

The Other Side of Grace

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

My exile on Tatooine ended suddenly when Lord Vader contacted me via holo transmission and told me face to face I could return to Coruscant and resume my duties to him there. It was a short, one sided conversation with no explanations, no apologies and no chance for me to ask questions but after almost a year of being banished from his sight I welcomed his terse words despite the fact it meant I would, once again, have to leave my home and my family.

Saying my farewells to Tatooine was hard. The night before the return journey to Coruscant we had a big family gathering. It had been bitter sweet. For this first time in my life I really understood what it meant to have such a good family and I knew that this time the goodbyes would be heart wrenching. Uncle Vahlek had made that a little easier by asking if I would drop him off on Corellia which was directly on the way to Coruscant. It had meant I was not alone for most of the trip and I think that was mostly his intent. We spent most of the time talking and I was grateful for his company. Only for the last few hours of my journey was I alone.

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

I had missed Winter fete celebrations by eight weeks and I wasn't complaining. Shiv had pounced on me two days after my return and regaled me with all the crazy gossip that I had missed. Some things just never changed and I had laughed at his descriptions of who was sneaking around with whom, about the fights that had broken out, as they did every year, and about the

various promotions that had been awarded. Sitting in a quiet, expensive café in the fashion district listening to him spin tales about the life in the imperial court that I had missed, I remembered the good side of being back. Shiv had a gift for gossip and story telling and through his words I felt as though I was not only catching up but seeing it all through his eyes. In return I had shared stories about Tatooine and life at a docking bay, much to his shock and horror. He considered anything outside of the Core to be entirely too provincial and Tatooine was his worst nightmare. I just laughed. I loved my home even more so than before.

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

Two weeks after my return a bouquet of flowers consisting of rare Nubian Sunset roses and Corellian Moon-bursts was delivered to my office. The delivery girl had smiled as I signed for them and made a comment about me being lucky to have such a thoughtful admirer. I just gave her a smile that said, 'I know'. There was a small card tucked deep within the flowers that simply said; *Welcome back, I trust you are settling in.* How Thrawn kept so well informed was beyond me. There had been no time to get word to him that I was heading back to the Imperial Center yet he had known. I had asked Jarack about this when he dropped off Thrawn's latest letter to me but all he had said was "*The Admiral always knows where you are, Miss.*" And gave me one of those secret smiles reserved for those in the know not telling a person who wants to know the very thing that has aroused the curiosity in the first place. I just made a face and he had laughed as he left the office. If I didn't know any better I would have half suspected Thrawn of having some tracking device tacked to me somehow.

For some time now he and I had been corresponding purely in his native language. While at first this presented quite a challenge for me, under his guidance my use of Cheunh improved greatly and in the space of nine months, give or take, I had become quite fluent at least with the written side of things. He had provided me with the most amazing dictionaries and data bases with sound files and pronunciation help but it was one thing to practice with the computer programme and quite another to speak with a native. I was looking forward to seeing him again so I could get in some practical lessons. The other

two languages he had suggested I learn and given me information for had presented less of a challenge and on Tatooine I had found several traders and a few pilots who were fluent in both Minnisiat and Sy-Bisti, neither were hard for me to pick up.

I enjoyed the challenge of learning a new language but Cheunh was by far the hardest I had ever set my mind to. It had taken a very long time before I could read his letters without constantly consulting the extensive data base he had given me. Once I could read his words without help, I usually savoured them in the quiet of my flat, with a cup of tea and no distractions. I would often reply to him the same night while his thoughts and stories were still fresh in my mind. It was easy to get side tracked if I put off answering him right away.
A'mia Tekari,

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

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

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

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

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

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

*In the mean time, look after yourself and try to stay out of trouble. I look forward to hearing from you. Your letters always brighten my day.
Ilath'mera'talashTi'Ia,
Mith'raw'nuruodo*

I laughed at the comments about Bel. She had argued with the antique book dealer for almost three hours before buying a small first edition of a book of poems by the famous poet Tiveria Sekanis. I hadn't known at the time but

the book was a birthday gift for me and I had cried when I had unwrapped it. I was certain that when he came back, it was one of the books Thrawn would very much enjoy looking at. Then, I had sighed at his almost eerie ability to read between my inability to spit it out, wondering then as I balanced my tea cup on the arm of my seat how I would answer the one question I had been dreading since the day I had found out who my birth parents were. With a sigh, I got up to refresh my tea and then settled down answer Thrawn because I had told Jarack I would have a letter for him to pick up in the morning and I didn't want to waste his time.

Mia e'Tekari,

Coruscant never sleeps do you know that? It is a pretty city; all lit up like a Boonta Eve street festival but it's terribly restless and utterly soulless. We had a very impressive micro storm earlier on and I wished you could have seen the lightening as it danced about the sky scrapers. I turned the lights off so I could watch and in the darkness I realised how fragrant the flowers are that you sent. I am not sure how to thank you for such a beautiful and thoughtful gift. The moment I unwrapped them they reminded me of home because the roses are the colour of a Tatooine sunset, and the Corellian Moon blossoms are almost the same colour as the planet's moons' light, which I am certain was the effect you were going for. I am quite sure it was not a coincidence that they arrived at the same time I got hit by a really bad bout of homesickness. Shiv was very impressed and although I commented to him that they could have been from anyone when he admired your thoughtfulness, he just laughed. He said and I quote 'Highly doubtful beautiful flowers such as this would come from anyone else, since most of the sharks that have been on your tail do not have the forethought or taste to send you such a beautiful combination.' I had to laugh because he is such a designer at heart, after going on about how expensive the roses must have been to get them shipped at this time of year, he suggested that I should ask Cati to make me a dress using the same combination of colours, then he took a blossom sample from each one so goodness knows what he plans. He said to tell you that you win points for class and making me smile.

You mentioned in your last letter that you felt I had something weighing on my mind. I wonder some times how you know these things, and if I should start looking over my shoulder for spies or something. As you have guessed, there is something I have wanted to tell you for months now but have not been able to find words for. I must have started the letters trying to talk about it a dozen times but words seem pale in comparison to that actual event and information so I will just say it. While I was home, I had a strange encounter in Mos Espa with a woman called Rikka Blane. To make a long story short she told the following. I was born on Tatooine in her house, the illegitimate child of a Jedi named A'kali L'uanna and a clone soldier, a commander I think. I spent almost the first year of my life in Rikka's care before my mother came

back and took me away to be hidden from those hunting Jedi. Rikka showed my holo-images of my birth mother and I look just like her. It was quite a shock to see. This first visit with this woman who looked after me for the first year of my life was unnerving.

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

According to Lord Vader A'kali L'uanna was killed by her lover, the man I assume fathered me. And as I write this I can't help but shake my head. My life is starting to sound more and more like a very bad holo film. You know one of those awful stories where it turns out that everyone is related to everyone and they all die horribly at the end. How much more complicated can it get?

I suppose I should be happy really, now at least I know where I was born and my birth date. Papa jokes that I am lucky because now I get to celebrate two 'birthdays', because we always celebrated the day I was found. But this news didn't bring happiness it brought more questions and a strange sense of emptiness I can't explain. Just over two years ago I had no idea I was even adopted, now I have no idea what to even think.

