone's guess. I was sure that Voss would not throw anything of mine or Thrawn's away but it occurred to me it might happen. It seemed like such a strange thing to worry about in the midst of all that had happened but it was still my home, in a way, and many of my favourite books were there. However, the few things I considered truly precious were with me. I kept them on my ship. Thrawn's letters, my Dantassi clothes and mask were all here.

Perhaps another person would have spent the time re reading the letters from their loved one but I couldn't bear to even look at them. It would have torn me apart to touch these letters, to feel his presence and read his words knowing he was gone forever. I just wasn't ready for that yet. Instead, I spent a lot of time in the cockpit just staring out into space. On a small ship there was nowhere to escape from one's own self and I had a lot of time to think and to mourn. By the time I reached Hjal over four weeks had passed since I had left Csilla but it felt like years.

Several hours before entering the planet's atmosphere I sent a message to Navaari using the comm he had once given me and let him know I would be arriving soon. When I finally landed on Hjal it felt surreal. Thrawn had been dead for well over a month and I was utterly wrung out. I had gone from denial of his death to finally understanding that he was gone. I wasn't sure how to move beyond this point. Each day I woke up the same way, I lay with my eyes still closed trying to bring to mind his face, his voice, his scent and his touch but these memories slipped away from me and all I could call to mind were fragments of the whole.

I remembered how I had felt after Lord Vader's death and now, while I could recall those feelings they seemed muted and distant somehow. I wondered if I would ever feel that way about Thrawn's death but doubted it. I had known only pain and loss when Lord Vader had died, it had hurt and I had grieved terribly but I had never been angry at him for dying. As I sat thinking about Thrawn's death I wondered if I would ever be free of the hurt and as much as I tried to center myself and let all the grief go I could not. There was, I discovered, a huge difference between stillness and emptiness. I could not center, I could not find stillness and underneath the empty place his death had left I was surprised to discover that more than anything else I was just incredibly angry with him. This was an emotion I didn't really know how to cope with very well so it festered.

Once I was safely on Hjal's surface, I changed into the appropriate clothes and slipped on my mask. It was the start of spring on the planet so bad weather was to be expected. Navaari was there to meet the ship when I landed and for a moment I stood in the open hatchway just staring at him. I had no idea how I was going to give him the news of Thrawn's death. Fortunately for me I didn't have to because the weather interfered.

"Quickly, we do not have much time before we are not being able to travel!" Navaari yelled above the howling winds. "There is a big blow coming in from the south. It will be bad so hurry up."

I smiled at his gruffness. It was familiar and oddly comforting.

The weather was every bit as terrible as he said. I had arrived right at the edge of a massive storm front. There was no time to waste with sad stories or explanations as to why I had come on such short notice. I shut the ship up and waded through the snow drifts to where he stood. Navaari hugged me fiercely but let me go quickly so that we could get on the sled to head to the enclave before the weather became too bad to travel in. I lost myself to the swaying rhythms of the sled as we sped to the only place I could feel safe. When we finally arrived at the enclave I was cold and exhausted. He saw this right away. I never could hide anything from him.

"An'jast'a is visiting her daughter in the neighbouring clan so she is not here or else she would have made supper for you. Go inside put the kettle on for tea and get warm, I am taking care of the sled and the wolves. I will not be long, we will have lots of time to speak and there is much to speak about."

I didn't argue with him. I hoisted my pack and trudged my way inside. I was looking forward to a hot shower and a cup of tea not necessarily in that order.

On autopilot I opened the front door and dumped my pack on the floor. Then I shrugged out of my heavy winter clothing, hung it up in the closet, slipped off my boots and then took off my mask which I put inside the satchel where I kept it and hung that up alongside my coat. Then I made my way to the kitchen to put the kettle on for tea, I waited until the water had boiled and then poured it into the tea pot savouring the scent of the tea as it mingled with the boiling water. This was such a familiar action that for a second I almost forgot why I had come here so when the

memory of why came rushing back it brought with it an ache so painful I stopped breathing. I shut my eyes tightly to try and get past it.

While the tea brewed I decided to go and shower then change into something more comfortable. I picked up my pack and headed to the room Navaari kept just for me. I had clothes here, I had a home here and somewhere deep in my exhausted, grief riddled brain I was grateful. I trudged across the dimly lit living room lost in thought to my bedroom. I dumped my pack on the bed and rifled through it for toiletries and clean underwear, then stood in front of the closet trying to decide what to wear when I heard the front door open and close I smiled because it meant Navaari had finished with the sled and the wolves.

"I'm just going to shower and then get changed because I smell worse than a bantha. I made tea already but it needs to brew!" I yelled, when he didn't answer I assumed he was already in the kitchen.

I stood under the powerful stream of water which was little too hot and leaned my forehead against the wall. I was beyond tired but the water felt good. Suddenly another rush of emotion swept through me but this time I didn't stop the tears. The crying jags always took me by surprise but I had learned to just go with them and let the grief pass through me. I waited until I was done sobbing and then finished my shower. Wrapped in big fluffy towels I made my way back to my bedroom and changed into the most comfortable dress I could find.

I felt a little more human but I was utterly wrung out. In the full length mirror I stared at the reflection of the person I had become. I had lost so much weight that the dress I was wearing hung loose on me instead of fitting as it once had. I looked ill, wasted away and the dark circles about my eyes were not helping matters. I towel dried my hair but left it down. I did not know this girl in the mirror. She looked like a broken doll.

With a sigh I turned away from the dreadful reflection and turned my attention to the little packet that Thrawn had requested I give to Navaari and wondered what it contained. Perhaps he had left some sort of message for us both knowing that it would be better if I were not alone to hear his final words. I picked it up and stared at it but there were no memories, no insights and no sensations that he had even touched the thing let alone left any words of comfort behind. Disgusted I tossed it back on the bed and decided it could wait, first I wanted a cup of tea and then, if Navaari had not already been told, somehow I had to break the awful news of Thrawn's death to him and I wasn't looking forward to it one bit.

I wrapped a warm shawl around my shoulders and then because I couldn't put it off any longer I made my way to the living room which was now cozy and cheerful with a fire in the fireplace and candlelight dancing against the walls, Navaari's way of welcoming me home.

I looked up and saw Navaari vanishing into the kitchen, "Hey, did you pour the tea?" I yelled, "Don't put too much milk in it like you usua...." and then I stopped dead in my tracks as Thrawn, or a man that looked an awful lot like him, got up from the chair in the shadows of the corner of the room and stepped into the light.

"Hullo A'myshk'a," he said.

The galaxy stood still and held its breath. So did I. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Navaari appear from the kitchen with a tray which he quietly and quickly set down on the nearest table before taking a step closer to me. I looked at him helplessly and shook my head ever so slightly believing, foolishly, that were he to touch me this spell would break. I turned back to stare at the ghost I was seeing.

"Za'ar?" I whispered, frowning.

He nodded ever so slightly.

I wondered if I had died because I was completely and utterly numb. Even my heart felt as though it had stopped beating. Then sensation and feeling returned in a rush, blood pounded in my ears and my legs buckled. Had Navaari not moved swiftly and caught me I would have landed ungracefully on the floor.

"It is okay little pup," his gentle voice reassured. "I have you."

I clung to him tightly because he was solid and I had no bones. I looked at him as though I had never seen him before in my life and then looked back at the dead man whose body I was certain I had transported to Csilla to be cremated so that his ashes could be spread amongst the stars. None of this could possibly be real but apparently it was.

Of all the emotions that coursed through my body the one, scrambling one over the other, that clawed its way to the top first was anger and it hit me like a wall of white hot rage. I let it have its way. It made me solid and whole again, giving me strength. I tore out of Navaari's grip and before anyone could think to stop me I hauled off and belted Thrawn across the face so hard he stepped back from the force of it. Still nobody moved or said a word and then, finally, Navaari broke the silence.

"This was not what we had agreed to. I do not understand why you think that doing things in this way is clever," he glared at Thrawn, "She does not like to be surprised in this manner, you are knowing this but still you insist. Now you have only yourself to blame for the aftermath"

I whirled about to stare at Navaari, "You knew?" I could not keep the incredulity from my voice. "You knew he was alive and you didn't tell me?"

"No, Kycsi'i I did not," Navaari said. It was the truth, "We heard word of his death a week ago. I expected you would come here sooner or later so I waited for you instead of leading the spring hunt." He sighed and shot another look of disgust at Thrawn, "He arrived on the planet earlier today although the first I knew of this was shortly before I set out to fetch you. The discussion we had about how best to inform you of what he had done, that he was not dead as you had been led to believe, was not productive."

I just shook my head in disbelief.

Navaari continued, "There was no time to talk about these matters by the landing and you were in no condition for such discussions in such cold, bad weather. I saw in your eyes that haunted look, when I hugged you I knew you were nothing but skin and bones. You look now the same way you did the very first time you were here, a ghost," he said sounding terribly unimpressed. "I would not have kept this from you and I wanted to be the one to break the news gently but the journey here was an inappropriate place for such a conversation. I wanted you to be somewhere warm and safe."

I understood that he had been afraid I might do something stupid again, like run off into the storm. He was never ever going to let me forget about that. I scowled but he ignored me and continued.

"I did not wish for you to be shocked in this manner but it seems that what I wanted for you played no role in any of this. I am sorry."

I went to speak but discovered I didn't know what to say. I made hard fists with my hands, the pain from my nails digging into my palms kept me sane for the moment.

Navaari sighed, shook his head and then he kissed the top of my head lightly. "Try to forgive him, little pup, he had his reasons although I was not agreeing with any of them."

I clutched Navaari's hand tightly pulling him to me. "Is this even real?" I asked him in a whisper.



He clasped my face between his hands nodded. "Yes."

"Merlyn..." The dead man spoke gently but a hand gesture from Navaari shut him down immediately.

"You have done more than enough damage with your ways here, do not make it worse." Navaari shot a look at Thrawn that would have wilted a lesser man, "This was very poorly played. Be mindful of this fact." And with that, before I could stop him, he was gone.

The silence that settled about us was deafening. Thrawn rubbed his jaw slowly all the while never taking his eyes off me. He didn't say a word and it angered me even more so I went to hit him again but he caught my wrist mid strike.

"Once was enough," he said gently.

I just stared at him. My head was so full of white noise that I couldn't think straight and it blinded me to the fact that I was standing in front of the man I loved and thought I had lost to death forever. For a moment everything stopped while he waited watching me and then all the anger I had been holding inside exploded.

"You bastard! Do you have any idea of what I went through, what you put me through?" I screamed at him, "Do you have any idea at all?" Still holding my wrist, he remained silent.

Suddenly the rest of my fury unleashed. "You died!" I shouted and to punctuate my anger I beat him on the chest with my free hand, curled up in a tight fist. "You were murdered! I saw you in the morgue, stabbed through the heart. Your body was cold and lifeless and I was the one who had to drag it back to your home world, me all alone with your corpse in a box on my ship for weeks. I had hoped it wasn't really you but they confirmed it with DNA, undeniable proof! I sat through your memorial service, the only human there and it was awful! Do you have any idea what that was like? DO YOU?"

When I finally stopped to take a breath he just stood there letting me hit him and still he said nothing. His strange silence infuriated me more.

"How could you do this to me? How Could You?" I would have kept on hitting him but finally he caught this wrist as well. Trapped, hysterical, I struggled and flailed against him, screaming at him. He just held me until my rage ran its course and something else, something less violent and less full of anguish took its place. I stared into his eyes trying to put all the pieces of this irrational puzzle together but I couldn't. Then, bereft of anger, I sagged against him and gasped, trying to recall how to breathe, how to stand, how to even think straight only to discover I couldn't do any of these things. All I could do was cry.

He let go of my wrists to wrap his arms tightly around me all the while remaining silent, letting me sob. At some point he had managed to pull me back so that we sat on the couch together and when the crying had given way to hiccupping breaths he just held me.

"Are you calm now?" he asked, brushing still damp hair from my face.

I nodded but it was a lie I wasn't calm at all I was confused, exhausted and above all numb. If I had been thinking properly I would have smacked him again for asking me that question.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I know that what you experienced must have been difficult and I'm sorry."

"Difficult?" The word was a slap. I jerked my head up to stare at him in disbelief, trying to untangle this new logic. "I thought you were dead and I have been living with this for weeks but now suddenly you're not dead and you think this must have been *difficult*?"

He shook his head and a slight smile graced the corners of his mouth. "I am not dead but Grand Admiral Thrawn is."

I drew a deep raggedy breath and pulled out of his hold to hug my knees tightly to my chest. "But you are Grand Admiral Thrawn," I said slowly wondering if had suddenly started to speak a foreign language neither us had in common.

"Not any longer."

I rested my head on my knees. He stroked my back with the tips of his fingers while he waited for me to catch up. When I finally raised my head to look at him he smiled.

"Then who are you?" I asked.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska."

"I don't understand." I shook my head. I was too tired to try and unravel this new turn of events or his riddles.

He got up and poured two cups of tea from the pot on the tray and handed me one. I welcomed the warmth of the cup and the tea which was heady and sweet. He sat back down at my side and regarded me for what seemed an eternity. When he caressed the side of my face with the back of his hand I didn't respond to it and just watched him warily without moving. He withdrew and sipped from his own cup.

"You pack quite a punch, you know that?" He said instead of answering me right away.

"I should have hit you harder." I growled. My anger was still there lurking beneath the surface.

