

## CHAPTER TEN

### **The Wrong Side of Right**

As I had suspected there were no repercussions from Zaarin's attack. I had gone back to work as though everything was normal and no one was the wiser. Aside from Thrawn, the only other person I told about the incident was Shiv. He had been horrified but not surprised and his only comment about it all had been; "Remind me never to piss you off, kiddo."

Grand Admiral Zaarin had vanished back off to where ever it was he had been stationed without a word. I was grateful for that; I didn't really want to face him again although I was sure the feeling was probably mutual. Not only had I hurt him physically but it had been a pretty major blow to his ego. Most men, it had been my experience, didn't like getting their asses kicked by a girl.

Lord Vader came and went as his missions dictated occasionally I accompanied him but more often than not I was left behind which I mostly didn't mind. His focus was on catching his son but the Emperor kept holding him back, sending him on other missions that often had lots to do with Prince Xizor. This did nothing to improve his already bad mood. Occasionally, I got a call to ferry something out to him or meet him somewhere in the galaxy. Sometimes I used a lambda class shuttle, if one was available, and sometimes I used my own ship. While it wrecked havoc on my schedule I didn't mind. It was good for my piloting skills and helped me keep up the mandatory hours I needed to maintain my pilot's papers. The last trip I had made out to meet him had also been one of the weirdest.

Lord Vader had been campaigning in the Outer Rim, near Shalyvane. Rebels had discovered the Emperor's desire to capture a strange, mythical creature called a teezl which was supposed to be a non-sentiment, creature that could be used as a natural hyperspace communications amplifier. It had sounded like a bunch of bantha poodoo to me when I had heard about it and Lord Vader was also sceptical but the Emperor had been quite insistent one of these things be found and captured, much to my surprise this had actually been done. During the skirmish between the rebels and the Imperials that had ensued over this galactic oddity many pilots had been injured or killed because the rebels had somehow managed to get a hold of TIE codes and the chaos that caused was incredible. The pilot casualty list had been greater than usual and the atmosphere on board the flag ship had not been good. Lord Vader had been fairly insistent that I stay out of the way, he was busy enough, he had said without me being under foot as well. That was fine with me; he had been driving me crazy anyway.

Shortly after the battle over the teezl, we had ended up in a huge argument that had started over a mixed up delivery but had ended with him pointing out all my flaws as a student to the darkside. He had not been very impressed when I had pointed out that he could either have me as a student or as an assistant but there wasn't enough time in the galaxy for me to be both and it wasn't my fault that he wasn't the best teacher in the galaxy. Needless to say, after this he had ranted at great length about why I was such a terrible student and that he did not know why he ever put up with me. The discussion had escalated into a true yelling match, the air between us fairly crackled ended with him storming out of my office and me being riled up enough to throw the nearest datalogue at him, after he had gone and the door had closed.

I had been so annoyed and angry that sitting down and getting back to work had been impossible so instead I had decided to go and work off some energy but I instead of ending up in the training room, I had wandered into a small secret medical facility. I had been so cross that I had taken a wrong turn, had not noticed where I was and had high enough clearance that the door opened for me.

I had known I was not supposed to be in the med lab the moment I had entered. It had that kind of feel to it, but the medical droids who had been fussing about the bacta tank had merely glanced at me briefly and then gone back to their work, monitoring the patient within.

Inside of the bacta tank had been a young woman. When I'd stopped and stared at her I had realised with a sudden knot in my gut that, despite the terrible injuries, I knew her face from an image I had seen while talking to Jorae. She had been an Imperial agent named Shira Brie. I could feel her strength as she fought for her life. She was a very powerful force user and I wondered if it had been that energy which had drawn me to find her there.

I don't recall how long I had stood there and watched her. I would never be sure if she had been aware of what had happened to her or not, but I had hoped not, I had hoped that Lord Vader had allowed her to be sedated and on pain meds unlike when the Emperor had taken care of him. In a bacta tank one was doped up pretty good and her condition was critical. She had been horribly burned and had lost limbs in the space battle. Part of me had felt sorry for her and part of me had been morbidly fascinated about what would happen to her next. I had been deep in thought when Lord Vader came in to check on her. He had not been pleased to see me there and I had felt the ripple of his anger keenly but I had ignored it and had chosen to let my own curiosity override my need to get out of shouting distance.

"Will she live?" I had asked him before he could chastise me for being in a place I wasn't supposed to be.

He had glared at me then went back to staring at the girl in the bacta tank, his thumbs hooked into his belt, his annoyance at me more or less contained. “Yes.” He answered after a lengthy silence.

“She’s a force user, isn’t she?”

He had seemed to sigh. “Yes she is.” He’d said, “Quite powerful, far more so than you are.”

I had ignored his barb. “What will happen to her?”

A moment of silence passed then he had answered. “She will be returned to Coruscant and have reconstructive surgery, cybernetic implants and then she will be retrained.”

I had shivered. “Retrained?”

My questions and my presence in this secret little medical lab had not been welcome and he grew impatient with my questions. When he’d answered me it was not friendly. “She is everything you are not.” He had said snarkily. “Her force potential is great and her will to work hard and learn all that I and my master can teach is great, unlike you, she does not question every single little thing that happens to her and she thirsts for knowledge. Despite her injuries she will become a great student of the dark side of the force. She will be a powerful agent for the Empire.” As he spoke I could feel the pride in his voice. He admired her for her strengths, for her ability to survive her catastrophic injuries and the student she might become. “Her ambitions will make her great, unlike like you....” He had not bothered to finish his sentence. I knew he felt I was a bit of a failure when it came to developing my force abilities. Although, his words had stung, as I had stood there looking at the damaged body of the woman he planned on reshaping in his own image, I had realised that what she was, I never, ever wanted to be and if that meant disappointing Lord Vader then that had been okay with me.

I had been grateful when we had returned to the Core and I could resume my normal routines and work. Shira Brie had been transferred to the special medical facility for rehabilitation and cybernetic augmentations. I had no idea what had become of her afterwards but assumed she had recovered and was undergoing training. She would be, I had guessed, just one of the many secret agents Lord Vader and the Emperor had at their disposal and while Thrawn had often urged me to broaden my horizons and become more than just an office girl, I was glad I hadn’t listened to him. I was rather attached to my limbs and it had seemed to me that seriously becoming a dark side adept had meant giving some of them up.

I liked the job I had, I was good at it and it was the one area where Lord Vader did not have too many complaints about. It was also, relatively speaking, safe. I didn’t want to be an *Emperor’s Hand*. It had never been my goal to run around the galaxy doing the Emperor’s dirty work and I was

extremely glad that neither he nor Lord Vader seemed intent on pushing this point at the moment. While I had some talents with the force, my best skill was also the most unpleasant and I wasn’t terribly keen on using it. I was grateful that with the rising insurgence from the rebels, the construction of the second Death Star, and the additions of two new classes of Star Destroyers also in the works, the two men had more than enough to worry about without concerning themselves about the training of a single, insignificant girl from the Outer Rim who was not particularly compliant. As long as I did my job and stayed out of everyone’s way, I was mostly left to my own devices, which was fine with me.

I was in the middle of confirming the latest order for more duelling droids when Lord Vader, who had recently returned to the Core, stormed into the office I occupied in his Coruscant home. He was furious. He had been ordered to go to the Kothlis Sector by the Emperor to retrieve Luke who had been captured by pirates. I thought he would be happy to finally have permission to go after his son instead of being sent on missions he considered beneath him, but that was not exactly the case.

“What is he thinking?” He snarled while pacing back and forth in front of my desk so savagely that his cloak, flaring out behind him, disturbed the air enough that I had to rescue several flimsies from flying off my desk.

I watched him stalk back and forth with my eyes. I didn’t dare speak for fear of upsetting him further, when he was in this sort of mood, someone usually got hurt, someone usually me. He stopped for a second to glance at me. I just raised my eyebrows. I had no idea what he was talking about. He went back to pacing.

“Was it not bad enough that the first Battle Station was destroyed due to the plans falling into rebel hands that he has to actually hand them the plans to the second one as well?” He yelled. “It is the stupidest thing I have heard of yet! I cannot believe that my master would actually listen to the advice of that Falleen thug!”

I opened my mouth to say something but realised there was nothing to say. If what Lord Vader was telling me was true, then I had to agree with him. It sounded like a pretty stupid plan to me.

“Now I have to go out to Kothlis and pretend to care about getting the plans back! To make it all look real! It is a ridiculous waste of my time!” He ranted.

“Will I be accompanying you on this mission, my lord?” I asked.

He stopped mid stride and looked at me as though he were seeing me for the first time and had only just realised I was there. “No. I want you here to keep an eye on things; to let me know should that so called Prince tries anything else.”

“I am quite sure your personal informants will do a much better job of that than I can.” I replied carefully. I wasn’t a spy and I didn’t like being used as one, the last time I had tried to play that game the results had been mixed and I had ended up fighting with Thrawn over it.

He folded his arms across his chest. “Yes, they but you have a knack for getting information they cannot. I want you on Coruscant, is that clear?”

I nodded. “Crystal.” I said.

While I was not happy about the reasons, I was happy to comply with his order. The thought of being cooped up on the *Executor* with him while he hunted down his son and put on a show for the rebels, was not my idea of fun. It didn’t help that the rumours that Zaarin had become difficult to get in touch with, reclusive and secretive the TIE defender project was now the subject of hushed whispers and concern. Something was going on but no one knew what. This all made Lord Vader very unhappy. He was hard enough to live with at the best of times and these were not the best of times.

He stormed out of my office and went to destroy some droids, venting a little of his anger before he headed back into space. I was grateful when I finished up my work for the day and could go home where I planned on soaking in a tub full of hot bubbly water with a glass of very good wine. All the scheming and plotting which was currently going on was making my head spin.

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“When did you get back?” I asked, turning around to see him come in the training room. I could not contain my pleasure at seeing Thrawn’s face, when his eyes met mine he, too, smiled. He had been off world long enough that I had missed him.

“About three hours ago.”

“How long are you staying?”

He ran his fingers through his hair; he hadn’t had it cut in a while and I thought it looked good. “I am not sure, a few days perhaps. It depends on the Emperor and how the meetings and planning sessions I must attend develop.”

I grinned. “Well, I won’t complain.” I said. I was sitting on the wooden floor bathed in the sunlight which shone through the windows. “How did you know I was in here?”

“I passed Taisto Kjestyll on my way to your office. He said, “And I quote, *she is exercising some demons, you might want to tread lightly*. But it seems to me that you are just doing your bearded-jax imitation and finding the sunniest spot in the room to bask in.”

I grinned as I lay back on the floor and stretched out as fully as I could. It felt so good that I never wanted to stop. “When Master Kjestyll says I was exercising demons what he really means is that he spent two hours straight kicking my ass. I get the feeling that the turn Merlyn into a deadly fighting machine isn’t going as well as everyone planned. I’m just not that good.” I said when I sat up.

Thrawn squatted down beside me, his elbows resting on his knees. “The people you get compared to have been in hard training most of their lives. You have only been at this a few years and even then only part time. Besides, when you need to, you can be quite ... formidable.”

“Why are you here anyway?” I asked, looking up at him with a grin. “I would have thought you’d have gone home. I’d be there soon enough.” I reached over for my feet and stretched out over my legs.

“My presence has been requested at an exclusive art exhibition tonight by the Emperor. He *suggested* I bring you. I thought you might like some lead time to get ready; it is a dress up affair. I was not sure if you had other plans or if you’d be working late so I had no idea when you would be home and your comm is off.”

“Oh, didn’t the Emperor go off world to oversee the construction of that new toy of his like the rumours are saying?” The Emperor had become somewhat reclusive and no one had actually seen him for a while. The whispers were that he was unwell and maybe even dying but I knew better. I had known that he planned to go to the new battle Station and sort out the lagging mess the construction had become but no one knew when he was leaving or if he had already left.

“Apparently not yet.” He said with a slight shrug, “Has Lord Vader returned to the Core? I must discuss some issues with him.”

“He was here briefly after his trip out to the Kothlis system but then he left again almost right afterwards. The Emperor gave him permission to go search for Skywalker. I don’t know when he’ll be back.”

“I see.” He said. “So, I suppose this means that things have been relatively peaceful while I have been gone?”

“Are you asking for gossip?”

He arched an eyebrow and smiled. “Not intentionally.”

“Well, lets see... Grand Admiral Zaarin has pretty much vanished from Imperial court life. The rumour now is that he has closed out all communications and no one knows what is going on with the SRD. Lord Vader wanted to send out agents to investigate this but the Emperor told him not to; needless to say he wasn’t thrilled with this. He thinks that Zaarin is up to something big but doesn’t know what. And no, I didn’t say anything, before you ask. I figured it was none of my business and I want to stay out of it. I am a bit scared that if Vader thinks I know something he’ll send me out

to spy on Zaarin under the guise of delivering a message or something.” I said with a sigh. “Of course, Lord Vader is his usual unhappy self. He came back from the trip out to Kothlis furious! Luke had escaped, and no one could find him and he had no one to really blame as somehow there were pirates or mercenaries or some such bad guys involved. He wasn’t too specific. He also thinks that Xizor is behind it all, as usual. I don’t want to be in Xizor’s shoes if that’s really the case, because if it is, Lord Vader won’t give a Jawa’s damn about upsetting the Emperor by eliminating Xizor. I suppose this war between them would be funny by now if it weren’t so damned annoying. I am just getting tired of hearing Lord Vader bitch about Xizor all the time, you’d think the second most powerful man in the galaxy would just deal with it and not simply keep complaining about it. Xizor, on the other hand seems to relish all the backstabbing snarkiness. You should hear how polite he can be now, it’s like being polite has become the new way of being rude. Oh and on top of it all he is rumoured to have a new love interest but no one knows who it…”

He put up a hand to stop me, unable to hide his amusement. “I get the picture, so about the exhibition tonight?”