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

I really enjoyed your description of the arboreal world you came across in the Gradilis Sector. It sounds fascinating. I have never seen a planet

belonging to a red star. I imagine the lighting must be spectacular. Do you think it will really be a place you will find useful for your secret and nefarious plans? I must admit I enjoy all the veiled secrecy in your words and it feels as though you half expect me to somehow figure it all out. So far I haven't come up with any brilliant ideas, but I will let you know when I unearth your secret plot.

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

Well, it's three am and I am falling asleep so I guess I will close this now and get it ready for Jarack tomorrow. He's very efficient and very secretive, you know. It seems to me my life is filled with secretive men, complicated family issues and a great lack of answers that make any sense. Papa always tells me that the only constant we can rely on is that nothing is constant at all, except change. This statement usually earns him one of my looks and ends with me having to go and make a cup of tea.

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

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

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,
Merlyn*

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

help the process any. I was so looking forward to the holiday, Tapani day, coming up in a week's time.

Being busy kept my mind off being maudlin. I sorely missed my family and my home but most of the time I was just too inundated with work to think about it. Lord Vader, it seemed, had decided that he would make full use of my talents as his go-to girl and things had never been so hectic as they now were. Or maybe, I had thought ruefully one day, he was actually punishing me in a more cruel and unusual manner than before, making him far more subtle than I had ever given him credit for being. I didn't really mind though, it felt good to be needed even if it was in that typical Lord Vader shouty, unappreciated way. I got a certain amount of satisfaction knowing I was good at my job and that he relied upon me to get things done. Of course it also made my chances of being killed due to failure somewhat greater but every job comes with risks.

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

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

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

He laughed. He had a nice laugh, rich and warm. In the time he had started taking care of the letters that Thrawn and I wrote to each other I developed a certain connection to him. He was a quiet man in his mid to late thirties, with silver grey hair ever so slightly longer than regulation allowed and a neatly trimmed beard and moustache. His eyes were a strange silvery colour that almost matched his hair and they were intense sometimes to look at. I was quite sure that if he had ever worked as an interrogator of any kind his victims would have cowered immediately after being stared at for any length of time. I was curious enough to wonder about what it was he really did and polite enough not to ask. I am certain he knew this and it amused him greatly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Will you be needing me to come by tomorrow?” he asked.

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

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

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

A’mia Tekari,

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

I am truly glad you enjoyed the flowers. I had suspected that you might feel a little down coming back to a planet you do not like very much. While I know you are happy to be back in Lord Vader’s, dare I say this, good graces, leaving your home world after such a long visit will have been hard. I remember how difficult it was for you the last time to say goodbye to your family when we were both there. Now, I imagine that leaving takes on extra significance since you know that you were born there and it truly is your home.

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

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

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

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

carried. Now that you know the whole truth perhaps you understand better the reasons your adoptive parents kept it from you as long as they did. Maybe now you can even forgive them a little for keeping such terrible secrets.

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

During that time, the armies of the republic were cloned on Kamino and the genetic source was a man who originally came from a planet called Concord Dawn. I don't know if you are aware of this or not but his native language was Mando'a, or Mandalorian as it is sometimes known as. I guess this would help to clear up one more little mystery about you, although how you would automatically know this language is beyond me. Perhaps some trick of your birth mother's? Maybe something she was able to pass on to you through the force? Lord Vader might be a better person to clear that question up for you.

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

The planet in the Gradilis sector is indeed ideal for my, how did you put it, secret and nefarious plans. Where do you come up with these terms, my dear? I think you are covertly reading far too many trashy space detective stories from the Jeb Holloway era. Next you will be calling me a dastardly rat bastard, start wearing your hair in inexplicable, gravity defying coifed styles, slinky silk dresses sexily slit up to your hip and a nasty little stiletto blade

strapped to your thigh. While this image is most appealing for a number of reasons, I beg you not to try it for real.

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

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

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

It's odd, I don't think of Thrass that often. It has been a long time since he was reported MIA and I am certain he is no longer alive but of course no one knows this for sure. I do not often let sentiment interfere with my work but all this talk of family brings these memories up and at this moment I find myself missing him. I wonder what he would have made of you. I can almost hear his voice telling me that getting involved with someone not of our kind will only serve to make me even more unpopular than I already am with my people. Rest assured popularity was never high on my list of things I considered important. My younger sister, on the other hand, would most likely see this as a good thing. She enjoyed my rebellious side and in many ways takes after me on this. Unlike Thrass and me, she did not become involved in the military and was taken on by one of the artistic families. She is a very talented artist in her own right and perhaps some day I will be able to show you some of her works. She has recently had a piece admitted to the U'kalleyj'ann Art Gallery's permanent collection. This is one of the main art galleries in the capitol city of Csaplar. I am, needless to say, quite proud of her accomplishments. I think that should the two of you ever meet, you would get along well. You have a surprising amount in common.

The Chiss produce extraordinary works of art, typical of a people such as mine, but few outsiders ever get to see or experience them. In some respects

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

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

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

My dear, I am quite flattered that you stay up until the small hours of the night writing to me, but really you should get some sleep. Jarack or one of his people would not mind if you rescheduled a pick up. He is paid to be both efficient and secretive. That is part of his job. I have known him for some time now, he was one of the best in his year at the Academy and as a commando he was part of an elite group of men I felt could be utilised in far better ways. Do

not be fooled by the fact that he delivers my letters to you and vice versa, that is a side line or perhaps better to say a great favour he does for me. As to your question about the types of male attention you attract, I can only speculate on why men of mystery, as you call them, would be attracted to your side but I am certain that were I to utter what I think it would earn me a projectile of some sort being flung in my general direction or worse.

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

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

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ya
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why did you stop?"

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

"Why?"

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

"You were there when it happened?"

He'd nodded. "Tried to save him, tried to help but they were too many and they were too well trained and I was just a young boy. One of them knocked

me unconscious and when I came to my master was dead along with ten of his attackers. I will spare you the details but it wasn't pretty. I had just turned thirteen."

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

"I did. It took a long time and I was much older and far more experienced." He looked at me for a moment with his pale green eyes and then had said, "And to answer your next question, yes. I killed them both and did not regret it." He had given me a small, tight smile. "His teachings were just the beginning for me, after his death I sought others who would teach me, I eventually ended up on Anzat and learned many valuable lessons under the watchful eye of Akku Seii. Still I never forgot my first Master I ever had. His life, his death shaped what I became, much as your does to you now. Treasure your time with him, lei'lei." He had toyed with his tea cup. "The way you move, reminds me of my first master. The one who is teaching you is very good. I see the same grace in your actions." We had just looked at each other for a moment and I felt him testing me to see whether or not the news that he had killed changed how I saw him. It didn't. Perhaps two years ago it might have but not any more. I had not looked away from his gaze and after a few moments he had nodded in acknowledgment of my acceptance. I had passed his test.

"How long were you on Anzat, Zte'sa?" I had asked after a long silence. Anzat was a strange planet out in the Mid Rim. Not much was known to me about it and no one ever went there, but I had heard stories from some of the spacers and pilots about it, none of them good.