"I am grateful that you didn't," He replied evenly.

"How is this possible? I saw your body and I carted it halfway across the galaxy."

He nodded, "Well, that was a version of me."

"A version? What do you mean by a ver...," and then the penny dropped. "A clone? The body I took to Csilla was a clone? I've just spent these past many weeks grieving for a clone? You put me through hell for a clone?" I could feel my anger resurfacing again.

"It was the only way."

"The only way? The only way for what?" I asked slowly. I had absolutely no idea how to react to this.

Thrawn sighed, "I always told you that I would do whatever it takes to serve and protect my people. This included dying if necessary."

"You can't take care of anything if you are dead." I told him crossly, slithers of anger resurfacing.

"No, I can't." He agreed. "But you made it possible so that I could perhaps use the possibility of death to my advantage. You gave me enough information that I was able to extrapolate a probable where, how and possibly when my death might happen. This made it possible to take precautions against it." He paused for a moment then said, "When I showed you the cloning facility on Nirauan I was showing you the future, my future. The clone in that tank, the one you asked about was me."

"You lied to me?"

He shrugged ever so slightly, "I omitted certain facts."

"That is the same as lying." I growled.

"I suppose it is," He replied offhandedly, "But it was necessary and the ysalamiri made it possible, given your lovely little gift of truth sense. You couldn't know what I was doing, what I was planning, because there was a possibility that none of it would work and with the strange truth your dreams seem to hold I didn't

want to give you false hope based on an experiment that, as far as I was aware, had never been done before."

I suddenly remembered something Ged had mentioned in passing. "You were transferring your consciousness to your clone? And it worked?"

"Partially," He arched one eyebrow slightly and smiled. "I wanted to create clones that would not only follow orders but think strategically, logically and be able to lead without the issues that clones seem to have. I wanted to take the best aspects of the donor's personality and infuse a clone with them to make a better leader." He studied me for a moment then continued. "I used myself as the first template, I could not ask anyone else to take part in such an experiment if I first did not know what the risks were or even if it was possible. There were other men I wished to use as templates for clone leaders, good men with great minds but first I needed to make sure I could transfer specific parts of a conscious mind, the useful parts, the knowledge and the ability to think in many directions first to see if it worked at all."

"And did it?"

He smiled, "You tell me, you met my clone on several occasions."

I frowned trying to remember when this could have been and then it suddenly occurred to me. I grabbed his arm and pushed up his sleeve and choked back on a sob when I saw the bond-bracelet around his wrist glinting in the candlelight. I traced the wound metal with a trembling fingertip.

"I looked for this but it wasn't on your...his...its... body and the *Chimaera's* doctor told me that all his...your... things had been destroyed as per your wishes. I thought maybe this had also been destroyed, lost or taken somehow...", my voice trailed off and tears welled up in my eyes again. "He never wore it did he? I asked him once and he said it was against regulations and duty forbade it but you...you never took it off." I wondered how I could have missed this.

"No one but I can wear this, no one, not even a clone of me. You know this I've explained how the bio-linking works before, it's based on complete body chemistry not just DNA alone. It should have been your first clue."

His arrogant words infuriated me but I restrained myself from slapping him again. "So when you, he, that man was on base and didn't want to touch me, seemed so cold and unyielding and wasn't wearing this that really wasn't you?"

"No. It wasn't. When have I ever refused you?" He asked.

I gave him a look that could have killed a hutt. "So you used me," I stated flatly, "You used me as an experiment?" I shook my head, "You wanted to find out if I could guess which was real and which one wasn't? If he could pass by me then he could pass by the rest of the galaxy is that it?"

I would have said more but I found myself bereft of words as my anger at him grew. I could have killed him for what he had done but luckily for him I had learned some self control over the years. The room felt oppressive and too hot with my anger pushing at every which corner looking for an excuse to fly. I stared at him, waiting for an answer, waiting for words that would make sense out of a situation my brain wasn't handling very well.

He drew a deep breath and began to explain patiently, "I wanted to see if selective memory and conscience transference would work. I wanted to see just how accurate I could make a clone and one of the things I didn't want was anyone discovering the truth of what I was planning. What better way to do this than to involve you? No one knows me as well as you and if the clone could fool you then I knew he would fool the galaxy and if you figured it out then I would have to revamp the process. If he could pass the test and you accepted him as me then I knew this

plan had great possibilities. If you discovered that he was an imposter, a clone well..." He gave a slight indifferent shrug, "Then I would have had to rethink the process."

I stared at him, "But I didn't see the differences as anything wrong. I blamed your work and I just got angry at you...him for being an ass." I snapped remembering back to those strange days when he had seemed so distant, so alien to me. As though he had become a person I didn't really know at all. I had put his strange behaviour down to the stresses of war and combat but now, when I thought about it, I should have seen it for what it really was.

"I know." He nodded with a slight smile as though this had amused him greatly, "The clone knew who you were and was aware of the relationship between us, enough to play the part, but he did not have any emotional bond with you nor did he share all of my memories of everything we have been together so he wasn't interested in you in that way."

"In *that* way?" I just shook my head in bewilderment. "You couldn't even share me with your clone, could you?"

He stared at me and I glared right back at him not giving an inch. Eventually he backed off because he knew I was right. Then he made an elegant gesture with his hand as if to dismiss the entire line of discussion and it reminded me so sharply of the Aristocra that I felt sick.

Thrawn gave a small one shoulder shrug and continued, "I felt it was a risk I was unwilling to take. I would wager that you would have known for certain the clone was not me if he had taken you to his bed. Even a clone is not exactly the same in personality as the original, he would have done things differently. I couldn't risk that and no, to answer your question, I did not want to share you with him." He paused for a moment, "And if you had slept with him I think now you would have been even angrier with me than you already are."

I doubted that last statement very much because I wasn't sure it was possible to be any angrier but didn't say it out loud, "So what, now you're telling me you were protecting me?"

"In more ways than you will probably ever know," He replied cryptically.

I shot him a look. "But you let your clone with only a partial memory transfer run your flag ship during a crucial battle? I have a hard time believing this."

He sighed and I could tell I was trying his patience but I didn't much care. "The only parts of my personality the clone was not given were my relationship and emotional bond to you. He had all he needed to be every bit the leader as me. What better way to test his abilities as a commander?"

"I'd say he failed the test," I spat.

He arched an eyebrow at me.

"He died," I said flatly.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly, "So he did but not due to an inability to command. His strategies were flawless, he did the same things I would have done and neither of us could have completely foreseen what would happen with a hundred percent accuracy. Just as I," he added carefully, "have never been fully able to plan for your erratic and unpredictable actions."

He may have been right but it didn't matter. "You must have been planning all of this for a very long time," I said coldly, ignoring his dig at me.

"Yes, but again, only because you made it possible," he said moving closer to comfort me.

I shrugged his hand off and curled up into myself as far away from him as I could be, making myself small and untouchable. Suddenly another terrible thought occurred to me.

"That's why you stopped taking the evexelhan. It wasn't you the drug was interfering with it was the cloning process wasn't it?" I shook my head in complete disbelief and when he didn't say anything I pushed. "Tell me the truth! I lost a baby because of that screw up so you damned well better explain this to me!"

The muscles on his jaw clenched. "Yes. Evexelhan had some negative side effects that showed up while trying to start the clone. It inhibited the clone cells' growth."

"Well of course it did," I snarled, "It's a form of birth control." I just stared at him. I wasn't sure I knew this man at all.

"I had no idea you would become pregnant," he said with a touch of sadness in his voice.

I just stared at him as all the grief of that terrible nightmare rushed back to me. My hand went to my belly and tears welled up in my eyes.

He reached out for me, "Tekari..."

"Don't you dare call me that!" I snapped slapping his hand away from me with a surprising savageness, "Right now you do not get to use pet names for me. What you did, what you planned, you left me out of it all and you have no idea of the hell I have been living in these past weeks so you do not get to call me that name. I am not your *beloved one* because no one treats someone they care about like this. No one!" I brushed the tears off my cheeks angrily.

"You're wrong about that," He replied quietly but I ignored his comment.

"When did you ..." I struggled for the right word, "...activate him?"

"Just after you miscarried." His answer was flat and devoid of emotion. We could have been talking about a shopping list.

I blinked at him bringing to mind that awful time and then I recalled the snippet of conversation I had overheard between him and the doctor. "The Wayland project?" I whispered.

He nodded, "Yes."

"Doctor Thracer knew? He knew what you were planning and he never said a word and he knew."

"Yes but he was under orders and sworn to the utmost secrecy."

I shut my eyes tightly and struggled to think in a straight line. "I remember he was so angry at you, I remember he was worried about me but I thought it had to do with the baby..." I could bring to mind the conversation I had overheard with such clarity it almost made me ill. I recited it back to him now flatly, angrily, "The Doctor said, '*And Merlyn, is she part of that business? Have you told her what is going to happen? What you have planned? What about her future? She needs you now more than ever.*' and you replied with: '*I am aware of her needs and her future is not your concern at this time, her health is. When the time is right she will be apprised of the situation.*'" I paused, "Let me tell you this, your idea of the right timing really sucks."

His jaw muscles clenched as he heard the words, "He was in charge of the medical aspects of the project. I could not have done all of this without his help."

"Sarlacc's teeth, I am so stupid! How the hell could I have been so stupid and so blind?" I spat, more hurt than I thought possible.

"No, you are not stu..." He began but I shook my head at him and something in my expression or my abrupt hand gesture shut him up.

"You lied to me! You lied to me all this time and I never even suspected, of course I'm stupid or blind or both! How could you do this to me? How could I not have seen any of this?" Words failed me.

He watched me for a second and then, ignoring my question, continued, "I had hoped it would not be necessary to utilize a clone like this but several

occurrences in the last few months made me realise that no matter what I did certain events had already been set in motion leading to only a few conclusions, many of which ended badly. There were a few which culminated in my death and the failure to achieve the goal of reuniting the Empire and these were the possible outcomes I planned against. "

"So you know what happened at Bilbringi then?"

He nodded, "Yes, I have my sources and they've kept me well informed. I am well aware of what occurred on board the *Chimaera* and how it all played out."

"I take it that means there are others who know you're not really dead?"

He let his silence answer for me and I knew a sliver of hate for him in that second. "And you know who it was that murdered you... I mean murdered your clone."

"I do know and although it was somewhat unexpected it was not a complete surprise." He nodded. "Well, that is I suspected that there was discord within the clans of the Noghri, so I had a feeling about their loyalty, but nothing indicated that Rukh would actually assassinate the person he was honour bound to protect. The Noghri were allowed to roam with relative ease due to their status, so in the end it could have been any one of them."

I opened my mouth then closed it again. "If I didn't know any better I would say you have some latent force ability to see into the future."

"Not at all, my dear, as I have said, it was you who told me everything I needed to know," He replied and when I frowned he explained. "Your first vision of my death, the one you had at the art exhibition on Coruscant told me possibly who and probably where. You saw me sitting in a white uniform, which meant I would be a Grand Admiral, on a command seat in a star destroyer. You also told me there was blood running freely down my chest which meant some sort of bladed weapon would be used. Blasters and your lightsaber do not create wounds that bleed. The only beings I would allow on board of my ship who have bladed weapons would be the Noghri, so that is how I came to these conclusions." He sipped some of his tea, "I had suspected that it would only be a matter of time before the Noghri saw through the deception of Vader and the Emperor that was keeping them bound in servitude and when that happened I would be the one chosen to pay the price for the destruction of their home-world as I was the figure of authority representing the Empire. It wasn't difficult to put the clues together. The only real question was when everything would take place."

I sat still, silently trying to process everything he was telling me, everything that had happened. It all seemed so inevitable when he put into words, "So now what happens? Is the Empire is really dead?"

He drew a deep breath and stared thoughtfully at my face for a moment before answering, "The Empire as we knew it, yes, I believe it is. The New Republic fought harder with less resources than even I gave them credit for and that Jedi master I was using was, well, let us just say it did nothing to renew my faith in that mystical force of yours. I had hoped he would be able to do what the Emperor had done and add a great cohesion to the fleets across light years but his madness was stronger than anything else and he eventually failed me in so many ways."

He gave a small shrug. "When I returned to normal space from the Unknown Regions after the Emperor's death it was to unite the people in this galaxy under one rule, one leader not because I wished to replace the Emperor but because everyone will need to work together if they are to face a worse enemy who, make no mistake, will come. When I realized that no matter what I did, no matter what course of action I took the Empire would not return to its former strength, that there would be

resistance at every turn and that this campaign of mine might fail, I decided it was time to put one last plan into action. I drew up, along with my clone, the idea for placing Coruscant under siege so that the New Republic's fleets would be divided and then the battle at Bilbringi for the ship yards should have been easy. I did not take into account that the smugglers and thieves of the galaxy could be united. I underestimated Talon Kaarde's strange version of loyalty and your little friend, Mara Jade also made some rather surprising choices which helped to shape this outcome. This was, perhaps, my biggest mistake but I had already left the *Chimaera* and was no longer in direct contact with my clone so no matter what happened he was on his own. Even so, ultimately everything we were attempting to do ended with Rukh. My death, or rather to say, the Grand Admiral Thrawn's death and the leadership vacuum his death left decided everything else. In the end it doesn't really matter any longer. The Empire, as we know, it is truly gone and what will replace it, I fear, will be so mired down in politics and bickering that if and when an invasion eventually comes no one will be prepared."