“Whose work is being showcased?” I asked.

“Tarka-Null.”

That got my attention. “The sculptor?”

He nodded. “Are you interested?”

I was but I made a face. “Does it matter? Usually if the Emperor suggests something it’s more of a polite order than a suggestion.” I sat back with my palms flat on the floor. “I just think he likes making us come to these things as a couple to paint big shiny targets on our backs for the *Daily Digest*. I feel like we are his entertainment sometimes.”

Thrawn gave me a slight smile that never quite met his eyes and then he stood up. “As you say, does it matter?” his voice held that crispness of distaste in it that I knew meant he didn’t want to discuss the Emperor’s whims or wishes. “It will be an evening out and a chance to see some of the best sculptures in the galaxy.”

He was right, what did the reasons behind it matter? “Will *The Waiting Dancer* be among the collection?” I asked offering my hand so he could help me up.

“I don’t know.” He told me, pulling me to my feet. “I have not seen the collection’s datalogue, but it is one of his most well known yes mysterious pieces so chances are good it will be there. Is it a piece you like?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I grinned knowing he would find my answer funny. “Because it always reminds me of me when I was six or so and desperately wanted to be a fluttery little dancer.” I made dancer like motions with my hands.

His eyebrow arched. “Indeed?”

“You don’t like it?” I asked as I stripped off my sweat soaked things and changed into dry clothes. I’d shower when I got home.

“I find it lacks some of the more delicate quality of his later works.” He turned his back to me while I changed and looked out of the window. “But I have never seen the original, only holos of it.”

“You know it isn’t really considered a sculpture. It was actually a Maquette for a commissioned piece.” I said, picking up my things and putting them in my bag.

“Really? No, I actually did not know that.” He said as we walked out of the training room. “That would explain the lesser detailing then.”

“My mother told me about it. He was supposed to complete a life sized version for the Alderaan Dance Academy, but it never happened and only the study exists.”

“I have never read this information in any of the literature about him. How do you know this?”

I grinned as we left the palace, “Because my mother was the girl who posed for the piece, she told me all about it.”

He chuckled. “Your family is just full of surprises.”

“What time are we expected this evening?” I asked, waiting while he unlocked his speeder.

“At twenty-two hundred hours.” He said. I just grimaced as we pulled out into Coruscanti traffic.

“Great, I have an hour to get something to eat, shower and make myself look like one of Coruscant’s elite and beautiful. You realise you’re asking for miracles, don’t you.”

He chuckled. “I have the food part taken care of, your ability to shower in under ten minutes has astounded me before and as for turning into Miss Coruscant, well you can work wonders under pressure, I know I’ve seen you do it.”

I just shook my head. There was no competing with his logic and, of course he was more or less right. By the time I had showered, he had a light, quick meal ready to eat, after which I vanished into the bedroom to turn from Rim-Girl to beauty queen, no easy task.

It was not unusual for the Emperor to arrange private collections shows, usually as fundraisers. The wealthy and elite of Coruscant were more than happy to shower money on these endeavours if it got them the chance to rub shoulders with other rich and famous as well as be seen in the

company of the Emperor. It was an old game, buying favour and power with wealth.

These venues were always interesting and often unusual. This one was no exception, being held in an old power plant that had been converted into expensive offices and studios in the area known as The Works. I was glad that Thrawn knew where he was going because I found The Works a total maze to navigate.

The gallery space was large and airy, typical for a remodelled production plant. The new design had cleverly incorporated the aspects that made these sorts of building special while modernizing it so that the space was comfortable to be in. The reception itself was much larger than I had thought it would be and despite the room's vast size it was very crowded.

We walked through the crowd and mingled politely. It was easy to keep quiet as no one really spoke directly to me. Part of being palace fluff was being seen but not heard. I smiled a lot and sipped at the odd orange drink that I had been handed by the waiter. It tasted like a mixture of melon fruit, kiki berries and saqui liquor. It was potent and prickled on my tongue. I thought it was cute how they had decorated the glass with tabjio flowers.

I walked around the room beside Thrawn as he made polite small talk with various dignitaries and their wives or female companion and looked at the sculptures that were displayed around the room. Most of the works were from Tarka-Null's later years and the one piece I had hoped to see was not amongst the collection.

I was lost in thought when Thrawn nudged my arm and I looked up to see the Emperor approaching. I suppressed the urge to shiver and smiled as I curtsied. The Emperor acknowledged Thrawn with a slight wave of his hand and turned to address me.

"You look lovely this evening my dear." He said as he gestured for me to get up.

"Thank-you, your Highness."

"And how do you like this exhibition." He asked me.

"It's a stunning collection of his works." I said honestly. "I had no idea how beautiful some of these pieces were until I was able to see them with my own eyes."

"But you sound a little disappointed." He remarked.

I smiled to cover up my surprise. "Not at all, your Highness. I feel very lucky to have been able to view these pieces. Tarka-Null was one of the galaxy's greatest artists."

He chuckled. "Yes he was." He had begun to walk and had gestured for me to walk with him. Thrawn, who had not been included in this conversation, remained where he was and continued to banter with the couple he had been speaking with. "You are familiar with his works then?"

"Yes, my mother was very fond of him and she passed that love of his art on to me. We have many books on his works at home on Tatooine."

"Indeed." He said. "But I still sense you hoped for something more?" The Emperor asked as we stopped to look at one of the larger more abstract pieces.

"Your Excellency does not miss much." I said quietly. I could feel him digging, a subtle brush of his mind against mine. It felt like meat grubs boring into my brain.

The Emperor smiled slowly, "You, my dear child, are an open book to me." He said. "So tell me, what piece is missing that you wished to see?"

"*The Waiting Dancer*." I said. "Though technically it isn't actually considered a sculpture the way the others are. I had heard it was not on Alderaan when the planet was destroyed. So I thought it might be showcased here."

He nodded and seemed to sigh. "Ah yes, that is an exquisite little piece." He said, "And no I don't believe it was destroyed in that unfortunate accident. Why are you so interested in it? It is, as you say, not considered a sculpture but rather simply a study for one that was never completed."

"It reminds of me when I was small. I had wanted to be a dancer. I suppose it also reminds me of my mother." I told him. It was the truth it just wasn't the whole truth.

"Well, in that case we shall have to arrange for you to view the piece you so obviously adore." He said kindly.

I glanced at him, surprised. "That would be lovely."

His expression turned to amusement. "If it would make you smile like that for me, then I shall most definitely arrange it." He spoke in that avuncular tone which made my skin crawl. "Are you feeling better?" He asked.

"Your Highness?" he had caught me off guard with his question. My surprise was not feigned.

"I heard that you left the reception for the new assembly wing early. Siavaan mentioned you were taken ill. I remember you said you had had an accident, I hope it was nothing serious."

I glanced at him. "I tripped, banged my head and ended up with a headache." I lied and I suspected he knew that.

"Perhaps you were coming down with the same thing that afflicted Grand Admiral Zaarin, he was also not feeling so well when he attended the reception."

"Oh, really? I am sorry to hear that." I said carefully. "I hope that he recovers." Actually I was sort of hoping he'd rot in the nine Corellian Hells but that was another matter.

“Yes, I’m sure you do, my dear.” The Emperor chuckled. “I would not trouble myself over his health if I were you; Grand Admiral Zaarin has a strong constitution. I am sure it would take more than a little run in with some minor health issues to bring him down.” He glanced at me and smiled. “You have had quite the effect on my Imperial officers; he also seems quite taken with you.”

I feigned shyness and looked away. “I was under the impression that the Grand Admiral wasn’t really interested in anything other than his career.”

Palpatine’s soft laugh gave me goose bumps. “Yes, his ambitions do seem to want to get the better of him some days. Still he is a valuable part of the Empire, as are all employees under my care. I would be most displeased should any serious harm come to those I need and have use. Zaarin plays his part in the Empire, as do you, my dear.” He stopped walking for a moment and paused to look at me. His words were pleasant and the tone of his conversation light but the reproach and warning behind it all did not escape me. I got the message. I wasn’t sure quite how to react so I just gave him a smile and I made it reach my eyes.

“I can’t imagine anyone wanting to displease you, your Highness.” I said after a moment’s silence.

“Of course not, child,” He said patting my arm. “Now, why don’t you run along and rejoin Admiral Thrawn. I know how much he enjoys your delightful companionship and how precious your time with him is. I should attend to my guests but we will speak again soon enough.”

“As you wish, your Highness.” I dropped a polite curtsy and stepped back to let him pass. Then meandered back to where Thrawn stood.

The wife of the man he was speaking to turned to me and smiled. I exchanged my empty drink glass with a full one from a passing waiter and took a healthy gulp. Thrawn watched me for a moment carefully and I knew he had noticed my trembling hands. The woman standing next to her husband began to chatter to me about how wonderful the collection was, how pretty my dress was and how wonderful it was to see the Emperor in such fine form. While I was grateful for the distraction, I wondered if she ever stopped talking long enough to breathe. For the most part I just stood quietly and nodded politely. Out of the corner of my eye I caught Thrawn’s slight, sly smile as he covertly watched me hide my bored annoyance. The rest of the evening was completely uneventful and I was grateful when we were able to leave.

We drove back to the flat in silence and I was more than happy to get out of the dress up finery when we were finally home. It felt like shedding a mask or a costume. When I joined Thrawn in the living room he was sitting in a chair, having changed from his uniform to sleepwear he looked less

austere and tense. He had poured me a brandy. I took it from his hand and sat across from him.

He had made it clear on the way back to the flat he wanted to know what had happened after Bespin, wanted to know what the Emperor had done to me to make me even more scared of him than I previously had been. I had told him I did not want to talk about it but Thrawn was insistent and he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. He, perhaps better than anyone else, knew how well I bottled things up inside and what that did to me. For reasons I didn’t understand he had made it his mission to draw out the poisons which damaged my soul. I never knew whether or not to be grateful or resentful, even though after talking about these things that worried at me, helped.

In truth, it was almost a relief to be able to speak of the unspeakable. To unfold the story that had been told to me by the lightsaber Luke had held. My hands shook and sometimes I had to fight to find the right words to try and describe what I had seen. Thrawn was well aware of what my talent for reading the memories of objects did to me and was patient. Once before, I had actually shared my gift with him, physically showing him the same images I had seen and it had shaken him to the core. Thrawn listened quietly without interruption until I was done. For what seemed like forever he remained silent and thoughtful. I could not tell if he was angry, upset about or just contemplating what I had told him. I swirled the brandy around in the glass, waiting for him to break the silence because I had nothing else to say.

“Did Vader tell him about this nasty little talent of yours?” He finally asked watching me closely, cupping his brandy glass in his hand.

I glanced at him. “No, in fact he suggested it was you who did that.”

He let out a slow, deep breath and sat back in the chair. His expression was unreadable but his eyes, which had never left my face, turned cold and hard. “What do you believe?” he asked.

“I believe that the Emperor found out somehow, but really how he did doesn’t really matter. I was the one who confirmed it for him. I don’t believe that the information came from you or Lord Vader. The Emperor has eyes and ears everywhere; it was bound to happen sooner or later. It’s possible he’s known for a really long time but never had anything he wished to test me on before.” I sipped my brandy slowly. “In the end it doesn’t matter. He knows what I can do and when he needs to he’ll use it.”

He nodded slowly. “He did not learn this information from me, tekari.” There was a sadness in his voice which I didn’t like hearing.

I had not thought this the case but I was glad to hear him confirm it. Still, something else nagged at me. “Did you mention to anyone about what happened between Zaarin and me?”

“No. Why?”

“I get the feeling that the he knew what had happened, just something about how he talked about the Admiral. You know how the Emperor can be sometimes, always some subtle message underneath the spoken words.”

“That would not surprise me.” He said. “Zaarin has caught the eye of the Emperor as of late with some of his more unorthodox methods of work. It is no secret that he had an interest in you just as your distaste for him was fairly obvious. The Emperor is not a stupid man; he could have put two and two together given how you were both behaving at the reception.” He said. “I am certain that he is watching his entire High Command staff very carefully. There are a lot of undercurrents going on within the Imperial ranks at the moment. Admiral Harkov’s defection was more damaging than first suspected.”

“Why do you think he did it?”

“Harkov?”

I nodded.

“Who can really say? He stopped believing in the system? Perhaps it was the arrest and execution of his nephew that was the final trigger but I suspect he had been planning betraying the Empire for some time.” He said. “What would make a man turn against everything he has known? You would have to ask him this question, not me.”