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

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

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

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

The first day back under Master Kjestyll's watchful eye had been welcome but hard. He had not taken it easy on me, wanting I suspect, to see how much work he needed to do with me so that I would get back up to the level he felt I should be at. When I had left Coruscant I had just passed my trial and gone from level four to level five. Now after being under his scrutiny for the past four hours I wondered if I should not be sent back to level four. I felt like a bantha in a glass shop. We sat on the floor bathed in the sunlight that streamed through the huge lancet windows. The dust we had stirred up danced in the beams and the pale yellow light sparkled. I waited for his comments as I worked into slow cool down stretches.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I surveyed the mess in my living room and then looked at Shiv who just shrugged and smirked.

"You want something to drink?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, you noticed that, did you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mia e'Tekari,

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

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

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

I would very much like to learn more about the clone soldiers but I would rather it waited until you were here and not done through letters. I hope you can understand that. I did try to find some information on them here but it is not easy to do and even my clearance doesn't allow that sort of access and, no I am not about to try slicing the Imperial mainframe. I don't need Intel breathing down my neck. I have already heard some serious horror stories about Ysanne Isard including a rumour that she had her father framed and executed so she could take his place as Director of Imperial Intelligence. Frankly, she creeps me out, although I suppose that is sort of her job. I have seen and occasionally spoken with her at a couple of the many of the palace events we've attended. I think she that she is just more interested in trying to figure out where I fit into the scheme of things than being friendly. So far, I get the feeling she is convinced I am just Lord Vader's pet office girl and I am, in this case, very happy to play the part. I have heard whispers about what happens to those who get in her way.

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

So, according to Lord Vader I have three very strong talents, telepathy, empathy and psychometry. I also have telekinesis, the ability to move objects with thought, but he said that was child's play for most force users who had any talent at all and I can sometimes step into another's being's mind and 'push' them a little or a lot depending on how weak minded they are. This is not one of those talents I like to talk about or use, although I have on occasion.

There are other abilities that I can learn but I need a teacher who is able to spend time with me and that's something Lord Vader has very little of these days. The ones I have listed above are the talents I have naturally, that developed on their own without any real training. I do see a difference now from two years ago. Practice and Lord Vader's teachings have helped me sharpen these skills.

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

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

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

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

I told him about what happened when I held the lightsaber A'kali L'uanna had left for me. He was not surprised that I had learned so much about her from that. She was my birth mother and the connection between us would have been forged probably even before birth. He said while it was very frowned upon there have been Jedi children born and it was noted that the

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

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

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

Speaking of actresses, Prince Xizor is now dating a famous holo actress by the name of Tylisha Ianko, she starred in the recent set of films based on Pell Norvic's books, The Black Star and the White Sun trilogy. Apparently she played very hard to get but he won her over anyway. I deal with his office on a fairly regular basis as he and Lord Vader communicate, if you can call it

that, on a fairly regular basis. I dislike him intensely. I met him briefly at the very first Grand Ball I attended and it was not a good experience. He apparently has the ability to give off some sort of pheromone that make him irresistible to women cross species and he has a thing for Humans. Personally, I feel that if a man has to use chemical means to attract a girlfriend then he's probably lacking something in some department some place. Thanks to Shiv I have this bit of information and so every time the prince comes near me I just have to pretend I am smitten and he leaves me alone. He pulled that pheromone trick on me at the grand ball and it was Shiv who saved the day, telling me that Xizor only goes after women he feels are challenging. So by acting like a besotted courtesan I am saving myself a ton of trouble. The man is repulsive, and has the personality of a Mos Espa Junk Dealer. If you ask me he's got serious issues. I give this relationship a month and a half, just because she is SO famous and he enjoys the lime light.

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

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

There is so much more I could babble about, but it is, once again, really late here and I am exhausted, truth be told. It has been a busy week and on top

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

So, I hope that you are well and that Jarack delivers this swiftly. I really think he enjoys the galactic man of mystery thing, to be honest. He's kind though and his presence is always a sign of something good so I am always happy to see him. I was also glad to read I am not the only one with a certain amount of sentiment that needs to be released every now and then. I was always told as a child that absence makes the heart grow fonder but in truth, I don't believe that. Absence is a black hole that is sometimes never filled back in when someone you care for is no longer in one's life. You know and understand this better than most and for that I am grateful.

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,
Merlyn*

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

father was annoyed that now ship's parts would be even more costly and difficult to come by than they had previously.

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

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

Jarack strolled into the office almost exactly at eleven o'clock and he looked tired. It had been almost four weeks since I had last talked to him. I signed for the courier pouch and then asked if he wanted something to drink. For the first time since I had met him he did not refuse the offer of a cup of spiced coffee and he sat down as though it had been the first moment of rest he had had in a long time.

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

He accepted it with a wan smile. "It's been a busy time but nothing to worry about; I'll catch up on sleep when I get back onboard my ship." I looked

at him carefully and he, in turn noted my scrutiny. “Ask your question, Miss Gabriel. I don’t bite.”

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

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

“An over abundance of tenacious curiosity?” that sure sounded like Thrawn’s words.

“Yes, ma’am that is exactly how he put it.” He grinned.

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

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

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

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

“You know him?”

He shook his head. “By reputation only. I wasn’t aware he had any living family, though.”

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

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

I frowned. “Why is that interesting?”

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

I sighed. “I don’t really understand.”

He looked at me for a moment then said quietly. “No, I am certain you do not.” He did not elaborate and the look on his face told me that part of our conversation had ended. He finished his coffee and set the cup on the table by the chair. “I must be on my way, deadlines to meet and I am certain that the Admiral will be waiting for this.” He said getting up. He turned to leave but then turned back to face me. “You know, when the Admiral first asked me to

play post boy, especially as a favour, I was a bit surprised. He never struck me as a man who attached himself to any one person, always kept himself to himself as a rule but not so with you. Then again, you are not at all what you appear to be, are you?”

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

He barked a shot sharp laugh. “Perhaps it’s good that you don’t know and can’t answer that.” he smiled. “See you next time, thanks for the coffee.”

“Anytime.” I said and watched as he left. I looked at the courier package and made a face as I heard the words *over abundance of tenacious curiosity* echo in my head. I set the package aside, slipping it into the drawer of my desk and got back to work. I was grateful for my job because it was the one thing that distracted me from all the strange little mysteries that had piled up in my life. My uncle Vahlek was slowly rising to the top of this list.

I yawned and poured myself another cup of spice coffee. Jarack was not the only one who was tired except my reason was too much partying Imperial style. Most of the time I tried to avoid the social functions if I could but sometimes even that was impossible and if Lord Vader said go, well I attended dressed appropriately either at his side or with Shiv at mine. Last night’s event was quite unlike anything I had ever seen before and at Lord Vader’s insistence I had remained until he had been ready to leave.

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

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

with this man because he was quite brilliant and powerful and didn't like not getting what he wanted.

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

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

"Oh, why is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A'mia Tekari,

I hope that this letter finds you happy and well. Yours arrived three days ago and it was a bright spot on a fairly dull day. I fear that to the outside observer the life of an Imperial Officer seems glamorous and full of excitement but you and I both know that could not be further from the truth. For the past week we have been meandering, I suppose is the best way to put it, around the edge of the Outer Rim in the Unknown Regions. I am hopeful that in six months or so we might be headed back to the Core. While I enjoy what I am

doing, I also look forward to some time planet side as well. At least I will not have to spend the first week back catching up on what has been happening. Were it not for you, I would be so far behind on the gossip and stories of Coruscant's rich and infamous that I could not show my face in court. Where do you get all this nonsense from? Siavaan, I am betting, has a lot to do with it.