"Except for you," I said snarkily.

"Perhaps, although it is difficult to prepare for something I know very little about," he said carefully, ignoring my sarcasm, "However, I swore an oath to protect my people and now I am free to do so in any manner I choose. The man the galaxy knew and feared as Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead which leaves me free to do what I can for those who are willing to listen."

"Your people do not care about you. I was at your remembrance ceremony. You are a disgraced soldier to them and nothing more," I spat.

"When I say my people, my dear, I am not only speaking about the Chiss," He replied patiently. "And there are those among my kind who do not see me as an exile or feel I disgraced the name of our people."

I sighed remembering my conversation with the Aristocra. "So Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead and now what, now you are Nikätza'arth'pavjäska?" I said.

"Yes. It will be easier to move about under the guise of Dantassi warrior."

"Just like that you switch identities?"

"Yes."

"But they are just names; you're still the same person," I asked a little unsure.

"Yes." He smiled ever so slightly.

I got up, no longer able to sit still, and paced around the room. It was so much, too much to take in that I didn't know what to do or say. He let me work through the information without saying another word all the while never taking his eyes off me. Finally, after a very lengthy silence, I stopped pacing to stand in front of the fire. It was warm and comforting but I noticed neither. Tears welled up in my eyes again and I let them fall. I was so tired of weeping for the death of the man I had loved with all my heart but now I didn't know why I was crying, he was alive and well and I should have been relieved and happy instead I was angry, hurt, and very confused. Eventually the silence became too much, he got up and came to me, turning me around and gently raising my chin with the crook of his forefinger so that our eyes met but I wouldn't hold his gaze.

"I am sorry. I did not think it would be so difficult for you to accept this," he said and he meant it.

I just shook my head at him, speechless. Simple apologies were not going to cut it.

"A'myshk'a...?"

I still didn't answer him because I didn't know how to feel or what to say instead I pulled back from his touch and turned away.

"Look at me." He commanded gently.

I shook my head, "No, this isn't real, you can't be real..." I tried to remember how to breathe. "You were murdered, I saw.. it felt.. no, just no..." words scrambled in my head and tumbled out of my mouth, jumbled and confused. I fought with the dizziness that threatened to engulf me as two vastly different realities crashed together in an ugly way.

He caught me as I swayed and held my shoulders with warm, strong hands. "Merlyn, look at me. I am here and I am alive and I promise you I am very, very real."

I did as he requested. Tears ran down my cheeks. My heart beat painfully in my chest and there was a rawness deep in my body I couldn't define, couldn't explain. His voice was gentle as he repeated what he had already said so that maybe, just maybe his words would sink in, "I am so sorry you had to go through all of that but there was no other way."

"No other way? There is always another way. You did not have to do this to me." I lowered my gaze and stared at the ground shaking my head. News of his death had been a terrible shock, one that I had lived with for long enough now that it was deeply embedded in my body and mind but suddenly seeing that he wasn't dead at all was beyond surreal. I wasn't coping with it very well and this surprised him. Gentle fingers guided my head so that once again I looked into his unfathomable, unreadable eyes.

"Yes, yes I did. You, of all people, had to believe I was dead. You had to believe it absolutely and without question. There are some things that cannot be faked no matter how great of an actress one is and for all your amazing talents being a great actress isn't one of them. You do not do a good job of hiding your emotions. Pellaeon had to see and completely believe in my death so he could retell the story, a credible eye witness to the entire galaxy and you had to believe because without your honest and real grief there was always the chance that someone might start to suspect something wasn't quite right and begin investigating further. The risk was too great. Everyone needed to think, without question, that Grand Admiral Thrawn was gone for good." He sighed. "His, my time with the Empire is at an end and that is for the best for all concerned."

"Why all the theatre, the whole song and dance about me bringing your body back to Csilla?" I asked unable to stop crying.

He cupped my face with both hands and wiped away my tears with his thumbs. "You speak my people's language; you know Chiss customs and you are a neutral party. You also had your own ship so it made sense that I would choose you to do the honour of bringing the body of Mitth'raw'nuruodo home. No one would question your right to do this or that it should be done and no one else knows enough about Chiss death rites to even consider questioning this action. I needed the body brought back to my home world because on Csilla all they would do is a simple DNA scan to verify it was who you said it was and nothing more. I had been exiled and disgraced, there would be no further investigation into my death and the body would be cremated. I could not risk anyone discovering that this Thrawn was a clone, something that would not have been too difficult if anyone had cared to look deeply enough. I needed a way to get the clone's body out of prying hands and eyes without raising suspicion. I knew that Captain Pellaeon would honour my wishes as I knew you would as well."

I twisted away from his touch as my anger resurfaced. "There is so much more to that, you used me somehow to bridge a gap on Csilla, you used me for some political gain with the Aristocra. He called me bait. Is that what I was?"



His jaw tightened and I knew I had hit a mark. "I had hoped," he said carefully, "that through you he would see there were advantages in becoming slightly more open to learning about other cultures. I know how good you are with bringing people together, your openness and honesty disarms even the most stoic of creatures. You bridge the gap between humans and Chiss so well it appears effortless and I hoped he would see this and perhaps it would do some good for future relations between our peoples, there was no other motive than that I swear."

I felt numb and when I didn't answer or add to what he had just said he continued, "The man known as Grand Admiral Thrawn needed to be dead to the rest of the galaxy in order that I may continue with what must be done next in peace and on my own terms and so that the rest of the galaxy could move forward. I fear the storm which is coming will be beyond all reckoning." He spoke with such utter conviction that I shivered. "This galaxy no longer wants an Empire, they want something softer, easier and it will be their undoing. If I remained alive I would always be seen as a great threat regardless of I tried to do and, as a threat, no matter what my intentions I would be dismissed and fought against. It would be a pointless waste of time. The New Republic is so wrapped up in their idealistic view that once the Evil Empire is destroyed everything will be perfect that they completely miss the boat, so to speak." He sighed heavily. "Now they will perhaps concentrate on building something up rather than jumping at shadows and, as I said, I am free to live my life and do my work without the constant need for the strategic planning of a war I cannot win. If this galaxy does get invaded then my skills will be required by people who are happy to have them unfettered by bias and prejudice."

I stood still for a long time trying to absorb his words and somehow make sense of it all but I wasn't doing a good job of it. "All of this, all of this elaborate ruse to fool the galaxy into thinking you're dead. You could have let me go on believing you were dead too. I would never have known. You always said I was a complication you didn't need so you could have vanished to live your life without me ... you cou...." but before I could find more to say he stopped me by placing his forefinger gently on my lips.

"I could have," He agreed, "A life without attachments would be easier and for a one single moment that thought did occur to me." He told me carefully.

"But you didn't," I said stupidly, returning my gaze to his face.

His whole expression softened. "No, I did not."

"You could have gone anywhere but you came here."

He nodded, his lips curved into a slightly bemused smile. "I knew you would be arriving here after your time on Csilla."

"The package I had for Navaari made that a given," I said flatly.

"You probably would have come here anyway, I just wanted to make certain of it."

"Why?"

"So that I would know exactly when and where to find you," he replied.

I just shook my head, "Why?"

"Is it not obvious?" He asked with a frown.

I looked away from him, shaking my head because nothing he did was obvious or easy to understand.

For a long moment the silence between us lay heavy, oppressive and then he gently lifted my chin so that our eyes met once again. Whatever he had to say next he wanted to make certain I not only heard it but that I believed it as well.

"Because I love you," He caressed my face with the backs of his fingers, "and I am not willing to let you go or live a life without you in it."

It was the most honest answer he could have given. It was also the one I least expected but most needed to hear. I opened my mouth but before I could argue, counter or contradict him he kissed me as though his life depended on it and, because perhaps my life did, I kissed him back. His kiss was sweet. His body, which pressed tightly against mine so that I could feel the beating of his heart, was very real and warm. His hands touched my face so gently that one would have thought I was made from glass. I pulled back from him and rested my forehead against his chest. He stroked my hair and said nothing. I stood weeping silently, unable to come to terms with anything that had happened in the bitter weeks which had passed.

Something inside of me had broken when I had been told of Thrawn's death but finding him suddenly alive and well had not miraculously fixed it. I leaned into his body, and his arms tightened around me as if he also knew that I was no longer the same girl he had left behind.

"I believed you were dead. Hearing that you had been murdered was the worst moment of my life and I have spent every moment since then trying come to terms with a life without you. Now I find out this was not the truth and I don't know how I am supposed to..." I couldn't find the right words.

"There really was no other way to do this," He replied quietly.

I shook my head because I didn't believe that. "You broke my heart." I didn't think he really understood what it had done to me. "I thought you were dead. Do you not understand this? Don't you remember what that felt like? Did you think somehow I would not believe it was you? That I would guess what you had done? That I would see all these clues you laid down and figure it out for myself? I wish I was as clever as you are, I wish I was as clever as you seem to think I am but I'm not. I did exactly what everyone else did I believed it was you because in essence it was and there was nothing except your missing bond bracelet to prove otherwise and even that had an explanation of sorts. Now you're surprised by my reaction? What the hell were you thinking?"

He looked at me carefully, as though it finally dawned on him that for me, learning he was dead, dragging his body to Csilla and then sitting through his funeral and then learning it was all a ruse might have been a tad more difficult than he had thought it would be. "I am sorry, Tekari, I am so sorry for everything I have put you through."

But I couldn't look at him. His few words of apology were just not enough.

When I said nothing he bent his head to my ear and whispered, "It was never my intent to cause you so much sorrow. Forgive me."

I understood then, in that single moment, that nothing would ever be the same between us, not as it had been before. I wasn't sure I would ever be able to forgive him for what he had done. When I didn't answer him he sighed and kissed the top of my head. It was enough that I was there and for the moment it was all I had to give.

If tis had been a holodrama set in an ideal galaxy he would have led me to the bedroom and we would have reacquainted ourselves with each other's bodies until we were too exhausted to do anything else. In such an ideal galaxy I would have forgotten that I was grieving, full of unspeakable anger and sorrow in favour of the utter joy in finding him still alive and not dead. In an ideal galaxy none of this would ever have happened at all but if there was one thing I had learned in my life it was that I did not live in an ideal galaxy.

It was incredibly and surprisingly difficult to adjust from grieving over Thrawn's death to rejoicing in the fact that he was very much alive. His physical presence did nothing to help this along, if anything it angered me even more. He shared the same space, he breathed the same air, and he slept in the same bed as me but the distance between us had never been greater.

I felt awkward and uncomfortable around him, wondering how he could have planned such an elaborate ruse in such a way that I had not even thought to suspect that something was up, after all, once he pointed them out to me, all the signs had been there for me to see. I also wondered how he ever could have thought that I would take his sudden return to life all in stride and not be upset by everything that had happened. Perhaps because he had not been the one having to go through all the motions of grief he simply did not understand how deep my feelings in this matter were and I forgot that he was not human. I forgot that he came from a culture which eschewed emotions in favour of logic and rational thought. I was not rational about any of this and I really didn't understand how he could be. It felt peculiar to watch him drink 'caf or eat lunch knowing at the same time that not so long ago I had sat leaning against the cold stasis box talking to what I had thought was his corpse.

My anguish was still very real and very raw. When I hoped no one was around I cried a lot, still feeling that gaping maw of loss and not even his physical presence in my world could ease it. While he slept I would lie awake listening to him breathe, watching his chest rise and fall terrified that he would vanish at any given moment. I knew this was stupid behaviour but I could not help it. Wounded, heart sick and resentful I shied away from him.

During the day, as much as I could, I avoided him because I was irrationally furious with him and when that wasn't possible we tried to act as though everything was normal but it wasn't it was awkward and strange. I no longer knew where I fit in his world and I wouldn't let him touch me. The tension between us pulsed and grew making everyone around us uncomfortable. Eventually I took to hiding from him as much as possible, losing myself in small mundane jobs around the enclave and pretending to be asleep when he would join me in bed.

I spent a lot of time with Navaari who seemed almost terrified to let me out of his sight. When he decided that the sled gear, harnesses and tack all needed to be cleaned and mended thoroughly I was happy for the job which gave me something to do with my hands. I spent time with his sled-wolves, brushing out their winter coats, collecting the wool and generally hanging out with them and was grateful for their uncomplicated company.

As was the way of things eventually news of what had taken place made its way through the enclave and the fallout was even greater. Most of the people who knew me well felt much like Navaari and they were angry at how things had taken place but there wasn't much they could do. Everyone had an opinion about it which, whether or not I wanted to hear, they shared with me anyway. I was glad to have a place to hide from the prying questions and the strangely annoying sympathy.

Not many people spent a great deal of time with the sled wolves, they were working animals not pets as Navaari's friend Kerrjan was fond of telling me but that didn't stop me from spending time with the animals or finding comfort in their uncomplicated company. I had grown up with wild creatures almost on my doorstep and had gotten used to my uncle's jaxes and their ways of showing affection for food.

"You be careful!" Kerrjan admonished one day when he found me sitting with one of the pregnant wolves grooming her carefully. "She's like to bite them as get too close."

I just shrugged. The wolves liked me, there was a strange kind of trust and while I wasn't quite sure where it came from I was happy to accept the fact that they neither snapped nor snarled at me when I was with them. I wondered sometimes if my connection to the force had something to do with this.