“Has it always been like this?”

“Like what?” He asked.

“Complicated and mixed up with all this suspicion and lies, all the back stabbing and double dealing.” We had had this conversation before but somehow I could not wrap my head around it all.

“For as long as I have been a part of this Empire there have been these games.” He replied. “But this is normal. I know of no society that does not have some aspect of this dance. Surely you must have seen something similar when you worked at Jabba’s Palace?”

“I was aware of it but most of the time it didn’t affect me, at least not until it landed me a job working for lord Vader. I just tried to avoid it all as much as possible.” I said. “Why does this happen? Why aren’t people just happy with what they have?”

He smiled slightly and looked at the brandy left in his glass, swirling it around in lazy circles. “I have no answer for that question. The lust for power does odd things to sentient beings. Fear, greed, ambition all set that drive for more. The easy answer is that it is our base nature for survival. He who has more, is stronger, has the biggest army, the most food survives longer.”

“It reminds me of scyks fighting over a carcass.” I said.

“An apt description.” He agreed.

“What about you?” I asked. “You also play these games.”

He regarded me for a moment. “I do.” He said slowly, “Because they are a means to an end. I am here doing the work that I do because my own people would not allow me the freedom to accomplish certain things at home. Power and a high rank, having the commands I do as well as the favour of the Emperor allow me to better prepare for any eventualities which may come.”

“You’ve mentioned this before but you don’t elaborate. You hint at threats but you never say what they are.”

He nodded. “This galaxy is full of dangers most beings, especially humans never even dream of. They feel safe, protected by the Empire, tucked away behind the security of a well armed navy. And while a little more thought should be given to these dangers which lurk out there it is more likely an invasion will come from outside our own galaxy.” He said, “Living beyond the borders of unknown space, beyond the boundary that defines this galaxy, is an enemy so ferocious that fighting it will take all of our collective minds and strengths to even contemplate defeating them.” He paused. “My people have had contact with these beings and judging by the ferocity with which the small reconnaissance force fought the Chiss, to come up against an invasion of these beings would be an unthinkable disaster were the worlds of this galaxy not allied and working together as one. Under the Empire the armed forces are strong and organised.”

“Does the Emperor know about this potential enemy?”

“He is aware of the threat.” He conceded after a moment’s silence. There was something in his voice I didn’t much like.

“This enemy, these beings, they worry you a little don’t they?”

“That would be an understatement, my dear. These *far outsiders*, as they have been called, are of great concern to me. I am aware of what one small recon force was able to do to a highly trained military response team. The Chiss military is one of the best there is and they were hard put to deal with this enemy. Believe me when I say I do not wish to see any more of these beings cross into this galaxy but I fear that will be inevitable.”

Knowing that he felt this way did nothing to comfort me at all. I always thought of him as fearless. I sighed and sipped at my brandy. In light of the conversation we had just had, my own problems did not seem so important any more.

He read that in my face and gestured for me to come to him. “These are worries we can leave for another day and preparations are being made to deal with the possibility of an invasion.” He said as he set his glass down on the table.

“You sound pretty sure of yourself.” I said taking the hand he offered, not resisting when he pulled me onto his lap.

“I, along with others, am doing all I can to ensure the safety of the galaxy is in hand.” He said gently. “A little trust, my dear.”

It was a phrase I was used to hearing from him and it always managed to make me smile and shake my head at the same time. It was also his way of gently telling me that he didn’t wish to speak about politics or our jobs any more. I could not blame him, he dealt with these subjects day in day out, coming home was a respite he welcomed. Sometimes, he had told me, what he needed the most was quiet and calm away from the daily machinations of the Emperor and his empire. That he found solace in my presence had touched me deeply. I didn’t push when he changed or shut down the topic of work.

I thought about what he had said, *a little trust...* but trusting him was not the issue, I did trust him more than I ever wanted to say, it was almost everyone else who worked around the Emperor that I worried about. It was a lot to think about and my mind buzzed as I rested my head against his shoulder. He didn’t say anything else, he didn’t have to. His hands were warm upon the skin of my back and I shivered when he nuzzled my neck, kissing that sensitive place below my ear which always made my skin prickle and me gasp. It was an effective way to direct my thoughts in another direction. Sometimes, I thought ruefully, he knew me just a little too well.

Later, as we lay curled about each other in bed; it seemed to me that even in the quiet of the night there was no peace. My fingers traced up and down his bare chest idly because I was restless but in difference to his usual methods to try and lull me into sleep this time he absently stroked my hair and we lay together in silence. His earlier words had troubled me; his own worry infected my thoughts. In light of what we had spoken of, the Emperor’s seemingly endless plots and plans did not seem quite so evil minded. This didn’t mean I liked him any better or feared him any less but it did paint a different image of what he was attempting to do, if what Thrawn had said was true. I suppose the conversation and these concerns also weighed on Thrawn’s mind as well, because he, too, was wide awake, troubled and lost in thought.

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“I need an investigator!” Darth Vader snapped as he all but flew into my office.

I glanced up at him from my desk. “Imperial or private?”

“Private, the best there is. Do a complete records check!” He replied. He stalked to the window and stared out over the city. He stood

statue still with his hands clasped behind his back. The sound of his breathing filled my office, which was a huge room, making it seem tiny and claustrophobic.

“Yes, my lord.” I said and began to access the Coruscant Business Listings Database.

“Did the Emperor’s shuttle leave on time?”

“It did, he should return in three weeks.” He replied.

I scanned the listings and highlighted several names then began to cross check names through the Imperial database. “Will the new battle station be ready on time?” I asked as I fitted the small earpiece and microphone to my head.

“No, most likely not. The project is ambitious and the crews working on it are not living up to their full potential.”

I nodded to let him know I was listening to him and opened a line to the Intel office. “Hi, Kaytal, it’s Merlyn from Lord Vader’s office. Yes, I am sending over a list for complete background checks. I need the information as soon as possible.” I said to the young man on the other end. “Yep, the works. Hey, listen this will be the first of several lists, you okay with this?” Lord Vader turned around and looked at me, I ignored him, “Yes, it’s very important and yes he’ll have my head if it doesn’t get done in the next hour.” There was a moment’s pause then I heard what I wanted, “Excellent, you are amazing and I owe you one. Thanks.” I took off the headset and went back to scanning the listings.

“Impressive. You make people actually want to work for me.” He remarked.

“Well, actually they do it for me and I don’t *make* them do anything.” I told him as I sent Kaytal a second list.

“You work for me so they also are working for me.” He said firmly.

“Yes, my lord.” I grinned. I wasn’t about to shatter his illusions. He was in a good mood; I guessed that being left in charge of Coruscant made him happy. “So when I find the appropriate candidate what do I tell him?”

“I will meet with him in my castle.” He said. “That is all you need to know.”

I nodded. My computer flashed as Intel began to send information back. It always amazed me how fast Intel was with their background checks and how many people they had red flagged.

“I heard a rumour about you and Grand Admiral Zaarin.” Vader said. He had gone back to staring out of the window again.

“And which rumour would that be, because the last time I heard any gossip there were about five different stories circulating.”

“The one about you damaging him.”

“Ah, well he thought he could bed me without my permission and I showed him how difficult that would be with a painful a groin injury, among other things.”

To my surprise Vader just laughed. “Serves him right.”

I didn’t say anything and just kept on working but I couldn’t help the smile that snuck across my lips. “I suppose the Emperor told you this?” I asked.

“No but he did hint that something had occurred and that I should be more careful about who I allow you to *play with*.” He replied. “It appears you are of some value to him despite your short comings.”

“Well, if the Emperor’s boys played fair I wouldn’t have to damage them, they need to learn to take no for an answer. Good to know I am still of some worth, I guess. It’s nice to be needed.” I shot back before thinking.

“Speaking of need, I expect to see you for lightsaber practice tonight.” He said. “I have new combat remotes I wish to see in action and you need the practice.”

“Where?” I asked not looking at him, but concentrating on the work at hand.

“My castle training room is better suited for the havoc you usually wreck when you attempt to beat the remotes.” He said. “Maintenance complained about the mess you left last time in the main palace training hall, I had to pay for the damages.”

I had to stifle a giggle. I remembered that. The sprung wooden floor had not taken too kindly to my lightsaber skills or lack thereof and I had managed to put pretty decent scorch marks on a wall when I had attempted to practice the saber throw technique. The pesky remotes got smarter every time. More files flashed on my screen, I discarded all of them except the ones with the double green flag. There were not many so it narrowed the field down considerably. “Male or female?” I asked.

“Male.”

“Human or non human?” already knowing the answer. In general Lord Vader did not really have anything against aliens but he did not like working closely with them, and this dislike had only increased since the competition between he and Prince Xizor had gotten out of hand.

“Human.”

That narrowed my choices down to three. I read him the names and the specs and he chose the one I figured he would.

“Contact him and arrange a meeting as soon as possible.” He said. He did not move so I knew he wanted results here and now. It was not often that he waited in my office to get information or results but it did happen sometimes. It didn’t bother me the way it had the first few times he had done this, it just meant he was either hiding from the world in general and liked

the peace and quiet in my office or he just wanted company. Whatever his reasons I took them as a compliment.

I slipped on the tiny earpiece again and got in touch with the investigator of Vader’s choice. The man was cold, professional and very polite. It took less than five minutes to set up the meeting.

“He will be at your home in an hour.” I said, sending all the details to a small datachip. He used the force to lift it from my fingers.

“You have done well.” He said. “Perhaps we will forego saber practice this evening, so if you have other plans you may...”

“I have no other plans, my lord and I could use the practice.” I cut him off, surprising him. I really wanted to learn the method of throwing a lit lightsaber and retrieving it. So far all my attempts at this technique had failed miserably. It was a lot harder to do than it looked. I still preferred to fight with a combat stave but Lord Vader had insisted that I continue learning to use my lightsaber. I was convinced he took a perverse sense of joy in watching me struggle with something he constantly told me small children had learned easily. I really didn’t have plans, my lesson with Master Kjestyll had been cancelled and Thrawn had gone off planet early in the morning. I had no idea when he was due to return, neither did he.

“As you wish.” He said with a slight shrug, “Be there promptly at eighteen hundred hours then, do not be late.” He replied and then he swept out of the room.

I would never know what it was that Lord Vader had asked the investigator to uncover but he was pleased with the man’s work. When I arrived, ready to train he had told me as much in his usual terse manner. Without much ado we sparred, dancing around the large airy room with the scent of burnt dust and the never ending thrum of the lightsabers heavy in the air. I both loved and hated this weapon but there was a subtle elegance to it that no other weapon I had ever seen had.

He was trying to teach me a complicated move that involved letting the lightsaber almost fly out of my hand as I spun it around. I was not getting the hang on it and it was frustrating me.

“You grip too hard, I have told you before. You need to trust the Force to guide you.” He said for the umpteenth time.

I made a face. This was easier said than done but I tried again, and again failing to execute the move to his desired perfection.

“Enough!” He finally snapped. “You can watch and learn now. Tomorrow I will teach you how to submerge yourself in the force, and some measure of control, as my Master has ordered me to.”

I was grateful for this, the three straight hours of rigorous training had taken their toll. I sat on the floor, and watched as he tried to show me what he could not teach me. I followed his movements and eventually saw

where my mistake was, that didn't mean I would be able to correct it but now I understood what he had meant. After this he ignored me and went about practicing on his own against the latest combat droids until he had forgotten I was there. Watching him wield his lightsaber never ceased to astonish me but in the dim light of the practice chamber my thoughts drifted to his comments about the Force.

I had been spending a great deal of time with my birth mother's diary. Listening to her speak about all she had learned but there was some subtle mystery to the force that eluded me. As if I had learnt to sing a song in a foreign tongue well enough to pass for native speaker but had no idea what the words meant, thereby losing the meaning of the song. So it was with the force. I understood that I had a power and I even knew how to use some of it most of the time, but I was missing something, some basic element of training that perhaps would have made me a better student than I was. She had spoken of many force gifts, some, like the healing trance and force hibernation I had never heard of from Lord Vader. I had wanted to ask him but never found the right time. Instead I had decided to take investigative matters into my own hands and after searching the little library that the Emperor had afforded me and found nothing, I had gone then, frustrated and curious, to the Jedi Temple. I had not been prepared for what I had found.

A couple of days before the Emperor was due to leave, Lord Vader had been in a tizzy trying to get his meeting schedule sorted out. This meant it had been a very late, very frustrating, night for me. Thrawn was away on a short fact finding mission of some sorts and was not due back until the next day. When my work day had ended I was too tired to even bother going back home and had decided to crash at the palace flat instead but this bed was now strange to me and without Thrawn's presence at my side or his scent lingering in the air I found myself restless and edgy.

Sleep would not come so I got up and made my way to the little library. It had been some time since I had been there. I had intended to read something but instead I had found myself inexplicably drawn to the secret passage way and before I had even realised what I was doing I had opened and it was already well on my way down the never ending stairs. I was half way there before it occurred to me that this might not be the greatest idea in the galaxy.

The Temple was quiet, not that I had expected anything else, but it had seemed to me that even the ghosts were hiding as if something had frightened them into submission and not the other way around. I had made my way through the labyrinth of corridors to the great library only to be stopped dead in my tracks once I was there.