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

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

The information you sent on the various force powers and gifts was incredibly helpful. The Chiss have never, to the best of my knowledge, produced a force user of any kind. While we are not a people who have been able to use this power we are certainly not immune to it. Once before, when I was considerably younger I was given the opportunity to experience what I believe Lord Vader called force choke. It was a most unpleasant sensation. Your delightful gift of empathy has a far more pleasant effect and one day I hope we can explore this to its fullest extent. Lord Vader's description of you as an ungrounded power coupling is not so far from the truth. I am curious if you have ever tried to use your telepathy on me? If so I have never noticed. Does it work on those who are not in tune with the force? I feel it would be to my advantage to know everything I can about this Force and all the implications that goes with it.

That Siavaan was a fan of the Grime-crime genre somehow does not surprise me, however, that you would become so enamoured by it does, just a little bit. I have not read the entire Holloway series but I am told he was the best. I am sure you will regale me enthusiastically with all the gory details of your newfound passion and when I return perhaps you will allow me to

borrow your books. I find the idea of a party themed around this topic a little unnerving, as you say I am uncertain as to how many clichés I could handle in one evening although I assure you I am a good deal tougher than you seem to give me credit for.

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

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

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

it is no longer there? How do you fill in the empty space left behind? My dear, while you did not grow up with siblings you have experienced such great losses in your own life that I know when I speak of these things, you will understand. This gives me some measure of comfort and I am thankful.

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

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

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

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

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

"No!" I stamped my foot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That is because it is all he now knows to use. His anger drives him so he feels it will drive you as well but you fight against it." My master said. "He uses his anger to fuel the power he takes from the living force but the Bunduki arts do not draw on this mystery, they were created to counter those who could, created to use the energy of the body, the air and the world around you. When you lock your anger deep within your shi-lu you block everything that allows you to move as one with the energy of life." He corrected my position and

continued. “This lesson is one you do not seem willing to learn, so often you come to me in this way, full of fire in your belly.” He tapped my solar plexus; the exact spot where I felt that hard knot of anger sit. “You must learn to let go and become the stillness.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I got up. He looked at me carefully. With a slight frown he walked around me as though I were an object of art to be studied. Then to my surprised he walked away without saying a word. For a moment I was cross and more than a

little annoyed with him but this was not the first time he had done this. I knelt on the floor, meditating. My brain was busy, too busy. It wasn’t so much about coherent thought but rather the lack of it, white noise, filling, distracting and hard to shake. The problem I suddenly realised was not the noise itself, not the jumble of what ifs and whys that raced around inside my head but the fact that I let it over take everything else.

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

Don’t seek the stillness, be the stillness...

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

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

I sensed him return to the room and I sensed rather than knew his move. I blocked it easily and didn’t even think about it. He did not stop he did not let up, he moved with a speed and a certainty that was beautiful. No thoughts, no clutter in my brain. Not only was I able to keep up and stay on my feet but one or twice I also surprised him.

Soaked in sweat and panting hard we eventually stopped when he had put me on the flat of my back with a beautiful leg and hand combination I had never seen before.

“That was called *water through stone*.” He said.

“Impressive.” I said catching my breath. I sat up slowly.

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

“Too much in my head. Coruscant is like a big explosion in my brain.” I said. “In the desert, with Zte’sa Vahlek, everything was simple, there were no distractions.”

He nodded. “In a fight there will always be distractions. One second of your mind being elsewhere could cost you an arm, or a leg or your life.” He said. “You are like a power coupling with no ground sometimes, your focus is

scattered all over the place, you send out energy in every direction. You could be so much better than this if you learned to focus properly. I am wondering how I can best teach you this. I have never had such a difficult student before. You are most challenging for me.”

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

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

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

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

“Did it?” I asked.

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

“I don’t know. I just know how I feel when I use anger to fight. It’s powerful, it’s seductive but I don’t like it all that much. I feel as though a part of me dies when I do things this way, Lord Vader and the Emperor’s way. I know that Lord Vader uses it as a tool but he can control it.”

“Does he or does it control him?” he asked.

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

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

“But in the meantime I struggle.” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

Once again it is late but I like this time of night, shortly before midnight when the traffic outside has calmed down somewhat and the activity along with the noise of the city moves downward into the underworld. I always liked night time and at home I often went up on the Bluff and spent hours staring upward. Of all the things I miss, seeing the stars definitely ranks high up on that list. There is too much light pollution here, as though the entire planet wants to outshine even the brightest star in the sky. I remember a couple of the Pilots who worked for my father years ago telling me that Coruscant was one of the only planets that shone like a sun. While I can understand that people love it here, love the busy life style, the access to everything and anything the galaxy has to offer I find it sad that the natural side of the planet is missing. I am glad I never grew up here and got to see the wonders of worlds without much technology. I miss Tatooine greatly, especially at night. Maybe that’s why it is easier to write to you in this quiet time, it takes away the sensation of loss.

Yes, Shiv is mostly to blame for my surprising amount of useless popular culture trivia, although the others help. He and Antygra, both keep up on all the gossip because they hear most of it first or second hand from the

courtesans and they pass it along to me. It's good to know sometimes, even if it is just gossip, and you would not believe how often these crazy topics come up in conversation at the Palace events I am obligated to attend. Speaking of Palace events, last week I attended at the behest of Lord Vader, one of the strangest events I have ever seen here.

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

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

There have been a number of strange rumours flying about the palace concerning the Emperor's health. Lord Vader won't speak about this topic but he did tell me that using the Force the way the Emperor does is very draining on the physical body. Since I have been back I have not had any personal contact with the Emperor and I am quite happy with that to be honest. Mostly I have been busy keeping up with Lord Vader and his affairs. I was cross as all hell to learn that he had been quite badly injured sometime ago on Aridus. This information slipped out from one of his informants, a man named Jix. I met him briefly at Lord Vader's Coruscant Palace, which should really be called a dungeon because it's so dark and dreary. Jix was waiting to see Lord Vader and I was there on some emergency last minute rescheduling which Lord Vader really enjoys hauling me out of bed for at the worst possible hour, before he went off planet again. This accident happened while I was still

on Tatooine and Jix was not very open about details. When I asked Lord Vader about it his answer was a terse statement about reminding some people to keep their mouths shut and that he was fine. I think he secretly likes it when I inquire about his health but you know how he is. It would be bad form for the Emperor's right hand man to be seen as anything but mighty and powerful. I didn't press the issue.

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

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

with me. Sometimes I do love the perks of the job. If there is a catalogue, I'll pick you up one and I will definitely tell you all about it in my next letter.

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

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

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

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

You asked about the trials and what that entails, well I am studying the Bunduki arts, also sometimes known as Teräs Käsi. A form of fighting that was started by the Followers of Palawa on the planet Bunduki. It is a kind of

weaponless martial arts, although we are also taught to use some combat weapons such as staves and swords. The trials are a test of how far I have come as a student and how well I have learned. If I pass then I will advance upward and learn more complex moves and combinations. Most of the time a teacher will evaluate his or her students themselves but the trials that take place in a few months from now are intergalactic. This is unusual and should be interesting. I have no details yet on the whole event but when I do I will keep you posted.