"I've experienced worse." I told him wearily and we both knew what I meant. If he had anything to say about the whole Za'ar come back from the dead thing he kept it, thankfully, to himself but it did not escape my notice that he, too, kept a watchful eye on me especially when the weather was bad.

"All of the whelps from this season are spoken for," he said unexpectedly.

I looked up at Kerrjan in surprise. "What made you think I would want a pup?"

"Might be good for you start learning how to train one, for when you are wanting to run your own sled."

It had not occurred to me that I would be staying on Hjal long enough to earn or train my own team of sled wolves. "I don't think that will ever happen," I said, "I don't plan on being here forever."

"Is this not your home now?" Kerrjan asked, clearly surprised by my answer.

"I don't know where my home is any more," I answered with a shrug.

"Is not your mate here?"

I just shrugged again causing him to look at me carefully, speculatively. What could I say to that?

"As you wish," he had eventually said in his usual taciturn way. "But be careful around the bitches they get snappy when they are pregnant."

I nodded that I heard him and then ignored his warning completely. Being with the wolves gave me a sort of peace I could not find anywhere else in the enclave.

If Thrawn was hurt by my avoidance he never said anything about it. I had the impression he was giving me space to find my own way back, much as he had tried to do on Nirauan after the miscarriage. He hadn't really learned from that mistake or maybe he just didn't know how to make amends. Perhaps he felt that it was enough he had found a way around the terrible visions of his death which had plagued me for so long. In the end it didn't matter. What was done was done and I could no more undo the damage than I could bring back Lord Vader and so the gulf between us widened.

What surprised me more was that Navaari wouldn't even speak to him unless he had to and then when they did talk it was usually in hushed angry voices which didn't help matters at all. I was glad An'jast'a was not around because the current state of affairs in the flat was uncomfortable at best and downright unpleasant at worst and as we were both guests in her home she would have not taken too kindly to the terrible atmosphere we were creating. Eleven days after returning to Hjal, sometime in the early hours of the dawn things finally came to a head.

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I woke up with a gasp disoriented and half caught in a dream, or at least what I thought was a dream until the man who lay in the bed beside me stirred but did not wake. I stared at Thrawn, sitting for a long time hugging my knees to my chest, looking at him as he was but seeing, superimposed over his sleeping face, the face of the version of him I had seen dead. I could not shake this image from my mind and my grief, so deeply ingrained in my soul, threatened to overwhelm me. I got out of bed and made my way to the kitchen to put the kettle on. I wasn't sure how to

proceed with my life as it currently was but I knew how to make tea and the familiarity of this action was soothing.

I poured a large cup and then slipped on my heavy coat and fur lined boots to head out to the south door to my swinging bench, a special place that Kerrjan had made just for me. I brushed off the snow and sat down, cradling my heavy pottery mug in my bare hands for warmth. It was still mostly dark out but dawn was not far off. The storm that had ravaged the enclave on my arrival had long tired itself out and left perfect stillness in its wake. The tea sent wisps of white steam dancing in lazy swirly into the bitterly cold air but it was still too hot to drink.

With the tips of my boots I swung the heavy wooden bench back and forth trying to make sense out of my world but it was just too much like hard work. I was exhausted from all of it. Adjusting to the fact that Thrawn was alive and not dead was far more difficult than I could have ever imagined and I didn't understand why. The fury I had first felt upon seeing him had gone into hiding and what had replaced it was still to be determined. At the moment I was in a strange sort of limbo and I didn't know how to move forward.

When I heard the door open behind me I smiled and brushed off the rest of the snow from the bench to make space for Navaari. The wood creaked as he sat down and pulled out his pipe, tapped it against the side of the bench to knock out the ashes and then set about filling it with fresh tobacco. When he lit it the air filled with the sweetness of the smoke. It was a comforting scent.

"You should be asleep," he said mildly.

"So should you," I replied sipping my tea slowly.

"It seems I have grown accustomed to An'jast'a at my side and her absence leaves me restless. What is your excuse?"

My problem was the opposite but I didn't voice this out loud. Instead I gave him a sad little smile, "I just can't sleep. When I sleep I dream and in my dreams I still see Za'ar dead. I know he's alive but in my head I still see him in that horrible cold stasis box. Now I'm so scared that if I do fall asleep I will wake up and he really will still be dead, that all of this is not real." I took a deep breath, "I am so angry at what he did that I can't be happy he's alive. I'm terrified to breathe. I can't go through that again, I can't and I'm so scared that I will never be able to get past this moment in time. I don't know how to live with him anymore," I said looking up at Navaari, "I love him so very much and I should be deliriously happy that he's alive, that he found a way to cheat his death but I'm not and I don't know why."

"Oh that's not so difficult to unravel." Navaari replied taking a long draw from his pipe.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Little pup, he kept you in the dark about his plans, he lied to you about what he was doing and he put you through one of the worst possible traumas that a person can go through by making you experience his death, carry his body to his home world and sit through his memorial service. You mourned his loss as though it were real because for you it was real. It has torn you apart; I see it every time I look at you. He made you an unwilling accomplice to what has to be one of the greatest deceptions your galaxy has ever known placing a burden on your shoulders which no one should have to carry, especially not a bond-mate. No wonder you do not know what to think or feel. Your grief is very real and your body remembers this even if logically you are knowing it is no longer true. You, especially you, cannot switch off these emotions easily; it will be taking a lot of time for you to come to terms with all that has happened and perhaps even longer to forgive him and heal. "

I shrugged. I didn't think I would ever be able to forgive him or heal. "What am I supposed to do?"

Navaari, who knew me just too well, gave me a speculative look and took another draw on his pipe sending sweet scented smoke into the air with his exhale. "Well, I have some thoughts on that if you would like to be hearing them."

"I'm all ears," I said making a face.

"Come tracking with me. You still have much to learn and I think it will be doing do you good to get away, be putting some distance between you and your mate. You will have time to think and come to terms with all that has occurred and perhaps even learn to forgive him," he replied.

I stared at my tea for a moment and then nodded. I wasn't so sure about the forgiving part but the getting away part sounded just fine, "Okay."

He raised his eyebrows in mild surprise, "Okay?"

"Yes, I will go with you or were you expecting me to argue?"

He chuckled. "I was but only because you always argue with me but good that you do not, you would lose in this case anyway. You cannot be staying here with things the way they are, all this tension and anger, one of you will break irreversibly and I am worried that it will be you."

"I am already broken Navaari." I told him with a slight shrug.

He took a very deep breath and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to him, holding me tightly. "Not yet, little pup, not yet but this impasse you are both at will eventually shatter and I fear that he will not be the one to pick up the pieces. You believed you had lost him forever and he is a part of who you are. You have been living in a place where he is neither alive nor dead, the in between with ghosts you cannot let go of but you cannot stay there forever and you know this. Right now you hate him just enough that given the slightest push it will darken your spirit forever. I would not see that happen to you, after all that you have been through, I would save you from that. I would not see you become bitter and angry, broken and forever tainted by a love that was lost then found only to be lost again because neither of you know how to move beyond this moment."

"You sound like Ma'kehla." I grumbled.

Navaari just smiled. "I am much older than you. I have learned a few things in my days. Ma'kehla is not the only one who understands the ways of the heart. I have already lost one child I don't aim to lose another."

"I'm not your child Navaari." I sighed.

He shrugged and made a dismissive sound. "Perhaps not by blood but in here you are." He tapped his chest, above his heart. "Love is love. Do not ever underestimate my love for you just because we are unrelated by genetics."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said with a small smile. "You know I love you too, right?" I added because it somehow needed to be said.

"I do but it's nice to be hearing it now and again."

I just nodded and drank my tea and when my cup was empty I rested my head on Navaari's shoulder to enjoy the silence and his presence for a while.

"How soon can we leave?" I asked eventually.

"As soon as you are packed and ready to go," he said.

I sighed and then got up. "Okay then, I will be ready in an hour." And before he could say anything I had vanished inside.

I had learned from my time with Navaari that one did not need much on a tracking and hunting trip. There wasn't much room on the sled for extras and packing light was a must. As I hurried about the bedroom, quietly gathering my

things Thrawn woke. He watched me silently but I didn't explain what I was doing and he didn't ask. It was pretty obvious anyway.

Once I had packed what I would need I left to shower, while there were a few lodges along the ways Navaari hunted they were far and few between. Such creature comforts as hot showers were not something that occurred daily while on a long trek.

When I was done I could hear Navaari and Thrawn arguing loudly in the kitchen with hard, angry voices. I knew it was about me but I didn't really care. I slipped quietly into the bedroom and got dressed, grabbed my pack and made my way to the kitchen but stopped short of entering to listen.

I heard Thrawn sigh. "I do not need another lecture Kirja'navaar'inkjerii."

Navaari snorted. "You think I am wanting to lecture you? We are so far beyond that."

"You do have that look on your face." Thrawn replied airily.

"Do I indeed? There are no words for what you have done and I am so angry with you that I am unable to voice my feelings on this matter, not that you are caring about this anyway. You do what you will and the emotional well being of others does not enter into it. I understand this but she does not so it is not me you must make your peace with."

I shivered at the underlying fury in Navaari's voice. It was like listening to a disappointed father berate his son and I had never heard anyone speak to Thrawn this way before.

"She will get over this and come around to see that I had the right of it." I heard Thrawn say softly.

Navaari snorted. "If you believe that then you are as stupid as you are insensitive."

"And you are being insulting," Thrawn said with a touch of annoyance finally lacing his words.

"There will be no debate on this. The decision has already been made. She is...."

"You do not have the right to...."

I took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen. Both men stopped mid sentences and looked at me, one with love and compassion the other with more questions than answers.

I hoisted my pack over my shoulder, "I'm ready. Let's go," I said to Navaari.

"Merlyn..." Thrawn began but Navaari cut him off.

"You have no say in this matter Nikätza'arth'pavjäska. She is my adopted kin and this is my house. I have the last word here not you and she has made her decision."

I watched them both with wary eyes. I had never seen things so tense between them.

Thrawn's jaw tightened in anger as he spoke, "She is my mate so I think ..."

"Do I have a say in this?" I asked interrupting before it got out of hand. "Or do you two just want to fight over me like sled-wolves over a bone all day?"

Navaari took a deep breath, clenching his jaw to bite down on his anger and Thrawn just folded his arms across his chest. I took both gestures as a yes.

"I'm going hunting with Navaari. I need to time to think about everything and I can't do that here in this flat," I stared at Thrawn, "This is not my or your home it belongs to Navaari and An'jast'a so do us all a favour and stop acting like you own the place, you don't. You are a guest here just like me." I watched as a myriad of expressions flashed across his face not the least of which was shock at the bluntness of my words.

For a moment I thought he would argue with me but he stayed very still and waited so I continued. "Navaari is right you know, it is his house and even though you named me and brought me into the Dantassi world, this is his enclave, his home and, under the Dantassi rules we both swore to abide by, I am his family. You don't have a say in what I do." As I spoke I felt a strange sense of coming into my own. "Especially now," I added.

"Merlyn you cannot ..." Thrawn began but I stopped him from speaking with a sharp flick of my hand.

"Shut up!" I told him firmly, "Just shut up." I took a deep breath to try and quell the sudden anger and hurt that had flared up in my gut then to make sure he really understood what I was about to tell him I stared him straight in the eyes.

"I love you, I love you more than anything in the galaxy but right now I can't look at you or bear to be in the same room as you. No one should have to experience what I did and I don't care if you thought I would handle it better than I am. I also don't give a wamprat's ass what your reasoning behind it all was. You put me through hell. I believed you had died and that I had lost you forever but it was all just a huge lie. I'm still trying to come to terms with Grand Admiral Thrawn's death never mind the complication of his sudden rebirth with a different name. Maybe it's easy for you to switch like that but I am having a really hard time so no, you don't get to say a word to me about what I can and cannot do right now or about what you think is best for me or any other life shattering decisions you feel you need to make on my behalf." I could feel tears well up in my eyes and I sighed, trying to fight off the unwanted emotions that washed over me, "You have so much to answer for that I don't even know where to begin and do not get me started about what happened on Csilla. When you refused to allow me to bond with you in any official capacity you gave me the right to choose what I wished to do with my life so now I am exercising that right and you have to respect it."

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. His face told me he did not like this sudden turn of events, it was not going according to his plans but I really didn't care as I waited for him to answer me.

"If this is what you wish then I will abide by it but I don't think that running away from your emotions will solve the issues at hand," He replied carefully and the uncertainty he now felt was so strong I could taste it. He had really believed that I would just accept his miraculous return to life without blinking an eye. I shook my head in disgust. Sometimes men, no matter what species, were incredibly stupid.

"Really? I said shaking my head. "Well maybe it isn't, but it's my choice to make. You cannot stop me and you cannot protect me by lying to me to cover up the truth."

"I am bound to you, protecting you is my duty," He replied as if that somehow explained it all.

I stared at him for a long moment and suddenly tired of those words, tired of this argument, tired of everything I said, "Then I release you from your bond and you no longer have to bother with my protection anymore!"

I heard Navaari suck in a breath but he didn't say anything.

Surprise and hurt flashed briefly across Thrawn's face and he took a step towards me, "Tekari, please you need to rethink wha..." he started to say something but I cut him off.

"We're done." I shook my head. "If you are still here when I return then perhaps we can begin again but I can't do this, or live here as we are right now. I can't bear to be with you. I am still walking with your ghost every day and yet you live. How am I supposed to deal with that? How?" I brushed angry tears from my face,



"You are free to do what you want. I release you from the promise you made to me because the man who made that promise is dead. I carried his body to Csilla and I sat through his memorial service. Perhaps he was just a clone but I believed he was someone I loved and trusted. I don't know who you are anymore but I know you are dead to me."