It had been gutted. Utterly and completely. All the books, the holo books, the access terminals, everything was gone. All that had remained was dust and empty shelves. It had taken me a few moments to understand what I had seen and only when the realisation had finally taken root in my brain did my heart thump wildly in my chest. Dry mouthed and scared I had made my way to the small records room, activated the lock and opened the door. The room was dark and I had not needed light to tell what I had already known. This room had also been completely emptied of all its contents.

From somewhere deep inside of me a memory surfaced. I had dreamt this very scene and it scared me to the bone. There were no more answers to be found here and the urgent need to get out had never been stronger. I had left the little room quietly, quickly, watching my feet not where I was going and had bumped into someone before I had known they were standing there, waiting for me. To my good grace, I had managed not to scream and found the wits to drop to a curtsy as soon as I had figured out who it was.

"Get up child, there is no need of court formalities here." The Emperor's soft voice echoed about the empty library.

"Your Highness." I had whispered, my voice sounded small and scared to my ears. I had done as he had asked and stood up.

"You come here often, do you not." It was not really a question but I had answered him any way.

"Sometimes, yes though not often."

"What is it you seek here?" He had asked beginning to walk in the direction opposite to the main entrance.

"Answers." I had blurted out before I could think about what I really wanted to say.

"Answers," He had smiled, "But what are your questions? This I think you do not know."

It was true. I had come looking for answers but I really didn't know what I was asking any more. I knew who I was, I knew who my birth parents were and I knew the history of this place, the terrible tragedy that had unfolded here. What more could there be to learn from this place? Why had I come back? I had not known.

"All the books and records," I had said instead of answering him, "Everything is gone."

I had felt his smile rather than seen it. "Yes, I had everything moved to a more secure place. You know this building is condemned. It is not safe here and I would hate to think of such valuable information falling into the wrong hands." I had been about to speak but he had continued, "Not that I fear you would do anything wrong, my child, but there are many who would. Not everyone is as loyal to me or my empire as you."

He had answered my question before I even had a chance to ask it. “So tell me, what has brought you here to this place in the middle of the night?” he asked.

“I keep hoping to find out more about who I am, I guess.” It had been an easy lie because it was mostly the truth.

“Ah yes, daughter of a Jedi and a clone. What do you wish to know?”

I had shivered then, he had known as I had suspected, where I had come from. “Well, I would like to learn how to use the force better than I do. I have heard tales about the Jedi being able to do amazing things, like fall into trances that could heal them of wounds and illnesses, to see into the future and even come back from the dead”

“And you would learn these *tricks*?” He had asked softly.

There was a catch in his voice and I had not liked how it had made me feel, the cold goose bumps that prickled up and down my spine made my answer cautious. “I would learn control.” I had replied and the tension in the room had eased, letting me know it had been the right answer to give. “I know I have some small talent but it’s wild and unpredictable.”

“The Jedi robbed cradles to train their kind young.” Palpatine’s voice was full of disgust as he spoke of the Jedi.

I didn’t have anything to say to this so I simply nodded. He continued but the sharp edge had gone from his words.

“You are far too old to begin any such training now, but control could be learned if you were willing to work hard.”

I had glanced at him, he had stopped walking and had looked at me with that penetrating stare which always made my brain itch. “I am always willing to work hard, your Highness.”

He had smiled that terrible, broken smile of his and nodded. “Then I will have Vader instruct you on matters of control, perhaps in doing so he will remember some of his own lessons learned from before. His control over his desires has been a little lacking of late.”

I had not answered this. I would not be forced to speak ill of Lord Vader no matter what I felt, especially to the man who had twisted Vader what he was today. This amused the Emperor to no end.

“Are you not tired child?” Palpatine had asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between us.

“A little but sometimes I just can’t sleep.” And that was the truth.

“Ah yes, and Thrawn is away.” He had said more to himself than to me. I had felt a stab of loathing shoot through me. What did Palpatine know of love and longing? I was certain the man had never loved anything except power in his life. It irked me to hear him speak Thrawn’s name in such a way and Thrawn’s absence was not the cause of my lack of sleep. Wisely, I had

held my tongue and the Emperor had continued, “Well then, now would be as good a time as any to bring out that rare smile of yours, come with me.” He had said. “I have something to show you.”

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Sitting on the floor of the training room in Lord Vader’s home watching him practice was something I usually enjoyed but this evening I was tired. He had worked me hard and I ached all over. I leaned with my back against the wall and closed my eyes. In my mind I could see the lightsaber’s motion to match its sound and the slight sizzle as it sliced through the metal of the droids. I knew how he moved, I had watched him practice more times than I could count, and even with my eyes closed I knew his grace and dance.

He had forgotten I was there. I knew that because it happened almost all of the time, some part of his mind shut off as he worked himself against the droids he had design and everything else around him melted away. I let my thoughts drift back to the night I had bumped into the Emperor at the Jedi Temple. I wondered, as I sat in the dimly lit training room, what it was the Emperor truly wanted from the galaxy he ruled.

The Emperor had bade me follow him and I had done so, walking as was protocol, slightly behind him. He was alone but somewhere in the shadows had skulked at least two members of his Royal Guard, I had not see them but I had sensed their presence. He had walked slowly, the gnarled walking stick which he had leaned on had made rhythmic tap tap sounds as it struck the marble floor. His way back to the Palace was over ground via his personal transportation, not skulking through hidden tunnels. I had not opened my mouth to say a word nor had he. He had sat across from me with his eyes closed. I had stared out at the passing city, my emotions in a turmoil I could not quell, my head full of questions I could not ask out loud. When we stopped he had gestured for me to exit first. I took the hand of the young guard that offered to help me out without thinking and stood waiting as the Emperor had unfolded himself from the vehicle to continue walking.

“Come along child.” He had said.

I had followed him without question. It was a part of the palace I had never been in before and I marvelled at its beauty. I knew the style to be much older than even the part I was used to being in. He had modernised much of the palace but this place he had left alone. It was breath taking.

“Not many are permitted here.” He had said as we walked through the silent hallways. “This place has been left as it was at the very beginning of the Old Republic. I have always loved the architecture but it is impractical

for our times, still a small part of history should remain, do you not agree, young Merlyn?"

"Yes, your Highness." I had replied. It would have been a shame to lose all of the history left behind but, I wondered, what good is keeping it when only one person ever got to see it?

He had smiled and continued to walk until he came to a set of doors, ornate and hand carved from a beautiful dark wood. When he had opened the door and stepped back I had gasped.

"Yes," he had crooned softly. "You may enter." And so I had.

I had gazed about me like a small child at a pallie stand. This was one of the Emperor's private collection rooms. I had heard he possessed such places, filled with treasures from across the Galaxy but I had never dreamed to even see one. I had looked about then, taking each piece that was being displayed, each a treasure, some I had known of some I had not but in the end it had been the piece displayed on a pedestal in the center of the large room that had held my gaze.

"Yes, I told you it had not been destroyed." He had startled me with his words making me jump. I turned to look at him standing so close I could almost feel the heat from his stare.

I had only nodded dumbly then turned my gaze back to the little statue. *The Waiting Dancer*.

"Well, child would you squander your only chance? Move closer, look at it."

I had done as he had said and stepped, hesitantly to the center of the room. The piece was quite small, but exquisite in its detail. The Maquette was no more than a hand or so tall. The little girl was seated on the floor, her hands clasped over her bent knee, upon which her chin rested, her other leg tucked underneath. She looked small and vulnerable, curled into herself until one looked at the face. It was the face of a young pupil staring up at a master she adored, waiting for instruction, waiting to be shown a move, waiting to be shown how to fly. Everything lay in Tarka-Null's ability to sculpt expression. I leaned in to look at her face and saw my mother as she had been as a child. I had studied this piece from books and holograms all of my childhood life. I had dreamed of being a dancer, whisked away to fame by the Alderaan Dance Academy. A little girl's dream, nothing more, but for many years my mother had lived it. A valued pupil of that once famous school prized and pampered until a fall had ended her career long before my father had stolen her heart.

She had told me the story of sitting for Tarka-Null many, many times because I had begged her to. Divulging her secret and urging me to keep it. I had begged her for every tiny detail she could remember, in some way living through her words this small moment of time. I knew why her

hair had been styled the way it had, and what colour her dance tunic had been. I knew that the constricting shoes she wore which helped her stand upon the very tips of her toes had been new and had pinched even though she had never danced in them.

I had gazed upon the small replica of the woman who had raised me and the world around me vanished. I was not even aware that I was crying. I longed to touch it but dared not. Only when the Emperor spoke, his voice so soft it was almost a whisper that I might do as I so longed did I remember where I was, and who I was with. For a moment I had paused, mid motion wondering what his price would be for this gift he was giving, then decided it did not matter.

If he had known, he had not said. I had reached and stroked the cool metal the statue had been cast from and welcomed the shock of images it had brought. Only when the statue finished telling me her side of the story did I break contact and step away. No wonder my mother had always smiled when ever she had told this story. I had smiled then as well.

I had turned and looked into the eyes of the Emperor and meaning every word I had uttered, I thanked him.

"You are a creature of astonishing passions." He said softly, "In a different age you would have made a great dark side adept."

I swallowed and glanced away from his piercing gaze, looking back at the small work of art that had made my heart ache.

There had been a moment's silence and then he had asked. "You knew who the model was?"

I nodded dumbly.

"Who was she to you?"

This puzzled me as I was sure he had known, but I had found no lie hidden in his words only idle curiosity. So I had answered him.

"She was my mother, the woman who raised me and taught me everything good and beautiful."

"I always wondered who had modeled, it is not written anywhere and Tarka himself never spoke of her name." He had said. "He would only smile when asked and comment about not revealing his muse."

"I didn't know." And that was the truth. While my mother had said not many people knew about the truth of it, I had never fully taken her at face value. My mother had been full of such mischiefs and we had had plenty of secrets between us.

"Did you learn what you wanted to?" The Emperor's voice had broken into my thoughts. Underneath his words I tasted longing. He really wanted to know.

So I had unfolded her story to him then, including some of the stories the statue had passed on to me, but not all of them. He listened with a slight smile.

“He had chosen her in secret.” I said. “He wanted the statue to be about the pose not the girl. She had modeled for him in a place of his choosing, his country estate. No one had known and she had lied to her parents about it. She took great delight in having this secret. Tarka-Null had given her a gift for her troubles and time, he had fashioned a tiny necklace for her, a small flower, which she wore until the day she was killed. Who the model had been had been the school’s greatest mystery, but I had not known it was also the galaxy’s.”

“I see you have been learning to better control your gift.” He said.

“Practice makes perfect.” I nodded reciting master Kjestyll’s words without thinking.

The Emperor had chuckled. “You are indeed every bit as fascinating as my favourite tactician finds you to be. No wonder he bristles whenever I mention your name. Such a distraction, I think, even he could not resist. It is an interesting weakness for such a strong willed man.”

Now, I had thought, we come to the truth of the matter. Thrawn. I had waited for more but surprisingly enough there was none. The Emperor regarded me for a few moments and I burned under the heat of his scrutiny, then in the blink of an eye he had seemed to grow weary.

“It is late, child, I am fatigued and I see sleep lurking behind your eyes. I will request that Lord Vader see to your training and when I return from my visit to the over see the new space station perhaps you and I will speak some more of art.”

“As you wish, your Highness.” I had said and because I hadn’t known what else to do I curtsied which made him chuckle.

“Yes, the woman who raised you taught you well. You may leave now and return home, he is waiting for you.” He had said. Somehow he had signalled for his guard who had entered the room crimson and silent. “Escort Miss Gabriel to the South entrance and see she is taken home safely.” And with those words he had dismissed me, turning his back to me to let his fingertips graze the small statue fondly. I had given him a gift; I had given him the answer to a long unanswered question. The Emperor did not like mysteries and he never left anything undone. When I had returned home, I found the Emperor had once again been right, and Thrawn had returned early. Still awake, he had waited up for me to come home. That reunion had been sweet.

Now, half asleep on the floor of Lord Vader’s training room I pondered this small piece of knowledge. Thrawn was just such a mystery and it occurred to me then that perhaps the Emperor was hoping I would be the

key to unravel it but I knew he was wrong. Thrawn was too many things, I knew only a small part of them, only a small part of him and even then I would not betray him, I would rather die. If I was Thrawn’s weakness then he was my strength. It was at that moment, in the quiet of Lord Vader’s training room I understood how deep my feelings for Thrawn went. The realization was daunting.

I yawned and stirred. The sound of lightsaber and droids had stopped. Lord Vader towered above me and nudged me with his boot.

“Get up, girl and go home. You are no good to me tired and I won’t have you littering up my floors like common street trash.” He said. “We will have plenty of work to do tomorrow, and I have no time to waste pandering to your fatigue.”

I got to my feet stiffly and did as he had ordered. I went home.

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Time seemed to both drag and fly by all at the same time. I had no idea how such a thing was possible but it was. It had been nearly three weeks since the Emperor had left and a week since Thrawn had gone off planet in a hurry. His presence failed greatly. I had become spoiled with having him around so much. While I had made no complaint about his assignment he had known I was sad to see him leave. We had not spoken about it, after all what was there to say? It was his job, his duty and it came first above all else. I knew this but it did not make it any easier to let him go.