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

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

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

Mera'ta'llath'Ia

Merlyn

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

"By someone you thought was a friend?"

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

"Did it?"

"No." I sighed and she just laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She only answered that with a snort.

"You disagree?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Always."

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

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

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

“I might just do that.” I said feeling suddenly grateful.

She just laughed and waved cheerfully as I left.

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

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

As I walked down the stairs, my hand lightly perched on Zaarin’s arm I could not help the ache in my heart as I realised there would be no dancing with Thrawn at this ball. I had not seen the man in over a year and despite the letters, his words and kindnesses, his physical presence failed making me lonely. *This is what it means to be bound...* Navaari had said. I had become convinced that it was some sort of a Dantassi curse.

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

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

after ten minutes of this I made a polite excuse of needing to speak to someone and slipped into the crowd.

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

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

“Don’t ask.” I growled.

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

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

“Who’s he with now?” I whispered to Antygra.

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

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

“Don’t you get the entertainment holonet?”

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

“No wonder you never know what’s going on.” He countered. “You’ve been on it you know.”

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

“Yeah, you and Admiral, then Captain, Thrawn were voted the most unusual pairing of the year, not this last winter fete but the one before that. They had holo footage of you both entering the grand hall, recorders were not allowed in but someone snuck one in any way, so the also had some hidden recorded footage of you two dancing, you looked pretty cozy in his arms and the expression on his face said he liked having you there. It was probably a good thing you weren’t around, you’d have been livid. You should have heard the speculations. Of course it all died down fast enough when he left the Core and you mysteriously vanished. Well... at first there were rumours that you’d run off together, that you were pregnant with his illegitimate love child and the

Emperor had banished you both from Coruscant. You know the usual wild speculation but then when no one came up with any new stories about you two, they got bored.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What sort of language is that?” Zaarin asked.

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

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

“What’s your mechanic’s rating?” he asked.

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

“Have you ever seen a TIE’s engines up close?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It looks like Lord Vader’s TIE Advanced.” I said commenting on his drawing.

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

“Won’t the additions make the ship more expensive to manufacture?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*What?!*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was grateful when Shiv appeared and bugged me to dance with him. The rest of the evening passed without incident. Zaarin was as well behaved as could be expected and I remained as aloof as I dared without being rude. We made polite banter and danced a few more times but Shiv and the others made sure I was well looked after. By midnight I did not have to feign fatigue, I was

tired and my feet hurt. I made my excuses to Zaarin who was deeply engaged in a heated argument with Admiral Harkov, relieving him from the duty of escorting me home because Shiv and Ynyth had offered to do that. He broke off from his conversation to ask if he might see me again and when I told him I did not think it would be a good idea he was not pleased.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If I am afforded the time to go, I imagine it complies with the regulations on inter palace relationships set in place. Now, Grand Admiral, I really must leave I have a lot of work to do tomorrow and my ride is waiting for me. I had a very pleasant evening, thank you." I turned to make a quick get

away but he caught my arm. I had to fight against my instinctive desire to put him on his ass. I was a little unprepared when he took a hold of my hand and kissed it politely. I could feel his lust but I shut it out. The thought of his hands on my body made me queasy. I wasn't sure why, though, because it wasn't as if he was ugly or even unpleasant to be with. But something about him didn't sit well with me and I was very glad to get away from him.

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

A'mia Tekari,

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

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

When I was first introduced to this planet I was quite awed by the sheer audacity of it. An anomaly of science more than anything else, it fascinated me to know how the whole thing worked, because in theory a planet like Coruscant should not exist. I visited some of the atmospheric plants and the weather controllers, and made several forays into the underside. It is not a place I would care to live forever. I, too, would miss the natural side of a planet. Csilla is a cold, place wrapped in the grips of an ice age, but one can go topside and see stars, feel the wind and breathe the air. I often got the feeling on Coruscant that the air was never really fresh, that it was used, cleaned then used again. A foolish notion I agree but something that passed my mind. So I do understand your feelings about it, and while I doubt I would ever feel wholly comfortable on Tatooine, it is an honest planet. She shows you her face for good or bad and you make of it what you will. I empathise with you on your longing to see stars in the night sky.

So, Tigellinus finally got his wish and was inducted into the Canted Circle. It does not surprise me that you have neither heard of this nor seen an induction before. It is a very old, fairly secretive society based on Coruscant for the elite, wealthy and the influential. There is a very long waiting list of

beings wanting to be allowed entry into it and it used to be that perhaps in a decade no more than ten or twelve new members were allowed in. Since the Ascension of the Emperor that number has increased considerably. He tends to push those whom he favours. I can only imagine that Tigellinus' induction caused quite a stir, he was most assuredly not officially next in line.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

job of repelling aggressive incursions and considering long-term strategic concerns. It is well organised and well run.

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

And on that happy little note I shall end this. Be well, my dear.
Ilath'mera'talashti'la
Mitth'raw'nuruodo

I grinned as I read the last few lines. I loved it when he played these word games. He had told me when we had first begun to write exclusively in Cheunh that the Chiss enjoyed word play greatly. It was an elegant, almost sport like past time and he excelled in it. I made a fresh cup of tea and sat down to answer him. I wasn't sure this would be an easy letter to write though because I got the feeling he wasn't going to like it much that Lord Vader had insisted I spend time with Zaarin.

Mia e'Tekari,

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

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

It was a long night to be honest and your presence failed. Lord Vader is playing some sort of game with Zaarin, I think, and is using me as a sort of human lie detector. I didn't find anything worth reporting except that Zaarin doesn't like the Emperor or Lord Vader that much and that he is terribly proud of his new ship designs. He spent an hour ruining very expensive table linens showing me the new hyperdrive ideas. I must admit his plans are impressive and he is, as you once warned me, very intelligent but he's a boor and I do not enjoy his company. I am quite sure that rumours will circulate

about the fact that I was there with him and not you, especially as apparently you and I were quite the gossip news item after the Fete Week gala we attended together. Zaarin asked me out but I turned him down, you should have seen his face when I told him I didn't think that was appropriate. To which he countered by asking if my relationship with you was appropriate. My answer of 'What relationship?' will no doubt confuse the issue and it does make me ask why all the competition between you Imperial men? This in turn has led me to feel just a tad like the end prize in a bantha race. He will most likely request that I go with him to other official social functions and chances are that Lord Vader will not only agree but insist. I am not sure what the deal is between Zaarin and Lord Vader but I am not happy to be in the middle of this at all. I wanted you to know so that there were no misunderstandings between us, now... onto other things.

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

Thank you for the little lesson on CEDF. It was really interesting to read. I cannot imagine an entire library filled with hand written books, it must be spectacular to see. You keep hinting at the wonders of your home world and one of these days I shall be so full of curiosity that I might just take my ship and head out there for a visit. I don't imagine that would go over well, given the xenophobic nature of the Chiss. I am also grateful for the information on this strange little 'boy's club' so peculiar to Coruscant. I had no idea you were on the list for induction into the Order of the Canted Circle, how exciting. If you get in I will try to make sure I am in the front row cheering you on. I am quite sure you will look simply stunning in one of those long velvet dressing gown robe things. I could probably arrange to have you matching slippers made, Cati knows a very good shoe maker. Sorry, I'll stop now before you really do come back and decide that payback is required. Not sure what the Chiss policy is on retribution for teasing an Admiral is but I am sure it can't be good.