My words left perfect stillness in their wake and when no one spoke to break the awful spell I turned to Navaari and nodded. "Whenever you are ready, I'll be with the wolves getting the sled and the gear." And with that I spun around and left them to finish whatever remained of their angry discussion.

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We travelled far the first few days, not saying much beyond what needed to be said. The weather was fine and the wolves ran happily. I wasn't sure where Navaari was leading us and I didn't much care. Broken and sad I sat on the sled as counterbalance and swayed with its odd rhythm as though I were caught in a far away dance with a ghost who never really existed. It wasn't hard to withdraw especially as Navaari was also quiet and brooding. I let time pass by without notice and enjoyed the subtle changes that spring was bringing to the world. Eventually, Navaari let me know that we were headed northwards near Chjelahn. There would be less thaw and more snow as well as better weather in the area. We would end up at the enclave situated close to the North Range Mountains where An'jast'a was staying there, helping her youngest daughter who was in the late stages of a difficult pregnancy.

I wasn't sure how she would feel about Navaari bringing me along but I kept my mouth shut. According to him I was family and if anyone had anything to say about it they would be dealing with him. He wasn't in the mood for big discussions and I didn't want to argue with him so I said nothing and did as he instructed. I was happy not to have to think about anything or make major decisions. It was nice to have instructions and guidance that were clear and concise. It was a long trek by sled especially as we deviated often so he could show me places of interest as well as instruct me along the way. We fell into a routine which did us both good. The hours became days and the days shifted into weeks. Time passed easily which surprised me a little.

I soon discovered that if I had thought I had learned a lot from my time on Hjal under Navaari's tutelage before it was nothing compared to now. He seemed hell bent on teaching me everything he knew as though jamming my head full of knowledge about tracking and hunting skills would chase away the demons we both knew lay in waiting for the right moment to pop out. I was grateful for the distractions and mostly by the time we were done for the day, had put up the shelter or made it one already existing I was flat out too exhausted to do more than eat and sleep.

When I had last been on Hjal for a long period of time, after I had recovered from my brush with death after Endor, Navaari had taken me trekking to teach me Jhal'kai skills but we had never gone too far from the home enclave. Now as we travelled northwards through parts of the planet I had never been to before I understood more and more why the Dantassi had chosen this world to colonize all those years ago. It was extraordinary.

I marvelled in sights I had never seen before, tracked creatures I had only ever heard tales of or read about and learned a great deal about myself but still we did not discuss the one thing we really needed to, Thrawn. I had never known

Navaari to hold a grudge or be so angry at any one person for so long but it wasn't as if I was in any fit shape to talk to him or council him about any of what had happened. So we danced carefully around the subject and tried very hard not to bring Thrawn up at all.

I carried the terrible grief around like a too heavy pack. It weighed me down and made me melancholy. The memory of Thrawn's death mixed with the knowledge that he was actually alive and well was strangely difficult to process. I felt betrayed and relieved all at the same time. I was furious at being left out of his plans, feeling as though he not trusted me to keep his terrible secrets but underneath it all I grudgingly understood that he had done exactly what he had promised he would do. He had taken all my advice, my dreams and visions of the future and he had managed to cheat his own death very cleverly. I tried not to let this thought worm its way into my anger but it did.

Navaari allowed me my space. I know he worried that I might do something crazy but I had learned that lesson a long time ago even if he did not think this was the case. So that he would not fret I kept my feelings to myself, working through the now unjustified sorrow to try and come to terms with reality. It was a slow and difficult inner journey. Still, as was the way of most things, the passage of time made the anger less sharp and one night nearly two months after we had left the enclave the damn of pent up emotions finally broke.

We were staying at one of the many permanent hunting lodges that had been built across the planet's main trade and track routes. These were small, rustic buildings with the basic amenities such as hot and cold running water, heat, a place to shower, sleep and cook if needed. All Dantassi who tracked, hunted or even just traversed the planet knew where to find these shelters. Navaari, who had learned from past experience, knew how far I was willing to go without at least being able to shower and had planned the trip accordingly.

We stayed longer at this one because we had been caught by an unexpected spring storm which had been too vicious to try and set up a temporary shelter so he had driven hard to reach this place and I had been grateful for it. For four days straight the blizzard raged about us and with each passing moment I had felt the pressure of words and emotions bubble upwards until the damn finally burst.

I woke up crying and had been unable to stop the flow of tears or sadness, which seemed to pour out of me like bitter poison. I had been dreaming, oddly enough, about Lord Vader as well as my birth mother but I couldn't quite recall what the dream had been about, just that it had been very sad. Not wanting to wake Navaari, I wrapped myself up in my warm coat and snuck out to sit by the entrance. He found me there sobbing uncontrollably. I thought when he opened the door he would yell at me for bugging off but instead he just joined me and held me tightly until the tears stopped then he motioned for me to come inside and get out of the wind and blowing snows. He made tea and poured me a cup knowing that now the topic we had both kept so close to our chests was now open for discussion.

We talked for a long time. In the end it was good to get all the feelings out into the open and discover that I wasn't quite as furious as I had been. Mostly I was just incredibly sad but even that emotion was shifting into something else as the grief I had felt for the death of a man who wasn't really dead at all slowly receded.

I had been given plenty of time to think about all that had happened to me eventually coming to the conclusion that the universe hated me just a little. Navaari only laughed when I told him this, reminding me of all the good things that had graced my life. It was hard to be self indulgent and melancholy for long around Navaari. He had a way of disarming self pity that was effortless.

"I'm not very good at this relationship thing," I said crossly, "I seem to incite men to do crazy things."

"Love does that Kycsi'i not you," he replied. "And you are a remarkably wilful creature which can be quite confusing to men."

"Love!" I snorted ignoring his other comment completely because I couldn't refute the statement at all.

"You do not agree?"

I had only made a face because he was right.

He watched the play of emotions across my face. "Do you truly no longer love him? Is it really your wish that you go your separate ways now?" He asked, concerned.

"No and no." I grumbled, "The stupid thing is I do love him. I love him so much it seems impossible. I spent so much of the time we had together terrified that I would lose him and then suddenly I did. The worst thing that could happen happened. I dreamed it, then I lived through it and now I don't know what to do because none of it was real."

"It was very real." Navaari countered. "Do not ever think it wasn't. You believed him to be dead and you grieved. You saw his corpse, you returned it to Csilla and you sat through the funeral. That is about as real as it can get. Nothing can undo what you experienced and you will carry this for your entire life and should anyone ever ask you about it or question it then you will be able to tell them this truthfully.

"But?" I asked because there had been a "but" at the end of Navaari's words.

"But he is not dead," He replied simply as if this explained every single mystery in the world.

"So what? Are you saying I shouldn't be angry with him? But you were furious with him...you were..."

He held up his hand for peace and I complied. "I was and I still am. He treated you with great disrespect. He is your Ta'kasta'cariad, he knows you so he should have known better than that. He acted without taking into consideration your emotional attachment or the fact that your species is not as well schooled in suppressing deeply anchored feelings. I told him to wait, to allow you some time to get used to the idea first but he said it would not matter, either way you would probably feel the same. You would be angry and resentful and no amount of softening the blow would change this. Perhaps he was right. You can be incredibly stubborn when you set your mind to a thing." He stopped to drink his tea and then continued, "My own feelings in this matter are irrational because my attachment to you is irrational and I would not be having this any other way. Simply put, he hurt you and that angered me. But I wonder how much deeper and irreparable your grief would be if he had not managed to plan this elaborate scheme and survive."

I watched the contents of my cup for a really long time then said, "I don't really know why he went to all that bother." There was petulance in my words which made me sound surly and childish mostly because I knew Navaari had hit the mark dead on.

He made a noise of disbelief. "Pshh, of course you do, he loves you more than he ever wants to admit, he found a clever way to avoid death to be with you because he made you the promise that he would listen and honour your wishes for him to, how did you put it, take care of himself? He is not a man to break his word easily. I do not like how he dealt with you in his plans, his lack of empathy for your grief is astounding, but his reasoning was pure and simple. He had to choose which world he wished to be in. He had to decide what it was he was willing to give up and leave behind. In the end even if we are not liking his methods, he chose you over

everything else. I know you would have eventually found a way to move beyond losing your mate but I am grateful you do not have to. Now you must find a way to forgive him his lack of communication skills with you in this matter and try to remember that he acted out of love as well as self preservation."

When he put it like that I wasn't sure why I was angry at Thrawn anymore but I wasn't quite ready to forgive him yet either.

"How much further until we reach An'jast'a?" I asked after a long silence.

"A week, maybe two. Depends on the weather. Why are you tired of me?" He asked with a teasing grin.

I made a face. "No, but I really, really want a very long, hot bath." While I was deeply grateful that the small hunting lodges we managed to find along the way had some semblance of warm water and showers nothing compared to soaking in a bathtub full of really hot bubbly water.

Navaari shook his head. "Too soft and spoiled you are." He teased.

Maybe he was right but I didn't care. "Well it's good that you love me anyway." I told him as I got up to go to bed, kissing him on the cheek before I turned in.

"Thank you."

"For what?" He asked in surprise.

"For everything but mostly for letting me be with you and for listening."

Navaari just nodded and smiled then shooed me off to bed as though I were a six year old. The next day we made a significant dent in the journey to the nearest enclave and somehow I felt lighter and freer than I had in a very long time.

We arrived at the enclave a week later just in time to celebrate the birth of An'jast'a grandchildren, twins, which was something of a rare occurrence among the Dantassi. It was cause for a great celebration so for a time I forgot about all my worries and small problems to celebrate new life. An'jast'a had come out early to help care for her daughter because the pregnancy had been a difficult one and everyone was very concerned for both the mother and the children. I was relieved to hear the birth had gone better than expected but the unexpected wash of memories it brought back made me melancholy. If anyone noticed they didn't say anything and I hoped they would just put it down to me being an irrational human.

On the third day I was introduced to An'jast'a's daughter E'mirji, her husband and their babies. For a moment I knew a terrible pang of sadness at the loss of my own child but I covered it up and it passed quickly so that when I was offered one of the twins to hold it was an honour I accepted happily. The tiny being seemed content cradled in my arms and I was more than willing to oblige him, rocking him gently humming some long forgotten lullaby. While I had no connection by family or birth to An'jast'a or her daughter I felt welcome just the same. Her bonding to Navaari had not given him any familial rights to her children or their children but the legalities of it all didn't seem to matter. Family was family and love was love and for the first time since I had left Thrawn standing alone in Navaari's kitchen I missed him. The ache of that emotion surprised me.

Oddly enough it was An'jast'a who ended up being the one I poured my heart out to. She found me late one night sitting in a quiet corner of the living room of the guest quarters we shared crying softly. I had always assumed that Thrawn would have told Navaari and An'jast'a about the miscarriage but that was not the case and when the words came tumbling out of my mouth in a messy jumble she just did what all mothers do, she held me and gave me comfort.

Slowly, with just the right questions, she drew out the whole story of what had happened between Thrawn and me from the time I learned I was pregnant until the moment I left the enclave with Navaari. From the look on her face, while Navaari

might have explained some of it he had not told her everything and she was none too happy about how Thrawn had behaved. It felt good to talk about it with someone who wasn't directly involved and when I was done talking she made tea and gave me some advice of her own which I listened to carefully and took to heart.

"I am sorry about your child," she said after a lengthy silence had passed. "Had I know I would have been more careful...."

I stopped her quickly, "No, it's fine, I'm fine really. I love seeing the twins, they're beautiful. I am so grateful you let me be a part of all of this. You've all made me feel so welcome, so loved and such a part of the family that I can't even begin to express how good that has been for me. She had a hard pregnancy but she made it through just fine and now she has two beautiful babies. It gives me hope which I suppose is silly but...." I shrugged not finishing my sentence because what I wanted seemed beyond my reach.

"Hope is never silly, dear, and you have overcome far too much to give up on what it is you know you have."

I looked at her in puzzled at first and then in wonder as the reality of it all hit me. I nodded that I got it, that I understood what she was trying to tell me without actually voicing it out loud. It all came down to a single action and for the first time ever I put it into words, "He cheated death to be with me," I said quietly.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, child, he did."

And suddenly I knew who I wanted to be with and where I wanted to be and neither of those where here.

We stayed for a month helping out where we could and I enjoyed the time I had with the babies as well as getting to know An'jast'a's daughter but I grew restless and it did not go unnoticed.

One evening, while we were eating, An'jast'a told Navaari he had to take me home, "It's time for you to go back and I'll not be here for much longer now, E'mi is doing fine and soon enough I'll be underfoot. Besides, she has many here who want to help out including her husband's mother." She looked at me. "You're done with your ghosts now aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Take her home before it's too late," she said to Navaari and with that the matter was closed. The next day we packed, said our goodbyes and headed back.