He had gone early in the morning, long before the sun had come up. I had lain curled up in the warmth of the bed we shared, aware of his quiet movements around the bedroom. He had woken me gently, whispering in my ear, kissing me lightly on the cheek as he made to leave. I was grateful for the dream like quality his going in the night always left. Good byes were not our forte and we didn’t make a big fuss. It was just easier this way.

I wasn’t sure what part of the galaxy he was being sent to but I knew it had something to do with Zaarin, although he had not actually said anything about it. We had been together long enough that I had learned to read him well enough and sometimes Thrawn told me more by what he didn’t say than the information he chose to give out. I wasn’t happy about this latest assignment. I did not think there was a single man who hated Thrawn more than Demetrius Zaarin. I wasn’t certain exactly how Thrawn felt about the Grand Admiral. He wasn’t a man to lay his feelings out in the open but I was reasonable sure the feelings Thrawn did have did not run towards the side of being friends. My last words to him before he had slipped out of the bedroom had simply been ‘*Be careful.*’

‘*Always, tekari, always.*’ Had been his soft reply.

Lord Vader concerned himself with the daily business of being on Coruscant without the Emperor's presence. He was restless and easily irritated. I stayed out of his way as much as I was able to and ducked when I had to. The only thing that seemed to cheer him up was news that came from the investigator I had hired for him. What the nature of that news had been Lord Vader never said but after the dour faced investigator had left, the mood had eased considerably. I for one was grateful because I had just about all the Vader bad temper I could deal with.

For the most part Coruscant was its usual bustling self. The day to day business of palace intrigue and courtier life made life less dull and the gossip columns ran wild with speculation about Xizor and his new love. I might have shown more interest in what he was doing had I actually cared but Prince Xizor was someone I hoped would vanish off the face of the planet or better yet the universe. He was more often than not the cause Lord Vader's foul moods and thus also mine. It astounded me how much this one man upset Lord Vader. Even worse was the fact that Lord Vader allowed this to happen. I spent my days divided between working from my palace office and working from Lord Vader's home. It didn't really matter where I worked, Lord Vader's mood didn't change. Life at the Imperial Palace went on as usual until the day Prince Xizor's luck suddenly changed.

I was working from my office in the Palace, in the middle of answering a letter when a large resounding boom shattered the peace and quiet. It wasn't unusual to hear such sounds as kids, joy riding low in their parent's ships would skim the atmosphere at supersonic speeds, causing sonic booms to happen. The booms rattled windows and annoyed the people who lived in the upper parts of the city but were for the most part harmless. I didn't think much about them to tell the truth but that changed when ten minutes later Shiv burst into the office nearly giving me a heart attack in the process.

"Damn it Shiv, why can't you knock like everyone else!" I hissed irritated. "You scared the sandjiggers out of me!"

He completely ignored me, bounced over to the holo caster and turned it on. "You have to see what's happening!" he said. "You'll never believe it!"

I sighed as the News Net flickered on. I was about to tell Shiv I didn't have time for this when I suddenly understood why he was in such a fluster.

The holo vid showed scenes of massive destruction and chaos. Black smoke billowed into the air and people were running around like confused eopies during a mass stampede. At first I wasn't sure where this was being filmed but then it dawned on me I knew the area well, because it

was very close to where Lord Vader's castle was and not that far away from here.

"Almighty sarlacc, what the hell happened?" I asked, still staring at the images being shown. The palace Prince Xizor had called home had exploded. The area was a wreck, a lot of people had been killed and even more injured. The city was in an uproar. The last time something of this nature had happened, so the reporter said, was during the Clone Wars. There was an area wide lock down and people were being advised to stay home.

Shiv shook his head. "No idea." He said. "I was watching the morning show when they broke in with a special announcement that there had been a massive explosion. It's only now coming through that it is Xizor's place." He looked at me then sat down. "You don't suppose that Vader did this do you?" He asked very quietly.

I shook my head. "Not his style." I said. The images shown of the area where Xizor had once lived were beyond recognition. It must have been some explosion and then I remembered the large boom I had felt and heard Shiv laughed. "He has a style?"

"Yep, that sneaky force choke you to death thing, definitely his style. He wouldn't kill Xizor like this, too much work, too much planning." How could I explain to Shiv that it just didn't feel like Vader's touch? This was something else. "Does anyone know if Xizor was in the building when it blew up? Anyone know if he is still alive?"

Shiv shrugged and we turned our attention back to the news hoping, like the rest of the planet, to hear more. While Prince Xizor was not the best loved member of the Imperial Court he was certainly one of the most prominent, his death would set the whole court buzzing. I wasn't sure how the Royal court or the planet would react if it was discovered he was dead. Even worse I wasn't sure how Lord Vader would react if it was discovered that he was still alive. For a moment I contemplated trying to get in touch with him at his home to tell him but I was certain he already knew. He had enough people spying on Xizor he didn't need me for that and besides if he hadn't been told he had certainly felt the blast.

The rest of the day passed in a bit of a blur. The HoloNet had gone mad with news casts, speculation and misinformation. Shiv and I ordered food in and spent the last of the afternoon glued to the holo screen. When I went home it was earlier than usual, to an empty flat. My head was still reeling from the news and when I switched on the holonet, the news was still stuck on the same subject. I sighed as I sat in the living room eating left over lunch and drinking a glass of nice wine. I had tried to reach Lord Vader before I had left the office but he had suddenly gone off planet. I suspected it had something to do with the whole Xizor affair but the man I spoke to was

not terribly forthcoming about any information and I wasn't really in the mood to care or push. I figured that I would eventually learn what I needed to, so I sat and just watched the news.

I suppose it should not have come as a surprise that what ever was going on with Xizor was not over yet. Once the initial fervour of reporting had died down and some semblance of normalcy returned to the programming, I curled up on the couch and watched a re-run of *Wild Banthas*. It was a very bad show about settlers trying to make a living on Tatooine when a special new bulletin broke into the show alleviating my tedium. I was suddenly wide awake.

*-We interrupt this programme to bring you this special bulletin. We have just received word that Prince Xizor's skyhook has been destroyed. There has been no official word yet if the Prince was on board his Skyhook but it is believed he may have been as his ship, The Virago, was seen in the immediate area. It is not know at this time if the persons responsible for this are the same as the group believed to be responsible for the destruction of Prince Xizor's Coruscant home which was destroyed earlier today in a massive explosion. Coruscant Fire Patrol has issued a statement, that there is no danger from falling debris but people in the area are being told to stay indoors for their own safety... -*

The reporter continued but I stopped listening. It was two in the morning but I called Shiv anyway. He wasn't asleep.

"Are you seeing the news?" I asked before he had a chance to say anything.

"What the heck is going on?" He asked.

I shook my head. "I wish I knew." I answered.

"Do you think he's dead?" Shiv asked.

"I have no idea but he'd be lucky to survive two explosions in one day wouldn't he?"

Shiv just nodded glumly. "This planet is going to hell!" he said a bit crossly.

"I don't disagree." I said as my work comm beeped. "I gotta go, see you tomorrow." And I disconnected.

I answered my comm and the shimmering image of Lord Vader appeared on the holo emitter.

"Lord Vader, what can I do for you?"

"I take you have seen the news?" He growled.

"I have."

"When is the Emperor expected to return?"

I dug out my datapad and looked up the date. "In three days, my lord, depending on his whim." Lord Vader already knew this but I suspect he

mostly wanted to gloat over Xizor's misfortune. I had to ask. "Is the Prince dead?"

"I hope so, for his sake!" Lord Vader's reply was terse but satisfied.

I had no idea how to answer this but I couldn't say I would be sorry if it turned out that Xizor really was dead. He was a giant pain in the ass. "What can I do for you milord?" I asked again, knowing he had not gotten in touch with me simply to talk about Xizor.

"Cancel all my appointments for the next two weeks!" He said.

"Yes, my lord, is there anything else?"

"No. I shall advise you of any further changes tomorrow. You will work from my residence, do not be tardy!" He said and disconnected.

I sighed as I sat back on the couch. What a fun day tomorrow was going to be, I thought and with that I decided I should probably get some sleep.

The next day I went to work prepared to deal with Lord Vader's general ire only to be pleasantly surprised, he was actually more or less cheerful.

When I asked what had happened with Xizor I did not really expect an answer but he told me all that he knew. It was quite a tale and I sat at my desk, my cold hands cupped around my mug of stimcaf listening while he recounted everything he knew.

It seemed that he had been right all along and Prince Xizor's reasons for trying to worm his way into the upper echelons of the Imperial court were not just for personal gain and power but also for revenge. Many years ago Lord Vader had been involved in a project on the Falleen home world that deal with biological weapons. There had been an accident in one of the labs causing the release of a flesh eating bacterial toxin. In order to contain this outbreak Lord Vader had ordered the area destroyed. The city which had been included in this destruction had been home to all of Prince Xizor's family and they had all been killed.

As Lord Vader told this story I shivered. He spoke coldly and without remorse. He had only been concerned with covering up the mess that had been made and not particularly concerned with the loss of life that resulted.

Prince Xizor had been off world at the time and had learned of the destruction too late to do anything about it so he had plotted his revenge. In order to hide his true identity he had had all records of his family wiped out and created for himself a new world, a new life as the secret head of Black Sun and in the open the owner of several shipping companies among other things. He had gained favour at the Imperial court and carried a place at the Emperor's side with his cunning and guile. If the Emperor knew of Xizor's

true past and reasons for gaining favour at court he never once gave any hint of it away.

Lord Vader had been right all along in suspecting that the Prince had ulterior motives for his integration into the Emperor's inner circle but that it revolved around revenge was a bit of a surprise. All this had been discovered only in the last couple of weeks when the investigator I had found him had unearthed the truth. It was then that Lord Vader put two and two together and fully understood that Xizor not only meant to destroy him, take his place at the Emperor's side but also meant to take away his family by killing his son Luke.

Vader's voice shook with rage as he told me the last part and there was a deep sense of smug satisfaction when he told me how Xizor had truly believed right up until the last second that fear of the Emperor's wrath would stay Vader's hand.

I smiled grimly at these words because I knew that as I pushed Vader, Vader also knew how far he could push the Emperor and some things were worth the punishment. It had been the Executor, on Vader's command that had obliterated the prince's skyhook. As to who had destroyed the prince's palatial home Vader could only speculate. I felt the pride in his words when he murmured Luke Skywalker's name.

"The Emperor will not be happy about this when he returns, my lord." I said cautiously when he had finished speaking.

"I will deal with that. Xizor was a menace and my master is no fool but sometimes he does not see the world as I do." Lord Vader growled. "Xizor paid for his pride and we are better off without the likes of him cluttering up the Imperial Court."

I could only nod. I didn't disagree. "What about Black Sun?"

Lord Vader regarded me for a moment and I swear I could sense his slow smile from underneath his mask. "There is always a bigger fish waiting in the shadows." He replied. "A new leader will appear, mark my words. Now, girl enough babble. I have much to do and so do you!"

And with that my work day began. I hoped that things would calm down a bit now that Xizor was out of the way but that was just wishful thinking. All bad things seem to happen in threes so when the next bit of peace shattering news interrupted daily life, I wasn't as surprised as maybe I should have been.

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Despite the fact that I had known Zaarin was up to something when news of the Emperor's abduction and the attempted coup by the Grand Admiral hit I was still shocked into a dull sort of numbness.

En route to Coruscant, the Emperor's shuttle had been intercepted and the Emperor had been kidnapped. Lord Vader had moved swiftly the moment the news of this reached him. It was lucky that he was already off world at the time and could deal with directly. I was just grateful that I had not been hauled off world with him. By the time news of the attempted coup reached the public's ears Coruscant was already locked down, a curfew had already been imposed and extra security had been set in place to avoid any problems that might arise from people who might take advantage of the situation. It was a mess and the News Nets were in a frantic panic trying to get any information at all. My contact with Lord Vader since all hell had broken loose was limited. He would not be back on planet until the mess was sorted out, he said and that I should cancel all meetings and appointments until other wise notified. When I pressed him for details he had simply replied.

"That moron Zaarin thinks he can rule the galaxy! He has no idea what the Emperor is capable of and he's not the first idiot to kidnap Palpatine either. I'll be back when this is over in the mean time I expect you to deal with your work and continue the studies I have set for you!"

I simply nodded. He had been trying to teach me more control over my force powers and neither of us were having a lot of success over this. At wit's end, he had requested that Master Kjestyll teach me more about the art of control through meditation as he seemed to have better luck with me on this subject than Lord Vader had. I did not think that it was a matter of control but rather more about master Kjestyll's ability to instil calm in me not anger or fear as was usually the case with Lord Vader. No matter what the reasons, my lessons with Master Kjestyll had gone from being combat related to control related and had done nothing to ease my sense of frustration. I was not a very good student in the art of being patient and calm.