So I imagine that by now you are wondering about the private art showing. Shiv came and picked me up at seven. We drove over into Coco town where Fontey's Gallery, as it was called, was located. The showing had been

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

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

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

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

It is hard to describe and I am sorry I don't do a good job of that for you. Perhaps, it will be easier to talk about once you have seen the catalogue.

There is another one of these private exhibits being put together for sometime in the future, no exact date has been given yet and if I understand that right I will get to go. I'll let you know more when I do.

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

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

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

*Mera'ta'llath'Ia,
Merlyn*

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

I closed my eyes and leaned back on the couch. The images that came unwanted, unbidden were not of Thrawn but rather of my birth mother. I had been lying to myself that I did not want to know more and questions about who

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

After the Grand Ball things around the Palace had settled down and were at a deceptive lull. Shiv was busy preparing for the Court's move to Naboo and I was busy trying to keep up with the work that Lord Vader created. I had been disappointed when he had told me that neither he nor I would be staying on Naboo this year. I had been looking forward to it but his order had not come as a big surprise. He hated the planet for a number of reasons and he hated reminders of his dead wife even more. Shiv had told me when we had gone out for coffee and desert that this year it was only a smallish portion of the Court going and the whole affair would be quiet and toned down. The Emperor was moving away from the huge glamorous courts and trying to streamline things a little more so I would not be missing much. Still, I was a bit sad about it. I liked Naboo but not having to shift the office to another planet did make things a lot easier. With most of the court and many of the offices getting ready for the move things were fairly quiet on my side. This meant I could explore the Imperial palace without running into too many people, asking me if I was lost. I never got lost but try explaining that.

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

I often visited the little library I had been given by the Emperor. I had not seen him there since my return but I was almost certain I felt his presence lingering and from time to time things were moved, or books added. Every time I visited there were new things to be discovered. The last time I had looked about I had found a file full of blueprints tucked away in a small shelf at the far end of the room. The bookshelf had been covered in dust that looked as though no one had touched it for years but I was certain I had explored it thoroughly. The data card had been tucked away behind a large book that I thought was

supposed to be a cook book but I wasn't sure. When I clipped the cards I to the card reader I was amazed to find the most complete set of blue prints I had ever seen. On one card were detailed plans of the Imperial Palace and on the other were plans the building I could see in the distance from my office window and my flat, the old Jedi temple. I had often wondered about the Jedi Temple but I had never asked about it, fearing Lord Vader's wrath. After his display of temper the last time the subject of Jedi and family had come up I did not want to even think the topic let alone ask about the one place he would probably hate more than any other in the galaxy. But the Temple called to me, it tugged at my curiosity and that was always a bad thing.

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

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

"So I see." He grinned.

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

"Yeah, well actually I would have stopped by in the morning but I saw the lights were still on. You know how things go; you start out a little behind schedule and just keep accumulating lateness." He grinned handing me the bulky courier package he held in his hands.

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

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

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

"Oh, will you be headed to Naboo?"

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

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

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

"No. Try again."

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

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

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

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

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

A'mia Tekari,

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

Your talented seamstress friend, Cati, had a valid point when she stated that men don't like it when women keep secrets from them. She is quite right you know we do not like that at all, but I know you and that is not the sort of secret you would keep from me, that is simply not your way. Your letter

sounded so apologetic, as though you had actually done something wrong by obeying an order given to you by Lord Vader yet I feel it is I who must apologise for not being there for you. I was also saddened to hear you did not have such a good time at what has to be the most lavish Imperial event of the year. It surprises me that Lord Vader would put you in such a position and that leads me to believe, as you surmised, that he has suspicions concerning the Grand Admiral although exactly what those suspicions are I have no idea as of yet. In the Empire nothing is ever as it appears to be. I can only reiterate my previous words and tell you to watch your back and keep your wits about you.

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

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

Isona Medeglia's portraits are really quite elegant, don't you think? I have only ever seen one in person before and judging from the images in the

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

It should not surprise you to learn that it was the Dantassi who first led me to look at art as a more functional way of understanding people and cultures. Chiss art is something that is almost sacred in many ways. Our artists are considered national treasures and we value the best of them by displaying their works in galleries and museums, to be looked at and admired. The Chiss produce stunning works of art but to a small boy, also uninteresting. It was not until my encounter with the Dantassi that I began to see that art itself could be and often was so much more than just a painting on a wall. You must remember I was a young child at the time of this initial encounter. Before that art bored me to death, I was far more interested in playing with my model spaceships than being dragged around a gallery on an educational school trip. After my time spent with the Dantassi I started to think about art in a different way and as a young teen I began to study it on my own quite seriously, much to the chagrin and confusion of my parents. I read a lot on the subject and began to understand that one needs to, more often than not, look a little deeper at the art, architecture and artistic culture of a species to get a better grasp on how the species and culture work. These insights did not come over night and I work quite hard to remain educated in the field of art analysis. It helps that I genuinely do enjoy these studies and that they are not just a means to an end. Yes, I have on occasion had the opportunity to discuss these analytical aspects of art with His Excellency and we have often had some quite interesting debates. He does not always agree with me nor do I, him but in the end it is not really about who is right or wrong. You are correct on one thing though, he is very knowledgeable about art and he does have some unusual ideas on the subject as well. I did have to smile at his comment about furthering your artistic education, I don't think you need a lot of pushing in that direction but do take advantage of any chances you get to go and see all the exhibitions you can. If I am able, I would be more than delighted to accompany you to these affairs should you wish it, the excuse to start yet another round of gossip notwithstanding.

I am sending you two books I hope you might enjoy. I did promise that I would try to find you Cheunh literature and thanks to some of my contacts I was able to procure some for you. The two I have included are among my personal favourites and are quite lovely. One is a collection of Chiss fairy tales and myths. The other is a delightful story based on an old legend that

supposedly took place long before the great cold came. I will be quite curious as to what you think.

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

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

I know that this is a short letter but I am going to say goodnight to you now. I am quite fatigued and in the interest of not having my own advice tossed back at me about getting some sleep, I am going to bed. I will add a little good news that we will be returning to the core worlds soon. By the time the Imperial Court has returned from its retreat to Naboo I hope to be back in Imperial Space. I am certain that after your not so pleasant evening at the Grand Ball it is I who owe you many dances, a debt I shall be more than happy to repay.

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

I folded the letter back up and slipped it back into its envelope with a grin. How could he make me shiver and smile from so far away? How was it that his words could caress like his fingertips and create such an ache, such a

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, can you get me that info?"

"Now?"

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

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

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

I have not forgotten about you, Mouse. Was all the message said. I did not know what it meant but the underlying threat scared me more than I thought possible. I removed the data card from the reader and shoved them both deep into my satchel. I had the worst of the shakes and my fear under control by the time TaduK came back with a second card.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It used to be, before the Empire was in place that on Boonta Eve the great pod race was held. People came from all over the planet and even the galaxy to watch, but that had been before my time and I had never been lucky enough to see a real pod race, an official pod race. Now the holiday was celebrated with city wide street festivals, open markets and fireworks in the evening.