The return journey took a lot less time because we didn't deviate from the straight line or stop as often on the way. It was early summer. Or what passed for summer on Hjal at any rate which meant long days and very short nights. Even though it was nearly midnight when we returned it was still mostly light. The sky had taken on that strange eerie half light quality of early summer colouring the world in dusky shadows. The snow was crunchy from thawing during the day's warmth and then re-freezing as the temperatures sank down to the freezing mark after the sun had sunk low in the sky. In a couple more weeks there would be no more snow on the low lying grounds and for a very short time much of the tundra around the enclave would be filled with all manner of wildflowers and vegetation. If we had waited any longer to return we would not have been able to use the sled and as it was we could only travel late in the evening when the temperature cooled the snow enough so it wasn't too mushy. We were lucky and the weather held so that in just three weeks we crossed the threshold of the enclave and we were home. We had been gone just over four months but it felt more like four years.

I helped Navaari clear the sled and get the wolves settled in their respective stalls in the large barn like building. They were shedding their winter coats which made them look scruffy since they scratched and great patches of fur fell away to

reveal a soft, lighter summer coat. It would be my job to comb them so that most of the winter fur could be saved, spun and used for clothing. The wolves' fur was surprisingly soft once it had been washed, carded and spun. Once I had housed and fed the wolves Navaari told me I could go and that he would see to the rest of the work. He knew I was dying to shower and find Thrawn not that I had said anything but he knew me well enough by now that words were not needed. It was a reunion I looked forward to but this feeling was mixed with great trepidation.

I made my way across the large quad to the main entrance and found myself oddly nervous. I knew it was quiet because it was so late but it felt deserted and strange to be back after so long under the open sky. I opened the door to Navaari's flat and knew instantly no one else was there. There wasn't anything unusual about that, Thrawn was a part of the enclave and summer was the time for many projects and meetings, repairs and new building. He was probably off somewhere helping out.

I stripped off my heavy gear and hung it up then went straight to the 'fresher to strip out of the clothes I had been wearing for several days, wrinkling my nose in disgust at myself. Navaari was right I was soft but it made me smile. I rejoiced in the kiss of the hot water on my skin as I stood under the shower. I felt as though I were washing away the past not just sweat and grime as I scrubbed my skin clean so hard it turned pink. I relished the process of turning myself from scruffy, unwashed tracker into a clean girl again but it took a while. I was deeply grateful that the enclave had an unlimited supply of hot water.

It was only when I had finished my shower and returned to my bedroom wrapped up in a large towel, did I realise that not only was Thrawn not at home but all traces of him were gone. The bedroom was clean and devoid of anything he had ever owned. For a moment I stood looking to see if he had left anything behind but there was nothing. I shouldn't have been surprised after what I had said to him the day I had left with Navaari but I was. My heart sunk. Just for a second I shut my eyes tightly, squeezing away the unwanted tears that had suddenly found themselves there.

We had taken too long to return and I guessed he had decided that he had waited for me long enough. I couldn't really blame him given the circumstances, after all I would not have wanted to stay with someone who had told me they no longer wanted me around, but it was still a shock. I wasn't certain what was worse, the grief I had felt with the news of his death or the emptiness I felt now. We never seemed to catch a break. For a moment I let the reality sink in and then, because there was nothing else I could do, I picked out some clean clothes and got dressed. I had let him go and it was foolish of me to expect him to wait for me to find my way back even though part of me had hoped he would.

With a deep sigh I went to the kitchen and set the water to boil. Halfway through making tea I realised, to my annoyance, that I'd left my pack on the floor near the main kennels. So before Navaari could find it and give me a lecture on leaving my stuff lying around I slipped on a pair of shoes and headed back across the main quad to the barn to find my pack right where I had dumped it. I looked around for Navaari to let him know that the tea was brewing but he was already gone. Instead, to my surprise, I found that one of the young wolf pups had managed to escape the holding pen and was trying to dig his way into the feed store.

"You little bugger!" I told him off as I dropped my pack to pick him up. He struggled and wriggled, half snarling, half licking my face. I knew he wasn't really a threat in spite all the growling because he was too small and he was wagging his tail. For a moment I forgot about everything as I cuddled the little animal, burying my

face deep into his still soft puppy fur. I was so lost in thought I didn't hear Kerrjan walk in to stand near me.

"Here you are," he said causing me to nearly jump out of my skin, giving the puppy I held a big enough fright that he nipped at me with sharp teeth. "Huh, I see you've met our newest escape artist."

"He was trying to get into the food. He got out of his pen, I think." I explained as I soothed the animal wriggling in my arms into more or less staying still for a few seconds.

"He's a pest." Kerrjan said tartly. "Always getting into things he shouldn't. Can't keep him locked up, he always finds a way to escape. Good that you found him when you did or he'd have wrecked havoc trying to get at the feed bin."

I smiled and gave the pup in my arms a kiss. I felt a strangely powerful sense of kinship with the small animal in my arms but for the life of me I could never have explained why. "He's adorable," I said.

"Hrmp," Kerrjan snorted studying me for a moment. "You are the first person I've seen that he allows to hold him like that. Usually he goes for anyone that comes near him with a surprising amount savagery for one so small. He was the runt of Gisch's litter. He's around seven weeks old now though he looks younger and he's into everything. I didn't think he'd make it because he was too small, too sickly when he was born but your Ta'kasta'cariad had a hand in keeping him alive. Turns out the pup survived against the odds and even thrived although he's still under weight and too small for his age. It was suggested you might like to train him."

"Oh?" I said careful not liking the way my heart skipped a beat at the mention of Thrawn.

"He felt, when you returned, that you might be needing something to keep you occupied. Now I see he was right. The whelp has taken to you."

I sighed and put the puppy down where it sat strangely quiet at my feet as if to prove Kerrjan right. "Keep me occupied?" I asked.

"Looking after something has a way of taking a person's mind off their troubles, I suppose, and this one will definitely keep you busy if you want to train him right."

I frowned. "I thought you said we couldn't make pets of the wolves, they are too wild."

"Since when have you ever listened to anything anyone says about such matters?" Kerrjan retorted, "And even I am mistaken on occasion. It seems you won't be getting rid of him any time soon. He's been trained for indoors but he's still young and he has quite the mind of his own so you'll have to keep an eye on him."

I was a little confused at the direction this surreal conversation had taken but the pup had laid his chin across my foot and stared up at me as if to say *you are mine so don't even dare think about saying no*. "An'jast'a won't be happy to have him in her house." I remarked with a frown.

Kerrjan just gave me a look and shrugged. "Oh I don't think she'll be too concerned as other living arrangements have been made for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked a little alarmed.

"I'm not the one to be putting this question to," he replied, "He is." And he gestured with his head to the figure standing silhouetted in the doorway.

"Wait, what?" I began but Kerrjan just flapped his hand impatiently at me.

"Turn the lights out when you leave and either take the whelp with you or make sure his kennel is well secured. As I said, he's good at getting out." He turned to go but paused and then said, "And for goodness sake keep the yelling down to a minimum and try not to kill each other, you have both put this enclave through more

than enough nonsense as it is and to be perfectly honest about it we've all had enough drama from the pair of you to last us a life time." And before I could even think to reply he was gone.

I stood holding my breath as Kerrjan left and Thrawn walked into the light. The pup at my feet growled softly in a way that meant business. I didn't think that such a small creature would attack a grown man but I picked him anyway and hushed him, grateful to have something warm to hold onto so that no one could see how much my hands trembled.

"Hullo A'myshk'a," Thrawn said carefully, "Welcome back."

"Za'ar?"

"Were you expecting someone else?" He asked taking a step closer to me. The little wolf pup in my arms raised his hackles so I held his muzzle gently until he stopped and licked my hand instead.

I shrugged trying to sound nonchalant and failed spectacularly. "I thought you'd left the enclave. All of your things are gone from my room at Navaari's. And after what I said to you before we left... well I thought you had gone for good."

He cocked his head to one side, "Why would I leave?" He asked genuinely surprised at the question.

"I broke our bond. I told you I no longer wanted to be with you?"

"Ah," He smiled ever so slightly and nodded, "You were angry with me and rightly so but only the Elder could officially undo a bond and only I could request he do so. I am the one bound to you under Dantassi law not the other way around. Even then, I doubt he would, in this case, comply. Didn't Kirja'navaar'inkjerii tell you this? He knows the rules as well as I do."

I shook my head. Navaari had failed mentioned this to me but then again I had also never really asked him either.

"I see," he said thoughtfully, "Well, I felt it would be prudent to wait a little and see if you still felt the same way about me, about us, when you returned."

I swallowed down the sudden fear I had felt and replaced it with a strange sense of relief so vast it nearly made me sick. "I don't." I told him honestly, "Although I could still kick your ass for what you did to me and if you ever lie like that to me again you won't have time to make a clone to save you from the hell I'd put you through."

Thrawn chuckled. "Of that I am quite certain," He replied as he shortened the distance between us even further. "But I am hopeful that I will not ever need to use such deception with you again."

I raised my eyebrows at this statement. "You hope...?" I asked, "No, no. You only get to pull that card once in our lifetimes and it's done."

He studied me for a moment and then nodded ever so slightly. "I see I was right about the whelp," he said gesturing to the wolf pup I was still holding, changing the subject so deftly it took me a few seconds to realise it.

I looked at the small furry bundle of growl and teeth in my arms. "It would appear he likes me but he's not so sure about you."

"I seem to have that affect on certain creatures," He said never taking his eyes off me, "But he'll warm up to me in time after all," He added, "You did."

I ignored the comment and asked, "Why did you ask Kerrjan to keep him for me? You know his stance on sled wolves being pets. And what ever made you think I would want a pet at all?"

He regarded me with an expression I couldn't decipher and took a very deep breath. "Were I to be completely honest I would say that really, I don't know. I was here helping when Gisch was giving birth and he was a bit of a surprise, the last to be



born. The scanner had indicated she would have a litter of seven not eight. When he was born he was cold and not breathing. Kerrjan said he was not worth trying to save, too small, too runty but I managed to warm him up and his lungs began to work. We were not certain the whelp would make it through the night but he did, against all the odds he survived. He has a very strong will for one so tiny. I suppose he reminded me a little of you. It's not been an easy road for you but you managed to come through everything stronger than ever. I thought that maybe he should have a chance at life, I thought that maybe you would be the right person to train him and give him that, after all everyone deserves a chance or two," he said carefully.

I buried my face the pup's fur and sighed. "You're getting soft in your old age."

"Death will do that to a man." He joked. It wasn't funny.

I made a face, "According to Navaari it's love which makes men do stupid things."

"Perhaps a little of both?" He suggested. "But for now you should put him back in his kennel as there is something I wish to show you without a pup underfoot."

I did as he asked making triple sure the kennel was locked tightly. I felt a deep pang of attachment as the pup began to whimper and then howl when I turned to leave.

"I see I was not mistaken." Thrawn remarked cryptically. "He'll quiet down when the lights are off."

I nodded, used the force to flick off the lights and then followed him out into the still light night, across the quad to the main enclave entrance but instead of turning to head to Navaari's he took a completely different route and led me to a older part of the enclave that was now seldom used. At the end of a short corridor he opened up an ornate wooden door.

"It was once a meeting area but it has since been renovated," he said as he stood to one side and let me enter first.

When I gasped in surprise he smiled. I had been here once before, a long time ago, when Navaari had shown me all over the complex and back then this had been a disused large open hall with a fire place and a small set of stairs off to one side that led to storage rooms. There were six offices or smaller council chambers, three to either side of the main hall, but they had been dimly lit and somewhat dusty with disuse. Navaari had explained that due to the ever growing size of the enclave new council chambers and meeting halls had been built, deeper underground and more modern. What I saw now was a far cry from that memory and the beauty of it reminded me, on first glimpse, of the flat Thrawn and I had shared on Coruscant.

"What is this?" I asked.

"This is the reason I am no longer taking up space in your bedroom in Kirja'navaar'inkjerii's home," He replied as if his words explained everything.

I just looked at him in question.

"Come, let me show you." He signalled for me to go with him so I did and what I saw took my breath away.

The main hall had been divided into an open plan living area, a semi walled in kitchen and dining room. I recognised some of the furniture and the art work that adorned the shelves and walls. Most of these things had been on the base at Nirauan or placed into storage when we had left Coruscant for good.

I followed him, speechless, as he showed me the rooms off the main area, one had been turned into a study with a library for him, and there was a training room along with a small but serviceable 'fresher. Two of the remaining three smaller rooms

were still empty and one was full of storage containers. The whole place was cleverly lit to simulate day light and was airy enough that I didn't feel as though it were under the ground which in reality it was.

For a moment I just stood looking around me unable to comment and then it crossed my mind something was missing. I opened my mouth to speak but before I could ask he gestured at me to follow him so I did and was surprised to find him leading me up the staircase which I had recalled being plain and small but was now wider and ornately made out of a dark hard wood leading to what had once been a dimly lit, claustrophobic archive storage area.

"I know how much you hate being shut indoors so I asked for some help in rethinking this place. There was more than enough workable space for our purposes. We had to build up the walls some, add the side rooms, redesign the roof and open it up quite a bit but I think you will like the results. Kerrjan is the one you mostly have to thank for this," he said as he led me to the second floor. "He's really quite brilliant when it comes to working with design and materials here and he has a soft spot for you."

I found it hard to imagine Kerrjan having a soft spot for anyone especially me but I didn't comment on this. I was too busy trying to process what was looking at. This was one large room with high open sloped ceiling with two smaller rooms off to one side and a door to what looked like it could be a large closet on the other. This was the master bedroom and I covered my mouth with my hand when I saw that bed taking up center position against the far wall was the beautiful antique one from Coruscant. Before I could ask any questions he took me by the hand and showed me the master 'fresher and smiled at the reaction on my face.