It was a dark time for everyone working at the palace. Security was on high alert and anyone not wearing their identity badges was in for a nasty shock. I was glad to work in the quiet part of the palace and I wasn't the only one. More often than not Shiv and sometimes Ynyth would come and join me, to hang out under the guise of being on official business. We mostly sat watching the HoloNet news, amazed at the level of disinformation that was given out on the public broad-wave, comparing our own news to that from the HoloNet.

There was nothing we could do except watch the story unfold, taking bits and pieces of news from every source we could. Luckily for us, as palace workers with good clearance and a lot of friends with even better clearance the story unravelled itself pretty swiftly once the information began to flow.

The kidnapping attempt of the Emperor had not been as successful as first believed. Someone named Arden Lyn had actually been the one to capture the Emperor's shuttle and was in the process of bringing it to Zaarin's Flagship the *Glory*. I knew when Lord Vader had engaged in battle because Jorae had sent me a quick priority message telling me. In the all too frustratingly infrequent updates that followed I learned that, despite the fight which had ensued, Zaarin and most of his fleet had escaped.

Shiv and I had sat in my office glued to the in-house reports, cups of tea growing cold in our hands as we watched and waited for more news. As much as I feared the Emperor, I could not imagine a galaxy without him and along with many others whispered quiet prayers for his safe return. There was a silent sigh of relief when the official News cast finally announced that the coup had failed, that Lord Vader had recovered the Emperor's shuttle with the Emperor still on board and that he was safe and well. When the Emperor returned to Coruscant it was a quiet affair. There was no parade and no large celebratory festivities.

I knew that all was more or less back to normal when Lord Vader summoned me to meet him in the office in his home in the middle of the night. The driver who came to pick me up was quiet and terse. I sat in the back of the speeder, wrapped in a heavy shawl. It was late, I had been asleep and I was not happy about being hauled out of bed.

The sentry on duty merely nodded to me as I passed through the great doors. I was expected. "He's waiting for you in the small library." He said.

I merely nodded and drew a deep breath. The small library was probably, next to my office, the most inviting room that I had seen in his home. It was situated on one of the upper floors and had a stunning view over the city. Despite the fact that he had filled the library with enough reading material to last me a life time, it was a room he rarely used and a room I was not often permitted to enter without his express permission. I knocked on the door and it opened on its own.

"Come in girl." His voice seemed too loud in the quiet of the night.

I did as he had asked and shut the door behind me. He was standing with his back to the door, staring out over the night skyline of the city.

"Is his Excellency alright?" I asked quietly, unable to gauge his mood.

There was no sound except the rhythmic in- out of the mechanical breathing and I did not know what to do, if I should approach or stay put.

"Yes, he was never in any real danger." Lord Vader replied.

I nodded. "What can I do for you, my lord?" I asked. It was late, I was tired and I wanted him to get to the point so that I could go back home to bed.

"Thrawn has gone after Zaarin and his fleet." He said simply.

I drew a deep breath and let it go slowly. This was not news I wanted to hear though it was not really a surprise either. I just stared at his back wondering why had he called me all the way out to his barren home to tell me this news that he could have given me at any time, could have given me in the morning so why here? Why now?

"Well, I am certain that if anyone can catch Zaarin it will be Thrawn, my lord." I said carefully.

"Your faith in your lover is commendable." Lord Vader said more to himself than to me. His words lacked their usual bite but they annoyed me anyway.

"Why am I here?" I asked crossly. I was irritated. I was tired. I was cold.

He turned around to regard me carefully. "I thought you would want to know what is happening before it gets blown out of proportion by the News Net." There was truth in the words he spoke but also a lie behind them.

"Thank you my lord." I said, puzzled by his demeanour. I couldn't read him tonight although I tried.

"Master Kjestyll has informed me that you are finding your currents studies with him difficult." He replied, utterly changing the subject.

"You've been speaking with him recently?" I was surprised.

"He keeps me informed of your progress, or lack thereof." He said vaguely, gesturing for me to sit on the floor. I was grateful this room was carpeted. I sat down, cross legged; my hands folded one into the other in my lap and waited.

"Why did you ask the Emperor about learning more control over your talents?" He asked.

Ah, I thought, now we get to the point. He was angry that I had talked to the Emperor about my training, about wanting more than I was getting yet Lord Vader did not seem angry to me, he seemed resigned.

I sighed as I answered him. "I don't know. He asked a question and I answered it but it's the truth." I said. "I have this power but I don't understand it. I feel as though I am missing something. I've read about the Jedi being able to do amazing things, how they could run faster, jump higher. I have even heard it said that they could even meditate so deeply that they could put themselves into trances which could help them heal. I didn't think it would be prudent to talk about learning Jedi abilities with the Emperor so all I told him was I thought I needed to learn more control,

which is also the truth. When it comes to the Force I feel as though I am just running around in circles and I have no idea what I am doing.”

“That would be because you don’t know what you are doing.” He shot back. I just glared at him.

The silence between us was long and hard I wasn’t certain if he was going to get angry and stalk off or turn violent, he did neither.

“Why control?” he asked staring out of the window once again.

I shrugged. “I didn’t really know what else to say. He scares me when he talks to me about what I want because it always comes with a price.” I said. It was the first time I had ever said that out loud to Lord Vader even though I was certain he already knew this.

“Of course it does. The Emperor always has a motive.” He retorted, “But that still does not answer my question.”

I sighed. “I feel I need it. Maybe if I fight Jyrki again it would help me beat him, we are so evenly matched and he knows me too well.” I said. It wasn’t exactly the truth and I wondered if for a moment he had figured that out. Lord Vader was many things but he was not stupid and after nearly four years of working with me he knew me too well.

“He knows the girl you once were, not who you have become. I have told you before you give him too much power.”

“Yes, you have but that still doesn’t change the fact I need to learn control or that it might be useful to know how to do more than just move coffee cups across a table.”

“These abilities require years and years of training. You are too old for this now.” He replied casually.

“Then why teach me at all?” I countered, my anger surfacing. I was too tired and cranky to care about whether or not I was being rude.

“I have been asking myself that question for several years now,” Came his terse reply. “But the Emperor’s will is not to be questioned.”

I sighed. “My lord, why did you call me here in the middle of the night?”

“You knew what Zaarin was planning didn’t you.” It was not a question. He did not bother to answer mine.

“I had an idea he wanted to take over the government but nothing concrete.” I told him. “The night he attacked me, he let his ambitions slip, but I didn’t know that he had planned to kidnap the Emperor. If I had I would have told someone,” I said and then I looked up at him, “I would have told you.”

He stood still and stared out of the window. “Admiral Thrawn mentioned that he thought Zaarin might try something to harm the Emperor. When I spoke of this to my Master he had simply smiled. He said everything was going according to his plan.”

I swear that in that single moment I knew a hatred of the Emperor like I had never known before. “Did he mean for this to happen? Did he know what Zaarin had planned?” I asked. “Did the Emperor plan this all along?”

Lord Vader shook his head slightly. “I have no idea but it would not be the first time he has put such a plan in motion to serve his own needs. Zaarin was becoming a problem but to remove him would have been ... difficult.” He paused for a second. “Demetrius Zaarin has powerful friends, enough of them who could make things annoyingly difficult for my Master.”

“So the Emperor set this up. He knew?” I pushed. I could not keep the bitterness or anger out of my voice.

“I believe he put certain events in motion.” Lord Vader agreed.

Suddenly I understood. A piece of puzzle fell into place. I felt my mouth go dry. “The Emperor made Thrawn a Grand Admiral but he didn’t tell anyone because he has no idea who will come out of this alive does?” I said through clenched teeth.

“No.” Lord Vader replied. The word sounded terrible to my ears. “The Emperor can see many things, predict many things but not everything and both Zaarin and Thrawn are evenly matched.”

I hissed and looked up at Darth Vader who had turned to look back at me. “I hate him.” I said very softly.

Lord Vader nodded. “I know.” Was all he replied. There was so much bitter emotion laced in those two words that I didn’t know what else to say. He knew better than anyone what games the Emperor played. Perhaps more so than anyone else in the entire galaxy, he had reason to loath Palpatine. I just brought my knees to my chest and hugged them, my chin resting on them while I looked up at Lord Vader.

“So now what?” I asked. “We just wait until someone wins?” I was furious.

“There is nothing else you can do.” He said simply. “Except your work, your training.” He added with a growl.

“If Thrawn dies....” I began.

“If Thrawn dies you will know heartache and sorrow which the Emperor will use.” Lord Vader said simply, cutting me off. “You have a strong, stubborn will which amuses my master but make no mistake you will be broken and then you will be his obedient and compliant servant.” There was a sorrow deep in his voice which he could not hide but I wasn’t sure the reason for it. “And what is more, you will be powerless to stop it from happening.”

“Why does he do these things?” I asked suddenly.

Lord Vader simply shook his head. “Because he can.” I was certain he had been asking himself this same question for as long as he could

remember. "He manipulates people into doing his will all the while thinking they are doing it all on their own."

"He did the same thing to you!" I blurted out suddenly, anger ruling over common sense.

"Of course. He wanted an apprentice who was powerful in the force so that he would have the strength to overthrow the government."

"He did more than that to you; he twisted everything you loved into something he could use. How can you still serve him after what he did?"

The air rippled slightly. "What do you mean?"

"He toyed with you, lied to you!" I snapped. "He used how you felt for Padmé and he twisted it all around into something terrible and ugly!"

For a moment I was certain he would lash out and strike me. Usually any mention of his long dead wife brought about a sudden and violent anger. This time he held himself in check. "He did not kill her, I did." He said bitterly.

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

That caught his attention. "Explain yourself!"

I told him about what I had seen at the compound of Wayland, what his lightsaber had shown me, the terrible fight with Obi Wan, his own anger at Padmé. As I spoke I could feel the room charge with his terrible sorrow and self loathing but before he could lash out I said. "But she wasn't dead when Obi Wan left that planet."

Vader whirled around so suddenly I flinched back from him in reflex. "My master told me she was dead, he told me I had killed her!"

I drew a deep breath. "That may be part of the truth but it wasn't your force choke that killed her. She gave birth to your son afterwards, so how could she have been dead on that terrible planet?"

The galaxy seemed to hold its breath. He had never thought on this before, he had been so utterly convinced he had killed his wife that he had never questioned it. What he had thought in that moment I could never have said. He had a son and Padmé had been alive to deliver that child, she had to have been. I had seen in the lightsaber's memories, because Obi Wan had held it in his hand while he boarded her ship to leave Mustapha, that when he had taken off she was still living. He must have put the weapon away after that because this was the only secrets of this nature it had revealed to me and I had kept them hidden, not daring to tell to Emperor what I knew of his lies.

There was a long silence and I pulled my shawl closer around my shoulders. The library was cold and not well lit, the one light that was on was mainly for my benefit. I wondered if I should get up, go home. I had no idea what it was I was actually doing here. When Lord Vader summoned me I did not refuse but usually he had work for me to do, especially when it was this

late at night. This odd conversation was unusual and unnerving. He turned his back on me once again and stared out of the window. The air was heavy between us.

I wondered, then, if he also got tired of Palpatine's manipulations and found some small solace in my company. As far as I know I was the only person in his life who did not judge him or try to play him and while I feared his anger and his temper I was not afraid of him the way most everyone else in the galaxy was. I would never ask him about these things, so I doubted I would ever know but in all the time I had known Lord Vader, I had never felt closer to him than at this moment. It was a peculiar sensation considering who he was, given all that he had done but it was not discomforting. So, I just sat and looked up at him.

"My lord?" I asked in a voice that sounded very small to my ears.

He stayed statue still and I wondered at that moment if he would kill me for the sheer audacity of speaking my mind. He hated to be reminded of the past but it was a false past, created memories built upon lies from a man who wanted to own him and manipulate him like a puppet. I tried to get a sense of his thoughts through the force but he shut me out so hard it hurt. Still there was a bond between us, something that had been created from almost the first moment I had begun working for him and that was hard to break away from. I could sense on the edge of things his terrible burning anger and hate but now there was something else, something I could not define. It felt as if some of the weight he had been carrying around since the moment he had turned to the dark side shifted and I felt his rage recede.

I realised while sitting on the floor of his awful castle that I had given him some tiny measure of reprieve as well as something new to think about. I have said it before, he was not a stupid man but sometimes he was an awfully linear thinker and he had been so focused recently on his son he had forgotten the woman who had given birth to the boy. For a long time we stayed like that, he staring out of the window lost in thought and I seated on the floor looking up at him.

It was he who eventually broke the dreadful stillness. "You mentioned the Jedi skills, deep meditation. This is what you really wish to learn is it not." It was not a question. He knew me enough to pick through my words and find the truth of things. The tie between us was strong, I didn't understand it but I could not fight it either. Neither, it seemed, could he.

I nodded when he turned to look at me. "Yes, I think it is important."

Surprisingly enough to me he did not argue with me or offer up and sarcasm. "Very well, I will tell you what I know, but you will not learn this technique in one night, it takes years to perfect."

“Thank you.” I said relieved without knowing why.

“Master Kjestyll has taught you to center, to meditate?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Then do so and listen to what I have to tell you.”

“Yes, my lord.” I said. “But before we start can I ask you a question?”

“If you must.”

“Why am I really here?”