Traditional meals would be prepared and small prayers of thanks offered up to what ever deity you believed in. Slavery still existed on Tatooine but less than before, even so, as was tradition it was the one day were slaves were allowed a certain amount of freedom, given time off to enjoy a day and night of celebration.

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

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

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

After dinner, when the dishes were cleared away and everyone had retired to the living room I snuck away to sit outside. I would have gone up to the Bluff but too much zuffi and wine made that impossible so I just sat on the rooftop of the house and stared up at the night sky. Stars twinkled and danced and I was so glad to see them, they reminded me of how small I really was and that in the entire universe nothing lasts forever. These thoughts were not sad just sobering. It was so easy to get caught up in Court politics, feel more important than one really was and forget one's place in the galaxy as a single being, tiny and fragile. I didn't say anything when uncle Vahlek sat down beside me and handed me a cup of spiced coffee.

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

I smiled. There wasn't much I could hide from him. "I got a message from Jyrki." I said. I felt him stiffen and the air rippled with his sudden anger.

repeated the message for him. "I don't know what it means or what he is doing, what he wants but he really scares me. This message scares me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Be more specific."

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

"Why are you asking?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

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

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

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

"Why?" he asked after a long silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How long do you need me to stay, lei'lei?"

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

He smiled. "Then I'll stay as long as you are here, if that's what you want." He got up.

I glanced at him. "I do." I said.

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

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

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

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

Long after everyone had wandered off to bed, my uncle suggested we go for a walk up out onto the Bluff, away from the house, the city and the

memories. Once we had found a quiet place to sit, we talked until dawn. It was only when I began to fall asleep, my head slumping against his shoulder did he nudge me into getting up and we wandered back to the house.

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

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

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

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he can." Uncle Vahlek replied.

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

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

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

"Dream of good things." he said heading into the kitchen as I went to my bedroom. I lay in bed watching the first rays of dawn trickle through the blinds. I was exhausted but my mind raced. Sleep took a long time to find me and when it did come, contrary to uncle Vahlek's wish, it was full of unpleasant dreams.

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

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

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

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

I shrugged. "Tea?" I asked.

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

We walked through the quiet dark halls. There was no one around and we did not speak. I unlocked the library door and we walked in. Nothing had

changed, nothing had stirred. The dust had not been disturbed since my last visit and everything was still in place.

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

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

"Sort of, yeah, I guess."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Uncle Vahlek looked at me but didn't comment.

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

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

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

"Huge and it's very old, close to over four thousand years old. It has been modified and built on many, many times. It used to be beautiful, full of light. There were fountains and extraordinary gardens." He said. We kept on walking, passing smaller corridors, heading up small stairwells, and closed doors. Suddenly without rhyme or reason I felt drawn to go left.

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

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

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

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

Uncle Vahlek caught me by the arm and tugged me to my feet. "Come on. This room is not a good place for you to be and there is nothing you want to know here." He hissed trying to drag me out, but I fought him. I had been led here for a reason and if I left now I wouldn't come back.

I shook free from his grip and walked about the rubble and the mess. No one had been here in a long time. I picked my way around the objects that lay tossed and scattered around, casually brushing my hand against them. I was looking for what had called me to this place. Some sent me memories and others held their secrets too tightly for me to see. Everything was a jumble until my fingers brushed the back of an over turned rocking chair. The vision sent me to my knees as it coursed through me. My mother had often sat in this chair. I saw her there, rocking small babies, whispering to them, laughing and even singing. The chair gave up these secrets willingly. She had longed for a baby of her own, saddened that she would never have one. I saw her as clearly sitting in the chair with a tiny Twi'lek baby in her arms. She was in the middle of telling

the baby a story when someone burst into the nursery. She had looked up and as she had absorbed the news that war had been declared and that armies of clones were to be used against the droid armies of the separatists. Suddenly all the babies began to cry as if they could sense her distress. The vision faded and I came back to the present with uncle Vahlek squatting down at my side.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What are you looking for?”

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

“Zte’sa, we should go.” I whispered, rubbing my arms to ward off the cold.

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

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

“Wait, go out and stand watch.” He told me. There was a thread of steel in his voice and impatience. I stood a moment too long and he turned on me. “Lei’lei, get out of this room. I will be very fast, trust me.” There was a ferocity in his eyes I had never seen before and I backed away leaving him to do what ever it was he had come here to do. I could hear him moving softly about but I couldn’t see what he was doing and the sensation of danger grew worse and

worse. It was a darkness pressing against my mind. It hurt to breathe and panic surged through me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Partially." He said.

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

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

"You used me."

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

I shook my head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

****Today is a big day for me. I am to be taken on as a Padawan learner. I was scared that this would not happen because I am almost eleven now and*

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

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

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

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

I nodded, biting my lip.

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

"Did you know they were there?"

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

"You don't like him?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-Lei'lei, I know you have questions and I know you are scared. I am sorry if I added to this last night, but you do not need to fear me. I swore to protect you and that is an oath I cannot and will not break. I would beg you not to go back to the temple and never speak of it to anyone, not even to the man whose token you wear, but I know that you are stubborn enough, or perhaps young and foolish enough not to listen to me. There are some things, some secrets which should never be revealed. You were right when you said there is much evil in the temple but it wasn't always that way. Once it was a place of great learning and of much joy. While I have wanted to go back there for a long time for myself, I truly did not want you to be alone when you ventured in there as I knew you would have. You are far too curious to let something like that be. Call it killing two wamprats with one shot. We will see one another soon enough, don't be surprised and don't give everything away either. Watch yourself, lei'lei. I fear for you. Jyrki has not done with you yet and you let your emotions for him get in the way. Just remember if you need anything I am here for you.

Zte'sa Vahlek -

I sat and stared at the holo message as it repeated itself and then turned it off. I was tired and he was right, I was scared and because I didn't want to

think about any of these things any more did what I always did to take my mind off what ever was bothering me, I re read Thrawn's letters then answered his last one. I had news to tell that did not involve midnight raids on the old Jedi Temple.

Mia e'Tekari,

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

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

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

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

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

totally ignoring them or those who fawn over anyone or anything having to do with Lord Vader in the hopes of currying some sort of favour. Typical of such a quiet, thoughtful man, he has a wickedly sharp sense of humour.

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

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

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

exactly what it is Tigellinus actually does in the Empire as work. In the end it was Shiv and the gang who saved the evening for me. They acted as guardian angels, saving me from the pomposity of boring Grand Admirals who just love to talk about themselves. Shiv and Tygra took me home and I was grateful for the chaperone service.

Thank you so very much for the two beautiful books you sent. I took them with me to Tatooine on the hopes that I would have some quiet time to read them but that was not the case. My family had other plans. We celebrated Boonta Eve in great style and I was too tired the next day because I stayed up all night talking with my Uncle Vahlek. He was helping me sort through some stuff that was on my mind.