"We designed this room especially for you. I have my own 'fresher so this is all yours."

I just stared at the beautiful craftsmanship that had gone into the room, the bathtub was deep enough and, I noted with a smile, large enough for two to fit with ease. The floors had been made of a deep grey polished stone and I feel the warmth from the floor heating under my feet. There was a large, well lit vanity and the rest of the utilities were all elegant and simple in design. There was a lot of room for plants and a shelf that ran the length of the bathtub built into the wall for books and candles and other things. I gazed around in wonder. It was perfect.

"How? When did you do all of this?" I asked as I walked around the room caressing the surfaces and fixtures with my fingertips.

"While you were gone and as I said, I had a lot of help. Many people here were only too happy to make sure this project would be finished before you returned but you missed something. Come," he said leading me back into the bedroom. "Look up."

So I did and gasped. "Skylights? You had windows put into the roof?" I almost got a crick in my neck looking up at the fairly large sloped windows that showed a deepening night sky streaked with colours from the slow setting sun. Windows were not something the Dantassi generally used, too wasteful when it came to design especially as most of the buildings were below the ground to help preserve heat.

Thrawn smiled. "It took some work, and we needed to raise the roof up so that it would be above the ground which meant some special engineering to make the room completely insulated but there are plenty of talented architects here and the transparent durasteel is strong enough to withstand the worst of the weather here and when it's too bad they have shutters that slide over them to protect them as well as for some semblance of darkness during the summer. I told Kerrjan you would live in a place without windows but I would rather we found a way around that because I never wanted you to feel boxed or shut in."

I took a deep breath and looked around but I didn't know what to say. He had done all of this in the four months I had been gone and it took my breath away.

"Is it to your liking because we could change it if you wa..." He started to say, uncertainty lacing through his words, but I made a little hand gesture to shut him up and was grateful that he complied.

"You did all of this for me?" I asked softly. "Even after what I said to you?"

"Did you really believe that a few words said in anger would be enough to drive me away from you?" He asked genuinely puzzled.

I made a face because that's exactly what I had thought. He chuckled and caressed my cheek with the back of his hand. "I had the plans in mind for quite some time knowing that you and I would need our own space if things worked out with the clone the way I hoped they would. It did not matter whether he lived or died, either way he would have taken my place so that I would be free to choose a different life. My time with the Empire was done. I accomplished what I set out to do, for the most part and now being Imperial would only serve as a hindrance not an advantage." He paused for a moment. "It is equally important to know when to withdraw from something as it to know when to advance. When I first met Palpatine the galaxy, the rules were different. Working under him made certain things easier to do. I had a goal I was working towards and for the most part I accomplished this goal."

"Nirauan?"

He nodded. "Yes, and it isn't going anywhere. What has been built out there will last and grow."

I digested this for a moment then asked. "So you haven't retired to settle down completely then?"

There was a very lengthy silence while he chose his words carefully. "When I was taken in as a merit adoptive under house Nuruodo I swore an oath to serve and protect my home world, my people and Chiss space. Everything I have done has been with this oath in mind. I felt I couldn't effectively do my job bound by the constraints of Chiss laws so when the opportunity came along to work outside of these constraints I took it. I have said this many times, you were an unexpected deviation in my path. My focus was on my work not women. Yet there you were a mystery waiting to be unravelled, like a work of art I could not quite decipher. By the time I realised I was in over my head it was already too late." He looked around him and sighed. "I knew I had lost the battle of keeping myself distant from female distractions the night Jyrki stole you away after the Grand Ball. The way I felt as I understood what had happened to you made me realise that I cared deeply for you and it wasn't just a passing fancy. It was especially unnerving to discover there was little I could do to help you and the way I felt in that moment shocked me because I would have torn down planets to find you if I could. I understood right then and there, that you had become a part of my world so that my oath to serve and protect now also included you. When you began to tell me about the dreams you were having of my possible death at first I was sure they were just dreams but I soon learned that your force talents are remarkably strong and one would be a fool not to pay them heed. I planned for a variety of possible outcomes all of which included you."

I bit my lip and stared at him. "You never tell me this."

His face softened, "Oh Sji'u Tekari I tell you this all the time you just haven't deciphered my particular language yet to realise this." When I didn't answer he continued, "Originally I had thought you and I would both build this together, that you would want to have a say in the plans but," He paused, "I had not reckoned on the depth of your anger although in retrospect I should have. After you left I decided that no matter what you felt for me upon your return you should have a place of your

own. As much as you love them you cannot live with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and An'jast'a forever. So yes, it was done for you but I had hoped we would share it." There was hesitation in his voice.

I looked up at him sharply in question.

"The last time we spoke you were not exactly happy with me and with good reason. I was not certain that when you returned you would still wish to even be with me. You were right when you said I had underestimated the level of pain and sorrow the death of Grand Admiral Thrawn would put you through and I honestly thought that you would see through some of my cleverness."

"You give me way too much credit," I said a little crossly.

"No, no I do not, I am certain that once you got over the shock you would have asked the right questions and unravelled it all but what I did underestimate was the power of your sorrow to cloud everything else." He shrugged ever so slightly and I got the distinct impression that his failure to gauge my grief was something he felt ashamed of. "I may be able to plan a war down to its finest detail but dealing with the depth and the intricacies of human emotions will always be somewhat of a mystery to me. The Chiss, as I am certain you have noticed, simply do not feel the same way humans do. I think that our upbringing and the evolution of our kind has somehow wiped away some of the intensity of the emotions we have and I do seem to constantly underestimate yours."

I didn't think this trait was restricted to just arrogant Chiss males but I bit my tongue. "You're just figuring this out now?" I asked instead, walking about the bedroom to look at everything. I smiled inwardly when I saw the ma'arilite sculpture that I loved so very much.

He made a face, "Yes, no, well, perhaps. I had not realised just how deeply hurt, how much pain you were in and I honestly thought the very act of actually seeing me, of seeing that none of it was true would counter that grief."

"You really thought that?" I shook my head in disbelief. "Really?"

He looked at me for a moment then admitted, "Yes, but then I realised I had made a rather large error in judgement."

"What was your first clue?" I asked tartly giving him a look.

"Well you hit me for one thing." He shot back.

"You deserved it!" I told him flatly, "In fact you're damned lucky I didn't do worse."

"I will not dispute that." He relented and then sighed deeply. "The extent of the damage became clear to me when time passed and you could still not even look at me. I understood that I had completely miscalculated your reaction and the depth of your grief for what you thought was my death." He frowned. "I had no idea, truly, no idea but when you were willing to release me from the bonding promise I had made to you then I understood the hurt must have gone very deep. After you left the enclave with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii, Kerrjan had a few choice things to say about the whole matter as did the enclave's council and several of your rather over protective girlfriends made sure I knew exactly what I had done wrong, I would be forever grateful if you would ask them nicely to stand down now."

I grinned. "It does serve you right you know."

"Indeed." He arched an eyebrow and drew deep breath. "Needless to say I have had some time to consider just how hard it must have been for you and that you saw everything I had done as a betrayal of trust for which I am sorry but I maintain it had to be done this way and now I hope you can forgive me."

I looked around the bedroom once more and took in all that he had done to turn unused council rooms into a beautiful place to live. I thought about how much

we had lived through and all the windy twisted paths that had led us to this moment. "I think given the right incentive I could be convinced to do so." I told him while giving him that under the lashes stare which said even more than my words. "But you understand things are different between us. What you did, what I went through, it changed me. I am no longer the same girl I was before all of this...." I struggled to find the right words, grateful when he interrupted me with words of his own.

"No," A slight hint of a smile touched the corners of his mouth as he took a step towards me. "No you are not."

I frowned wondering if this was something he found distasteful but before I could voice this concern he beat me to it.

"Every time you go through some sort of emotional or physical trauma you manage to come out of it stronger. You are so fierce and yet at the same time so incredibly vulnerable, it is a seductive mix. When I first met you, you were a lovely, feisty young girl on the verge of discovering her place in the galaxy now you have become this extraordinary woman whose strength through adversity awes me at every turn. You are both fragile and strong and this strange dichotomy makes you unbelievably attractive. You have no idea how truly beautiful you really are." He paused for just a second then said, "I am certain that were I to try anything like this again you would kill me before I could ever apologise. But just this once forgive me for not telling you the whole story. I had my reasons and one day these will become clear to you."

I made a face. "I reserve the right to use this against you when we fight." I told him and I was only half kidding.

His smile broadened. "I would expect no less."

I let him caress my face with gentle hands, smiling when he pulled me to him and held me tightly as though that very act would make everything that had happened between us go away. He wasn't right but he wasn't wrong either.

I looked up into his face to find him staring intensely at me. My heart skipped more than one beat and I welcomed the familiar and wonderful sensations which sent heat flooding through my body. I waited for him to move but he didn't and for a second I wondered why then I decided the why didn't matter. There had been too much back and forth, too many misunderstandings and, above all, too much time apart. I had spent far too much time letting him take the lead, letting him set the pace and allowing him to make the rules and now I decided that it was my turn. This moment wavered, fragile and delicate, as though everything between us hung on my next words. I wanted to make them count.

"I think this is the part where you kiss me." I whispered never taking my eyes from his.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Now." I prompted.

I could see relief and something else in his face. The sweet smile on his lips turned feral and hungry but he hesitated for a moment so I clasped his face between my hands and drew him to me so that I could kiss him making sure that if my words were unclear my actions were not.

When we pulled apart he went to speak but I shut him up with my forefinger upon his lips. "No, no more words. We've had enough words to last an age. You told me you loved me now show me just how much."

"As you wish," he replied, his voice suddenly husky and brandy warm.

I just smiled and then I let him undress me slowly while I took great delight in removing his clothes with equal care. I let my fingertips explore every inch of his

skin, seduced by the sensations his own hands created as they reacquainted themselves with my body.

I had thought this was lost to me forever and suddenly the enormity of what he had done so that this moment was possible crashed down on me much like an avalanche. I rested my forehead against his chest and gasped at the whirlpool of emotions which clouded my thoughts.

"What?" he whispered, guiding my face upwards so he could maybe figure out my sudden change in mood just from looking at me, "What is it?"

I wanted to tell him but I couldn't find the words and perhaps he read some of this in my expression because he didn't ask any more questions he just kissed me instead until the strange sad dizziness passed into something filled with hungry need and heat. This, too, he saw and he did not argue when I pulled him to the bed, yanked him to lie on top of me so that for a short time he could complete me. But I was hurried and breathless. I wanted too much too quickly, but this was not really what he had in mind. I growled at him when he moved away.

"Not so fast Tekari, not so fast." He murmured, slowing everything down to an agonising crawl. He shifted and moved so that he could kiss my body gently. I writhed under his touch. When his mouth, his tongue, warm and wet, found my breasts I arched my back involuntarily and whimpered as he teased. He left me shuddering with need and it was annoyingly wonderful.

There had been a time when such intense passion had scared me but not anymore. Now I found myself willing to follow him into this abyss and drown in the desire which made my heart beat so fast I thought maybe it would burst out of my chest. He chuckled as I snarled at him when he moved away, tormenting me in a way I had utterly forgotten about. I could have, if I had wanted to, turned the tables on him but for reasons I could never have voiced I was happy to have him lead. His hands found all the right places to touch, his mouth on mine was sweet yet needy and I responded exactly as he knew I would.

We had danced this dance so many times that his guidance was more of an afterthought than a direction, a variation on a theme that had an unlimited amount of combinations. He led. I followed. I knew what pleased him but he knew me better and this time he took great care to direct the action so that my lack of self control would not get the better of us both. He wanted this moment to last a very long time and it made me nearly sick with a sexual hunger I had never quite known before. For this moment in time this was his dance floor and upon it he owned me body and soul.

Just when I thought I would pass out from want he shifted again, nudging my knees apart, sliding his body between my legs. The weight and warmth of him made him real, made him solid. I wrapped my limbs about him but I wanted more so I grabbed his hair, which had grown longer, and pulled fiercely. The growl which came from somewhere deep in the back of his throat gave me an odd sense of satisfaction. He pulled in tightly to my body as if that would quell my need to hurt him but it only drove my need higher. I nipped his shoulder with my teeth and dug my nails into the skin of his back.

"Sheath your claws and fangs, Tekari." He whispered, "You can punish me later if that is your wish but you asked me to show you how I feel, allow me to do so without drawing blood." He reached up and threaded his fingers through mine to push my hands back up over my head pinning them there against the pillow. "Please." He added.

For a second we lay there face to face, almost joined as one, pausing to savour the moment, utterly aroused and incredibly vulnerable. The galaxy held its breath just for just a moment, waiting. There was so much pleasure that it was almost

painful and when I could stand it no longer I gave in to his request and relinquished control. He smiled as my body which had been tense suddenly relaxed into his touch, moulded to fit against him, water over ice, a second skin.

His hands grazed across my breasts, then trailed across the flat of my belly to pause there. An expression I couldn't quite decipher flashed across his face as he kissed where his hands had lain but before I could ask about it his fingers found something else to occupy them. Whatever question had been on my lips was cut short by his caresses and deep, exploring kisses which sent me into a tailspin almost nudging me over an invisible edge into that madness which only lovers know.

I growled at him and he chuckled softly.

"Keep this up and I will have to hurt you." I gasped, "Again."