He looked at me for a moment. “Because I wished it.” He said simply. It was the truth, although not the entire explanation. I doubted I would ever really know the whole of it but the answer satisfied me enough to leave it alone.

“Now, are you ready to learn or do you wish to return home and wait for news of Thrawn’s fate on your own?”

I had no desire to return to the flat I shared with Thrawn and wait alone, awake all night to hear if he lived or died trying hunt down the man the Emperor had deliberately set up. I sighed and nodded and with that gave myself over to the meditation techniques that I had been taught, listening to Vader’s voice as he began to instruct me on a long forgotten ancient art. I wasn’t sure why I felt a driving need to delve deeper into these Jedi techniques but something in the back of my mind told me it was important. So far that nagging voice had not steered me wrong so I wasn’t about to stop listening to it now. I drew a deep breath and began to find my center. It wasn’t as difficult as one might think, given the current circumstances.

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Thrawn sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows resting on his knees, his face resting in his hands. I stroked his bare back with my finger tips.

“Are you really alright?” I asked.

He turned his head to glance at me. “Yes, I am just exhausted, sj’iu tekari. This has been a difficult campaign.” He said.

“So he’s finally dead?” I asked, getting up to curl about his back, pressing my cheek against his skin. When I kissed him on the shoulder he reached back and caressed my hair then continued to undress.

“Yes.” His reply sounded so weary it almost broke my heart.

“I am so glad you’re home.” I told him quietly.

I hadn’t seen him in what seemed like forever and even though the boys in the spook room had done their best to let me know what was going on the details were greatly lacking. I got snippets of information mostly with the tag line – *he’s alright*- tacked on for good measure. Sometimes, when he

was actually on planet Lord Vader would tell me more but mainly the time together, which did not involve work, was spent with him teaching me.

It became a pattern of his to roust me out of bed and send for me to meet him at his Coruscant home. Most of the time he would instruct me in methods he had learned from his masters long before the mask and the anger, often we would spar and sometimes we would talk. It was a strange time and there was an odd sense of limbo, of waiting for something to happen. The strange restlessness that had permeated the Imperial Palace seeped its way into daily Coruscant life. Despite his annoying habit of waking me up at odd hours, I didn’t mind, especially since Lord Vader never did this when Thrawn was on planet only when he was away.

Oddly enough, I welcomed Lord Vader’s presence and the peculiar hours he kept didn’t really bother me, I was used to them. If he felt the same for me he never said, he was not a person to speak over how he felt but I got the impression he was happy to have someone to wake up in the small hours of the night, to keep him company. Loneliness comes in many guises, who was I to question this? I suppose it was a compliment that he allowed me such a place in his private life. I knew more about him than almost anyone else, while I could never condone the terrible things he did, I understood, maybe just a little better than most, why he was the way he was. He also understood about fear, about worry for someone else.

Despite the fact that I tried to keep my feelings about Thrawn and what he was doing to myself, Lord Vader knew anyway, how could he not? So he would impart knowledge of Thrawn’s work in small careful nuggets for which I was grateful. He knew things no one else would tell me. I supposed it served his own purpose to keep me informed and up to date. Worried, I was not much use to him and my work suffered, my studies suffered. Much of the news I heard never made it to public channels so I was glad I had my own resources. Still, when the conflict with Zaarin was finally over I was relieved beyond belief. I knew that Thrawn was on his way back to Coruscant because Lord Vader had let me know.

It had been just past three in the morning when Thrawn had finally returned home. I had not been sleeping well so when the door to the flat opened I had woken up instantly. I had turned on the small side lamp to let him know I was awake and that there was no need for stealth. I had not been prepared for how worn out he looked when he had walked in the bedroom. He had motioned for me not to get out of bed and had begun to undress right away; stripping out of his uniform, stripping away the vestiges of the battle he had been instrumental in winning. I was glad he had returned safely.

“Do you want a cup of tea.” I asked as he got up from the bed, moving away from my embrace to go to the refresher.

“No, but a brandy would not be unwelcome.” He said before he closed the door. “I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

I got up, pulled on a robe and padded, barefoot, to the kitchen. Two glasses of brandy in hand I went into the living room, set the glasses on the table and lit a couple of candles. I could hear when he finished showering and I smiled when he joined me, wearing the long robe I had bought for him to replace the one I had stolen from him, the scent of his damp hair and soap filling the air.

“I suppose you will want to hear all about it then?” He asked touching is glass to mine.

“At least the *Daily Digest* version.” I replied. “But I don’t really need all the gory details and only if you want to talk about it.”

He nodded and caressed the side of my face gently. “How much do you know?” He asked sipping his drink slowly.

“Well, after Zaarin’s kidnapping attempt failed he vanished and then there were reports that he had begun to rain Imperial facilities, I am guessing he wanted to slow production of the TIE advanced. I heard that the battles were pretty vicious. I also heard there were rebels adding to the mix and that Zaarin actually used an interdicator against you while you were on board the *Sceltor*. I heard that your ship took heavy damage but everyone I talked with went to great pains to let me know you were okay.”

He smiled. “I see your friends in Intel have been keeping you informed.”

“They said you had come back to the Core but it was a quick turn around.” I told him.

He nodded. “That is true, though I stayed onboard while we were in space dock to supervise the repairs. I did send you a message to let you know that I was alright.”

I smiled at that memory, a bouquet of white Corellian roses mixed with pale blue lilies and tiny bright red poppet-blossoms. “I got it.” He had sent me flowers, much as he had once before letting me know that he was not so easy to kill, still I had been a bit freaked out. “But seeing you alive in person would have been nice.” I added. “I was worried.”

“Duty comes first, tekari.” He chided gently.

I rolled my eyes at him. “I know that.” I said and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek.

“So do you know that when we returned to go after Zaarin he was trying to destroy the TIE Defender project?”

I nodded. “Yes, but didn’t you get a couple of prototypes out before he destroyed the place?”

“Three in total,” he said, “Which we shipped in separate corvettes to Coruscant but one was stolen by pirates while en route.”

I gave a short, mirthless laugh, “I heard about that, the pirates tried to auction it off to the highest bidder, which turned out to be the Emperor.” I said. “I suppose it’s a good thing the Emperor is so wealthy he can buy back his own technology.” I added. “And didn’t Zaarin have some involvement with the pirates?”

Thrawn drew a deep breath. “Yes. He used everything available to him to try and keep us from finding and using the prototypes. It got very messy.” He said quietly. “I lost an ISD and a lot of good people. Fighting Zaarin was sometimes like fighting a ghost. It was very challenging and sometimes very frustrating.”

“Bet you almost wish I had done away with him when I had the chance!”

He just gave me a hard look and did not dignify my question with an answer “It was a jax and mouse game for a while and most intriguing to do battle against someone with such a keen mind.”

“They announced your promotion, by the way.” I said when he stopped to take a sip of his drink.

“Yes, there was another ceremony done out in the Eva-T system; you know how the Emperor likes things done properly.” He said with a touch of disdain. “However, I felt it was inappropriate given the circumstances.”

“The Emperor could afford to let everyone know I suppose, after all it was official that Zaarin was a traitor and you would probably win.” I did not bother to hid the bitterness I felt.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow at me. “So you figured out Palpatine’s game then? Clever girl.” He said softly.

“He really is evil.”

Thrawn simply shrugged.

“Well at least now I get to call you Grand Admiral for real.” My words made him smile. “So what finally happened?” I asked.

“We attacked his convoys based on information from prisoners, it was mostly a success except when Zaarin ambushed us and we lost the ISD. After this we used missile boats to lure him out of hiding. I suppose he must have begun to feel desperate because it ended up that he stole the corvette with the cloaking device. He thought he could use it to escape but he did not realise there was a major design flaw. When he tried to make the jump into hyperspace the cloak became unstable and exploded. He was killed instantly.”

“Well, I can’t say I am sorry to hear that he is finally dead.”

Thrawn looked at me for a moment. “Nor can I, tekari, nor can I.”

“What about the cloaking technology?”

“Gone. The Emperor decided that it was too unstable to continue with the project for now and he has his mind on other things these days.”

I made a face. "Right, the new battle station and his nefarious plan to trap the rebels."

"You disagree with this plan?" he asked mildly in that manner which let me know I wasn't the only one and that he was just interested in knowing why.

"I think it is stupid." I snapped crossly, echoing Lord Vader's sentiments. "He's underestimated the rebels before and look at what happened."

Thrawn nodded. "He is taking a risk, I agree, but the rebellion's fleet is limited as is their technology. If the battle station's weapon is fully operational which is the plan, the rebels won't stand much of a chance."

I sighed as I swished the last of my brandy around in the glass. "You said so yourself, the rebels have nothing to lose, they will fight like cornered animals and the Emperor is too sure this plan will work. Lord Vader on the other hand..."

"I know how Vader feels, believe me I have heard plenty about it. He even asked me to speak to the Emperor on the subject, which I tried to do but was told on no certain terms to leave it alone. The Emperor does not like to be told he is wrong and I have done that one too many times it seems." Thrawn said softly. "I was not part of the planning for this particular trap so I don't know all the details and I also have my reservations but I cannot argue against the amount fire power the Empire has."

"As I recall, that is what everyone thought the last time one of these huge battle stations was built and look at what happened to that one!" Vader's words echoed in my head. *I told them that ridiculous weapon was nothing in comparison to the power of the force but they just laughed. Never underestimate the power of the force and never underestimate a force user.* He had said.

Thrawn merely nodded and changed the subject. "So, my dear, how have you been?" I knew better than to try and fight him when he did this. If there was more to say about the episode with Zaarin, when he was ready, he would tell me. I had meant what I had said, the details were not important I was just glad Zaarin was dead and Thrawn was home.

"Busy, mostly even though Lord Vader left a week ago to go and over see the lagging construction on the new battle station. He keeps me on my toes with all the stuff he needs done. And when he is in space his schedule is non existent so he wakes me up at the weirdest times to get stuff sorted for him. I am kind of surprised he hasn't asked me to come out and join him on board the *Executor* yet, to be honest, not that I mind." I said. "Oh and I had an interesting run with Mara Jade a few days ago." I shrugged. "Mostly I just work and that has been insane especially since the death of Xizor, you heard about that right?"

He nodded. "I did, bad news travels faster than light speed. Although I cannot say I am sad to see the back of him. If I understood the story correctly all his plotting was to get revenge for something Lord Vader had done years ago." He said.

I nodded and filled him in on the details.

"I can understand Xizor's wrath and I have to say I am impressed by his patience and planning but once again it seems everyone underestimated young Skywalker."

"Yep and Xizor underestimated Lord Vader. He thought that Vader's fear of the Emperor's wrath would keep him safe enough. I wish I could have seen the look on Xizor's face when he realised that was not the case."

"Was Vader punished?"

I shook my head. "Not that I know of. I personally think the Emperor found it all very amusing and couldn't really care a wamp rat's ass if Xizor lived or died. I think he just enjoy baiting Lord Vader."

"That guess is probably more truth than any of us will know."

Thrawn replied. "What happened with Mara Jade?"

"Oh, well I was in the training room trying to work on a particular move Lord Vader was teaching me when she came in. I haven't seen her around much to be honest. I just figured she was off saving the galaxy from evil doers or something along those lines so I was kind of surprised. Anyway, she didn't waste much time in getting to the point and wanted to know what working as a dancer for Jabba the Hutt was like."

I smiled at the reaction on Thrawn's face. "Really?"

I nodded. "It was a little odd, but since she asked I told her what I knew. Then she started asking me about the palace and the people who worked there and dancing there. Her questions were pretty pointed so I knew she was on a fact finding mission. I haven't worked there in a while but things with Jabba don't change a lot. I am pretty sure it's same old same old, if you know what I mean."

He nodded. "Do you know what she needed the information for?"

"No. She likes to gather intel not give it out. Although, I did get the distinct impression that asking me had not exactly been her idea. I suspect the Emperor had a hand in that and he knows well enough where I worked before I came here." I replied. "It could mean anything from the Emperor wanting to blow up Jabba's palace and sending her to do it or she's fed up with working for the Empire and wants to try her hand at another profession. I really don't know. She didn't lie to me about anything but she didn't give much away either but what ever she is doing it made her a little nervous so it must be big." I shrugged. "I wasn't going to press her either

because to be honest, Za'ar, I just don't care. She is just another one of the Emperor's pawns and I have no desire to get tangled in her business."

"That was probably wise, tekari. The Emperor does like to play his games." Thrawn said with a sigh, quietly, drinking the last of his brandy, setting the empty glass back on the table. "I guess we will know what he was up to when we see how it all plays out." He said getting to his feet, offering me a hand up.

"So now what?" I asked as he tugged me up out of my seat, wrapped his arms about my waist and pulled me in to hold me tightly. When I looked up into his face I could see the fatigue etched on it. I suppose he read the concern in my eyes because he smiled then and kissed me lightly on the forehead.

"Now, we go to bed." He said quietly, caressing my face with his beautiful hands. I was not about to argue with him on this at all. I looked at him for a moment and felt my heart suddenly skip. I know he noticed. He could see it in my eyes, the flush on my cheeks, he always noticed. Despite the fact we were both tired, the desire between us blossomed and he smiled *that* smile. He moved my hair aside to kiss the side of my neck.