Just before I left Coruscant to fly out I received a data message from Jyrki. It was short and cryptic but it would seem he has not quite finished with me yet. I spent a lot of time talking with uncle Vahlek about this because Jyrki's note scared me more than I had ever thought possible. My uncle even travelled back to the Core planet with me. Normally, I would have complained about the babysitting, but I was just grateful to have him along and I guess he knew this. He isn't usually the type to interfere or poke his nose in my life.

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

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

Your description of Chiss policy and tactics on defence was very interesting but if the Chiss do not make the first aggressive move then you seem to have violated this rule because if I remember correctly it was you who initiated the first act of "aggression" with me. Not that I mind, but it does seem contradictory to what you told me. I suppose this is your subtle, rebellious nature coming into play? I also have to wonder then if 'frisking me for concealed weapons' comes under pre-emptive strike? I must admit that your defences are impressive but surely you are aware I do have some interesting counter measures of my own. As I recall the last time I used them you were somewhat taken by surprise. I do agree that this skirmish would be far more fun in person than on paper. You put it so aptly the last time we fenced verbally. I do enjoy the linguistic challenge of exploring an alien tongue. So far your follow through efforts have been offensively weak, or is this your way

of trying to put me off guard? My experience in these kinds of battles is very limited and as you have by now surmised you have the tactical advantage. So if you want a worthy opponent, you will have to educate me, something I doubt you will mind as I think you secretly enjoy teaching and are especially fond of the 'hands on' approach. So, yes, I do believe you answered my question adequately; the next question would be, are you up for this little rumble? I am quite curious about your next move. On that note I think I will end this before I get myself into trouble I can't get out of.

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

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

*Mera'ta'llath'la,
Merlyn*

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

The micro storm moved quickly across the city and I stood on the balcony, my favourite place in the palace, staring at it. The lights were off and no one else was around. I watched as the storm cells shifted, showering the tall, silvery buildings with flashes of lightening. The sound of thunder vibrated all around and I could feel the wind on my face as the clouds pushed the warm air forward. There was a sweetness to the heavy air and moisture so thick I could taste it, almost drown in it. When it started to rain I raised my head upwards to greet it. Rain was a miracle to a person from Tatooine. These storms were a mirror for my own thoughts, my own inner turmoil. I welcomed them. It had been almost two months now since I had been on my home world, two months since uncle Vahlek and I had taken a little side trip to the Jedi temple and two months since I had received Jyrki's little data card and in those two months I had not slept well at all.

In difference to how I usually felt about time, at the moment it was dragging its heels miserably. Lord Vader was more often than not away and had not only growled when I had asked to go with him but had expressly forbidden me to go off world at all. When I had asked for a reason his answer was a swift and nasty 'because I told you to so.' followed with a little taste of force choke. I

had backed down fast. I wasn't willing to fight him on anything at the moment because his temper had been much worse than usual. So he had gone off to Mechis III and then on to Ord Mantell and I was stuck on Coruscant. He was working with bounty hunters and they were not making him happy. There was a substantial reward for the capture of Luke Skywalker now which had brought out all the very worst sorts of beings into the hunt the rebels game. I had been compiling lists of the better known Bounty Hunters for Lord Vader, sometimes my job experience from working Jabba's Palace and the docking bay paid off but it had been a bit odd to hear him mention Boba Fett and I had to bite my tongue from saying 'tell him Merly from Jabba's says hi.' I didn't think that Lord Vader would appreciate being a messenger boy for me.

I brushed wet hair out of my face as the storm unleashed its fury and it rained with a vengeance. Everything was a weird pale orange-pink colour as the city lights reflected in the rain and the off the clouds. Only the lightening changed that into a second of brilliant bluish white every time it struck. I shivered with the sudden change in temperature as the storm cell passed. Below me the traffic moved as it always did, a steady stream of lights and noise. As the rain eased up I could once again see off in the distance the spires of the Jedi Temple. A shudder ran down my spine and I turned my attention away from it. In difference to what my uncle had thought, I had not gone back since our first visit. The temple called to me, though. It made me think of the tales that were told about strange ghosts in the deserts of Tatooine, spirits who would sing to weary travellers especially during sand storms to lure them away from safety and shelter. The temple whispered but I could shut its voice out, at least for now. While I knew there were things waiting to be discovered over there, secrets and answers but my fear outweighed my curiosity and I had no real reason to go back there. Even though I had pulled out the box with my precious things from its hiding place many times I had not activated the holocron cube of my birth mother's diary.

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

A'mia Tekari,

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

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

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

I do find it of interest that Admiral Ozzel is now in charge of the Death Squadron, as you so delicately put it, he is a bit of a pompous snob and he is not quite as suitable as some of the other men who might have been better prepared to serve in this posting. Time will tell how good of a placement he is. Firmus Piett, on the other hand, is a very suitable choice as captain if the Executor. I have only spoken with him once very briefly several years ago, before his promotion to Captain. He struck me as a deeply intelligent man with a slight penchant for worrying too much. Like all officers serving directly under Lord Vader's command I do wish them a certain amount of luck. Vader goes through men the way small children devour sweets.

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

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

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

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

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

My dear, you seem to excel at getting yourself into trouble and you do not need much help in this area from me. As I have explained previously, the Chiss have a very strict policy of not attacking first. I, however, do not always agree with or follow this policy as you have pointed out. While it has served the Chiss people well enough to sit back and wait for the aggression of another. I do not subscribe to this approach, feeling it leaves us open to an

attack that perhaps we would be otherwise better prepared for had we known before hand the military capabilities of our opponents.

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

On that note, my dear, I must end this. I wish you the very best of luck in your up and coming Bunduki trials. I am quite certain you will do very well. Do not take the disparaging looks you received at the Griff memorial to heart. As with all things, once the initial sting of loss has passed the family will come to terms with it and move on as we all must do after the death of a loved one. You have nothing to do with the military side of things and this is a known fact. You are not responsible and no one blames you at all. You just happened to be a convenient target. Don't take it personally.

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

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

My mind drifted to the up coming trials. I had been training hard and had learned much. Master Kjestyll assured me I was more than ready but I was nervous about it. I had been trained in private by one of the best Bunduki

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

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

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

"Why is that?" I had asked.

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

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

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

I woke up nervous from a listless night full of restless dreams. Not a good way to start one of the most important days of my life. I got up, showered, dressed, ate a decent breakfast and then as arranged I went to the meeting place where I would be picked up along with several other students and taken to where the Trials were being held.

I had discussed the day before with Lord Vader about having the day off for the trials. I wanted to make certain that he knew where I was and what I was doing so that on some off chance that he might actually miss me at work and wonder where I was that he wouldn't send a bunch of stormtroopers out to drag me back. That would have just been very embarrassing. His end of the conversation had been as cheery as ever ending with a somewhat terse;

"See that you neither fail nor disappoint me in these trials, girl. I expect nothing but excellence." He admonished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What level are you going for?"

"Ninth."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jutiri was a medium height, well built young man about three years younger than I was. He had an easy way of moving that reminded me of my uncle's jaxes. His opponent was taller, more wiry but no less graceful. They were very evenly matched and their three trial bouts were just gorgeous to watch and it was no surprise that they both passed. Nothing could hide their beaming smiles as the master of the ceremonies handed them each their new coloured kej-ji'doh jackets.

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

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

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