"A delight I shall look forward to at a later time but for now allow me the illusion that you are mine and let me pleasure you in my own way," he said so possessively that it made my heart skip.

It wasn't an illusion though, I thought idly. After all we had been through there never was and never would be anyone else but I didn't say this out loud. Instead I just gave him an enigmatic smile which he returned with one of his own then he eased himself into me with agonizing slowness. I gasped at the delight every centimetre of him gave me.

My entire body reacted quite of its own accord to each thrust and all I could do was ride with him. The pace he set was slow and he moved with a deliberate, languid grace all the while watching my face, keeping eye contact as if he were afraid I would somehow vanish. I smirked at the knowledge that he needed me too and then because I didn't really have a whole lot of options I followed the path his rhythm created. It was a deep, deep place and I felt my mind slip backwards into it, surrounded by love and pleasure, strength and power as well as something elusive and indefinable. I sighed as sensations stripped me of my senses and I let my mind go.

*Stop holding on to your fears* someone had once said and that advice had never felt more apropos than right at this very moment. I called up the force and felt it shift around us, a subtle misty veil which threaded through all living things. It wound between us and bound us together sparking like fire on resin soaked wood and I knew he felt it too because his eyes widened in surprise. I pushed it through us both and he gasped with my name on his lips.

When I tapped into it in this way I could see it dance over us, forming a living breathing arc of magic illuminating everything that breathed. I followed this thread of light as far as I could into my body, into my soul, into that place where we joined. In this moment we were truly one and just possibly we were also creating life. Suddenly I understood his earlier expression as he had caressed my belly. There had been such sorrow in that loss but it would not always be the case and I smiled with a secret joy then clung tightly to him while we rode through the storm our coupling created as it reached that point of no return.

For a very long time we just lay wrapped about each other until the racing of our hearts slowed down. Sweat soaked, satiated and boneless, I nuzzled his neck and kissed his salty skin only half aware of the world around me. When he pulled back from me, separating us, I complained about it, as I always did, which made him smile. When I shivered, he drew the large blanket over us both.

"Za'ar?" I spoke his name out loud and asked a thousand questions with this single utterance.

"I am here." He murmured in my ear. "I am not going anywhere and you are safe." It was an old, familiar mantra.

"And will you still be here when I wake up?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Promise?" I asked too drowsy in the aftermath to move.

I could feel him smile as he answered. "I promise," he said then he shifted so that he could curl himself protectively around me stroking me absently until I fell asleep and if there were dreams, good, bad or in between I didn't recall them when I woke up the next morning.

He had kept his word and when, still caught up in the remnants of sleep, I rolled over he was there lying on his side with his head propped up on his palm wide awake and watching me. For a long moment we just stared at each other and then he broke the spell by caressing my face.

"And she who dances as sunlight upon snow finally awakens." He murmured.

I grinned and stretched in a jax like manner. "You're still here."

"I promised I would be."

"Did that promise include 'caf'?" I asked hopefully.

"It certainly could be arranged," he replied, moving a stray lock of tangled hair from my face as I just watched him, then something in my expression made him ask, "What is it?"

"I was just wondering how long we can stay like this?"

"In bed? I think it would get a bit uncomfortable after a day or so." He teased.

"No, I meant, like this, in general, together and alive at the same time in the same place with nothing to do that will keep us at opposite ends of the universe or do you have some new plans for galactic domination that I need to know about?"

"Ahh," he cocked his head slightly to one side and the corners of his lips curled into a smile. "No, currently my schedule is clear for the time being. Perhaps at a later date more pressing issues will intrude but for today I had rather thought you might like to unpack your things and settle in. I had all of our belongings shipped from Nirauan and from storage."

"You did, how?"

"I made arrangements in secret with Thomas to sort all of that out prior to coming here. Once this place was finished and habitable I had everything moved here and what I didn't get around to or belonged to you I placed in one of the unused rooms downstairs," he said, "Even if you did not wish to be with me I imagined that you would prefer to have your things here rather than return to Nirauan to deal with all of that on your own."

If I ever saw Doctor Thracer again I was going to have words with him about keeping such massive secrets from me but for now I was happy that he had been able to help. "So everything is now here?"

He nodded. "Unless you still have belongings on the *Virulent*."

I shook my head, "No, I didn't know if I would be returning to that ship so I cleared my quarters out completely. I think Ged knew I wouldn't be coming back even though he told me I could." I answered feeling an odd flash of sorrow as I recalled that moment in time. "Even if I had wanted to I don't think I would have returned to that life." There had been something horribly final about that moment in the *Virulent's* hanger bay. It must have shown in my expression because he reached over and caressed my face gently.

"I am sorry," he said.

I opened my mouth then closed it again and then I said finally, "I know you are and I know you mean it. You keep saying those words but you should stop."

"Perhaps." He didn't sound so sure. I guess he had been given quite an earful by several people after I had left and being told off by Kerrjan alone would have been



enough to send me scurrying away like a frightened durni. Here, in this enclave as Nikätza'arth'pavjäska, he was not in charge of anything and while he might have been respected and have a place on the council he was not considered terribly important in the overall scope of things. It must have been weird for him to make such a switch. I suspected there were many things going on to keep his brilliant mind occupied that I did not yet know about. It occurred to me in that moment that maybe the Aristocra had known the body I had returned to Csilla wasn't actually the man I thought it was, and then I wondered if Ged also knew the truth. Thrawn was many things but a man to settle down and be happy with a quiet family life was never going to be one of them and I was a little surprised to discover I was okay with this.

I inhaled deeply and let the air out slowly while I thought about what I wanted to say, and then deciding that thinking was overrated I ploughed ahead. "Listen to me," I said, "I used to have nightmares about your death a lot and I lived with that knowledge for a really long time. Then the very thing I feared and dreaded the most happened and thought I'd lost you forever but that was not the case." I brought my knees up to my chest and hugged them tightly. "I don't like being lied to and it was a hell of a shock to see you alive and well after what I had just gone through, sitting with your corpse, sitting through your funeral. I needed time to deal with that shock, that grief, your ghost, as well as my own anger." He watched me with in intensity that was a little unnerving but I needed to finish my thoughts.

"You hurt me." I told him plainly, "I thought you were dead and grief sits deeply with me which you should have known. Maybe part of you did but the logic part of you ignored this fact and the result was not very pretty. You really did put me through hell and I still don't know what to make of it all but I worked through the worst of it and came to understand that no matter how mad I may have been it doesn't compare to life without you in it."

He nodded but before he could say anything I added. "Navaari knew, he knew I needed time to think and he did as well, like me, he was pretty pissed off at you, you know."

"That would be an understatement if ever there was one," Thrawn said with a sigh, running his fingers through his hair to brush it back off his face.

I nodded, "We both just needed time and once we'd sorted through all the grief and the anger to discover that having you alive was much better than thinking you were dead it was time to come home. When I saw the room cleared of all your things I thought...well I thought we just never seemed to get a break that, no matter how much we tried, the universe was determined we should not be together. In that moment, when I thought I had lost you for good a second time I knew that no matter what you had done or how you had done it I wanted you alive and I wanted you with me. I didn't think I would ever be whole again until the moment you stepped into the barn."

"I had hoped to catch you when you arrived so that I could explain why I had moved everything from your room but you had already gone to change and then I missed you again because you had come to the barn. I ran into Kerrjan who wanted to see what all the fuss was about, suspecting that the pup had escaped. He got to you first."

I nodded. "I had forgotten my pack and you know how picky Navaari gets when I leave my stuff lying around."

That made Thrawn smile, "You are a little chaotic."

"It's part of my charm," I replied airily.

He reached over and caressed my cheek. "You were not the only one who was concerned about the state of our relationship."

"That's good to know." I told him. "But now you're here and you're alive. I feel as though we've been given a second chance. You don't have to plan a war, you don't have to command a battle fleet and there's no Emperor to meddle our fates. I may have been pretty pissed off at you but now I am just grateful. Stop saying you are sorry. I accept your apology, okay?"

He gave me a slight almost uncertain nod. "Okay."

"And I forgive you." I added after a moment.

The air in the bedroom was still as he just watched me and then he let out the breath he had been holding slowly. "Thank you." He nodded and I understood that he had really needed to hear these words.

"So that leaves me to ask what happens now?" I looked at him.

For what felt like an age he said nothing. He just stared at me as though I were some great mystery he had yet to untangle. Then he leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. "Now I make stim'caf and we begin," he replied, getting out of bed and nudging me to do the same

"Begin what?" I asked taking the warm, floor length robe that he handed me and slipping it on.

"Begin the rest of our lives," He answered with an enigmatic smile.

I stood very still, watching him slip into a pair of soft trousers as the enormity of his words sank in slowly. I wondered, for a moment, if we could actually have a life with each other that did not revolve around some sort of personal conflict, or a galactic war, or some other major disaster. If we could live together for longer than a few stolen months at a time and not end up fighting or hating each other. I had believed, in the past, that such a life with this man could never happen because he was too tied to his command and his ship but now that the possibility stood before me and I suddenly found myself scared at the prospects of one way of life ending so that another could begin. Perhaps he sensed my thoughts because he looked at me with a slight frown and came to stand in front of me.

Credit for them," he said as he circled my waist with his hands.

"I was just wondering if a normal life together was even possible."

"I think, given all that we have been through, we have earned the right to try, don't you?" He replied touching his forehead to mine.

I just stood there for a moment not answering him then I looked up into his face trying to read the expression in his eyes and nodded. "Yes," I said, "I suppose we have."

"Right then, come with me so that I can feed you." And he led me downstairs.

I sat at the kitchen counter and watched as he prepared 'caf and breakfast. I believed then that, maybe just maybe, it was possible to be loved, happy and content all at the same time. I wrapped my hands around the hot mug of 'caf he handed me and sipped it with a smile. I had no idea what our future would bring but in that moment I also didn't care. I sipped my 'caf slowly and thought briefly about the last ten years of my life. I had come a long way from the mechanic pit in our docking bay on Tatooine to being here. I had experienced more than I could possibly ever dreamed of although I had not planned for any of it. Certainly I would not have believed I would fall in love with a man like Thrawn but now I could not imagine a life without him although that had very nearly occurred. I wasn't a person generally given to long periods of introspective thinking but it occurred to me that in this moment I was content. I also knew it wouldn't stay that way for long but that was also okay.

"So," he said suddenly breaking into my thoughts, "have you considered a name for that whelp of yours yet?"

"A name?" I laughed, surprised at his question. "No."

"Kerrjan has been calling him Ka'lü'biri and if you are not careful that name is going to stick."

I grinned, Ka'lü'biri meant little pest who is nosey. "It's an apt name though." I replied.

"You like him then." It wasn't really a question.

"I do, thank you he's very cute." Then I said, "You understand that he will be living here with us and not stuck out in the barn, right?" It had been heart wrenching to hear the little pup yowl for me as I had left him alone in his kennel. That was not going to happen a second time.

"Kerrjan warned me you would want that and I have no objections as long as he is well behaved. He also said the pup won't be a good sled-hound but that he has the makings of a fine tracker. He's very intelligent. You will have to start training him soon though."

"I'll talk to Kerrjan about it later," I said, "One more day of relative freedom won't hurt the pup. I want to spend the day here, unpacking and...well... being with you." There was a quiver in my voice which made him stop what he was doing and turn around. "I still can't quite believe everything that's happened but I'm grateful you're alive and...." I added, "I am really glad you're here."

He turned to look at me thoughtfully and when our eyes met I felt the world stop and my heart flutter. After all this time, after all we'd been through he still had the power to suck my breath away with a single glance. The sudden blush that coloured my cheeks did not go unnoticed and his smile was seductive and pleased all at the same time. I didn't need to ask what he was thinking because I could see it written all over his face.

"No, no, no," I wagged my forefinger at him, "breakfast first, I'm hungry then I really, really want to try out the bathtub because I think every muscle in my body hurts and after that ...well I'm sure you can think of something since diversionary tactics seem to be a speciality of yours."

He arched an eyebrow and smiled. "Indeed."

Perhaps if we had been an ordinary couple in the galaxy he would have said something romantic to fill the silence that followed his words or maybe taken my hand in his and gazed lovingly into my eyes but we were not an ordinary couple and he did none of these things. Instead he refilled my cup and then he made breakfast which we both shared in an easy silence reminding me of that single morning on Coruscant when everything had seemed perfect.

There were a billion things I wanted to ask him and he knew this but all of my questions could wait. Right now I was content just to be here in this moment with him because I knew from personal experience that moments like these were rare and precious. We could never go back to what we had been before but I was glad for this too. Now, at least to me, it felt as though we were on more equal footing, as though we had both passed some sort of test of character and managed to survive it intact, more or less. We had been given a second chance to share a life together unfettered by all the constraints that the Empire, duty and expectation had laid in place. I had never known or loved anyone the way I knew and loved him; it was a daunting thing to face. He was a lot of work, but then again so was I and it was this last thought which made me smile.

I looked up to find him staring at me. His eyes glowed with a soft, red heat which made me shiver. "You have that look on your face." He remarked casually as he began to clear away the dishes.

"Oh? And which one is that?"

"The one that usually means you're planning some sort of mischief," he replied.

I shrugged as I got off the stool and headed towards the stairs. "The only thing I plan on doing right now is running a bath and giving that swimming pool you called a bathtub a try. There is nothing mischievous about that," I said looking at him over my shoulder, "Unless you'd care to join me."

And then it was his turn to smile.

The End.