"I thought you were tired?" I murmured. I could sense his own waking need. I had tuned into that a very long time ago, and now I could feel it almost before he could.

His hands swept the robe off my body and then grazed up under the shirt top. I gasped.

"I am," He said. He lifted the top over my head and my bare skin prickled as nothing but air brushed against it.

"I was wearing that." I whispered.

He gave me a feral smile. "Not anymore." And before I could argue he swept me up and carried me to the bedroom. "Sometimes, tekari, even I need to lose myself in the good to forget about the bad." He said as he laid me on the bed. He disrobed and I smiled. His own interest was more than apparent.

"Well, welcome home." I whispered in his ear when he lay down in the space I made for him as I moved my legs. Any more words spoken were lost in the urgency of his mouth meeting mine and after that the conversation was of a vastly different nature. How I treasured these bedroom discussions.

I was not at all surprised when two days after his return Thrawn told me he had been ordered back to the Unknown Regions to continue the task he had started. Unspoken but implied the Emperor's command was telling him to stay away from Endor. It also did not surprise me that the day he gave me this news Lord Vader summoned me to join him on board the Executor.

Luckily for me, I had enough time to pack carefully but this time I decided on leaving almost everything I usually dragged with me, including his letters and gifts, behind. Mostly it had been his doing. I had been sitting on the bed in the room that was mine agonizing over what to bring when he had come in to ask if I wanted tea and then just stared at me with that raised eyebrow look.

"Why do you do this every time you get called off world?" He had asked.

"I hate leaving my things behind."

"They are safer here than anywhere else, tekari." He had said. "Especially the letters, I will write more, you know."

I sighed. "I know, it's just that I just miss you, I miss ...well I miss home... and the letters are like having a part of you with me. Great sarlacc that sounds so sappy." I had said with a shrug, the fact that I caressed the letters which lay on the bed with trembling finger tips had not gone unnoticed.

His expression had softened then and he had sat down beside me on the bed. "Leave these things here, take only what you need. This flat is safe, your treasures are safe. I would not like to know what would happen if these letters should end up in the wrong hands." He said.

"No one can read them!" I said, "At least most of them anyway, they are in Cheunh."

He had looked at me then, "Are you willing to take that chance?" his voice soft, dangerous.

He was of course right. "No." I had said, making a face. It touched him, I think, that I dragged these things around with me every time I went off world. That his letters meant so much to me, of course he had mine hidden away as well. So in the end we were as bad as each other.

"I promise, I'll write and send books enough to keep that curious mind of your busy." His finger tips grazed through my hair. "I doubt you'll be away for that long anyway. After all Coruscant is the seat of power and once this latest battle is over with hopefully there will be some semblance of peace. You won't be gone long enough to miss me." He had said with a smile. He had meant his words to be reassuring but they sent a shiver down my spine.

In the end, I had taken his advice and packed up my little treasures in the box I kept them in and tucked them away in the back of the closet under a pile of blankets. This amused Thrawn to no end who just watched me shaking his head in silent laughter. How could I explain to him that if I had found Jyrki's secret hidden away in the Jedi Temple that I was sure someone, if they tried hard enough, could find mine. Call me paranoid but I wasn't taking chances.

I had not realised that I had made a home in his flat on Coruscant. But when I thought about it, it seemed silly to keep dragging my stuff everywhere I went. The *Executor* was not my home, there was no need to try and make it into one. The only thing I hesitated over was the lightsaber and in the end I reasoned that I could tuck it in my satchel and carry it with me along with my ident cards and my datacard reader.

“Don’t spend all night in here sorting out the past, tekari; I just opened a rather nice bottle of wine.” He had said, cupping my face to kiss me. His smile had told me all I had needed to know and he caught the blush that coloured my cheeks. “I want to spend the last evening we’ll have together for a while ... *together*.”

The rest of the evening and night had been filled with enough pleasurable memories to last a life time. Chiss, he had once said, have amazing stamina, and this was true but I had been well trained in the Bunduki martial arts and so did I. We teased and played each other in way I suspect would make his people squirm. In between the passion were pockets of subtle and gentle affection, words and stories, memory and thought. I knew as I lay in the safe circle of his arms that as he had been the first man to truly love me, to bed me, he would also be the last.

I hadn’t lied before when I had told him, there was no other. If I had known what was to come, know how things were going to change I would have told him truly how I felt, that which I kept so close to my heart, words we never ever spoke for what was between us. As it was, I was certain he knew anyway, how could he not, but I would wish I had told him. Our passion for one another could have rivalled the fire from the twin suns of Tatooine but somehow passion is never enough when everything else around you is broken.

With our goodbyes said quietly and in private, once again I left Coruscant on board a shuttle headed for the Outer Rim Territories to the Endor system. I sat as a passenger this time and was oddly grateful for it.

The journey was long and quiet; the shuttle was mostly empty save for a couple of Imperial Intel officers who ignored me completely. I was glad of the large selection of electronic books Thrawn had given me before I left but for much of the journey I could not actually concentrate on reading, instead I spent the time either staring out into the hyperspace lane, absently playing with the necklace I always wore, the small round ma’arilite stone with the hidden star in it, or sitting on my own in the tiny galley drinking tea.

So much had happened in what seemed to be such a short time that I had barely had time to put it all together. Xizor was dead, Zaarin was dead, two men who had caused so much trouble for such a long time

suddenly gone. I wasn’t unhappy about their deaths but it all seemed so surreal.

Thrawn had spoken sparingly about the details in the drawn out battles Zaarin had caused. I knew better than to push him. He was angry with himself for losing an ISD, for losing so many men and women and decent pilots. He was also angry with himself for not seeing everything play out the way he usually could. I had to remind him that it was he who had told me often enough of Zaarin’s intelligence and tactical genius. That in spite of Zaarin’s intelligence Thrawn had still managed to out-think him on more than one occasion. It had not helped to ease his mind.

Like Xizor, Zaarin had had an axe to grind and his hatred of the Emperor as well as Thrawn had burned deeply inside of him driving him to do what he did. I didn’t understand why he had loathed the Emperor so much. I knew why I hated Palpatine but Zaarin had no obvious reason to and the only thing I could put it all down to was Zaarin’s lust for power. In the end it was his own greed that did him in, that and the fact that Thrawn knew something he did not. My uncle had once told me that in the end everything always came down to details. When I had repeated this to Thrawn he had just laughed bitterly. I toyed with the pendant around my throat and sighed. In the end I closed my eyes and dozed fitfully until we landed on board the *Executor*.

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I stood at the window in my office on board the *Executor* and gazed out at the planet we were orbiting. Endor was a huge gas giant with nine satellites including the life sustaining forested moon, known as the Sanctuary Moon because it had once been a protected nature reserve during the time of the Galactic Republic. During the rule of the Empire the Sanctuary Moon had been surveyed many times with mixed results.

The moon itself was home to several indigenous species of sentient life including Ewoks, yuzzums and Duloks. While the reports had down played any dangers any of these species posed I had heard rumours that on one expedition the Ewoks had managed to run circles around the first scouting party that had been sent down to explore the moon yet there had been nothing noted about this in the official reports. It would not be the first time that Imperial surveys had completely discounted the intelligence of the local species and I was certain it would not be the last.

Thrawn often spoke of the arrogance rampant in the Empire leading to the silly belief that humans were far superior to all other sentient species in the galaxy. *One of these days this misguided belief will come back to haunt the Empire, believe me. It is very unwise to underestimate a*

*species simply because they are physically and mentally different.* He had said and I guessed he ought to know as he had experienced this first hand, being alien himself.

Still, as I had looked at the image of the furry little creatures called ewoks I could see how people, particularly Imperial men would be quick to dismiss them as harmless. They reminded me of small bears and they were more cute than threatening. Still, visitors to Tatooine often thought that wamp-rats were cute in their own way and soon found out the hard way this was as far from the truth as possible.

From where I stood I could also see the new battle station which was still under construction. I had not been allowed to accompany Lord Vader when ever he went over to converse with the Emperor so I had no idea just how far along the construction actually was. I found it strange that no one would even speak about it and when I had asked Lord Vader about all the secrecy he had been less than kind in his answer so I left it alone. In the end, I didn't actually care.

Two days after I arrived, the rest of the fleet began to amass and by then I was busy enough with work for Lord Vader that it didn't occur to me to ask questions. The *Executor* was the command ship for the fleet so every operation was run from her bridge. I lost count of the number of drills that occurred and eventually learned to tune out the ear splitting alarm that shattered the peace and quiet. I was pretty certain that whatever the rebels were preparing for it wasn't this and they would be outnumbered and outgunned beyond their wildest dreams.

It was a good thing that I had brought my lightsaber because in the small pockets of down time, in between the drills and the work Lord Vader had decided that I was the perfect distraction. Despite the fact that his battle droids were an infinitely better challenge than I was, he seemed to enjoy sparring with a live being and I know he enjoyed teaching even though he would never in a thousand years admit to that. For my part I was also grateful for the distraction. If I was trying to concentrate on not losing any limbs and keeping out of the way of his evil little remotes I was not thinking about the up and coming carnage that was sure to happen. It was going to be a slaughter if it worked out the way the Emperor had planned it. The waiting drove me mad. When it ended it was almost a relief.

We were in the middle of a lesson when Lord Vader was suddenly summoned to the bridge. I knew that this was the beginning, the signal he had also been waiting for, but there was something else. He had felt something, a ripple in the force. I had felt it too. Like a slight caress to the back of my neck, making all the hair on my arms stand on end.

"What was tha...?" I started to ask.

"My son." He spoke with a quiet hush. This was what he had been waiting for even though he had never voiced it.

"He's here?" I asked. It seemed so surreal to me that this Luke Skywalker would deliberately walk into a situation that would surely mean his death.

Lord Vader suddenly looked at me as though seeing me for the first time. I could have sworn he was smiling. "Of course." There was such pride in his voice that I suddenly hated Luke Skywalker but I bit it down.

He didn't say anything else and swept out of the room as though I no longer existed. With nothing else to do and the desire to continue my own workout gone I went back to my quarters, showered and then wandered down to see if Jorae was working.

I lounged in the extra seat beside Jorae who was busy at his work station. I had brought him a cup of stimcaf and his grin had been worth it.

"So what's going on?" I asked impatient for news, bored and frustrated all at the same time.

He took off his head set, sipped his 'caf and drew a deep breath. "Well if I understand it right they just let a shuttle go through the blockade to the moon."

I made a face. "That's news?"

He nodded. "Yeah because they were using a really old pass code, probably one of the ones the Emperor let slip. We think it's *them*." He said dropping his voice to a low whisper.

I arched an eye brow doing a good Thrawn imitation and said, "Them?"

Jorae grinned. "You know, rebels." He said. "Probably the scouting party, you know, come to check out the lay of the land and report back to their control."

"You've been watching too many holo war dramas!" I told him with a laugh.

"Do you think they know this is a trap?" Jorae asked looking at me.

I shook my head. "No, I am fairly sure they don't. I am fairly certain they have no idea what is waiting for them."

He looked at me then. "You sound like you feel sorry for them!" He could not keep the incredulity out of his voice.

"A little. It will be a slaughter. A lot of people are going to die and for what?"

He shrugged. "They are the ones stupid enough to want to try and take down the government and the Emperor." He said.

I nodded. "I know but it doesn't change the fact that a lot of people are going to die." I said, "That includes a lot of Imperial pilots and ground troops."

Jorae made a face. “Boy, you sure know how to ruin the mood, don’t you.” He said and slipped his headset back on. “I gotta get back to work, you should go and get some sleep or something, you look like hell.”

He was right and I could not disagree with him. “Yeah, sleep sounds like a good thing.” I actually could not recall the last time I had a good night’s sleep. My nights had been filled with strange dreams full of mixed messages I could not decipher and nightmares that had me waking up screaming blue murder. The images were so jumbled that upon waking I usually had no clear memory of what I had dreamt but the lingering fear of something awful about to happen remained.

“I’ll ping you if something happens.” He said cheerfully as I got up to leave.

“Thanks.” I said and gave him a little wave, leaving him to his work.

As I wandered through the corridors of the *Executor* I was clear that the tension level on the ship had risen up several notches. Everyone was waiting and it was driving me crazy. Nothing seemed to ease it. I could have exercised until I dropped from exhaustion and still I would have felt the stress.

Restless and frustrated I resorted to the one thing I knew would keep my mind occupied. I went down into the hanger bay where the shuttles were docked and asked the deck officer if he minded if I worked on the *Sigiri* which had been unofficially dubbed my ship because I used it so much.

“Be my guest, Miss Gabriel.” He said. Preoccupied with other problems the last thing he wanted was to deal with me whining at him, which I would have given half a chance.

I often spent time tinkering with the *Sigiri*’s engines and ship board systems. It was the one place I felt truly at ease and out of the way. When Lord Vader was busy and did not need my services, there wasn’t much else for me to do on board the *Executor*. So one day, in the throes of absolute boredom, I had begged the deck officer on duty at the time to give me some mechanic work. I was certified and had papers so it wasn’t as if I wasn’t actually qualified to touch a ship’s engine. It had taken some convincing and only when I had complained about it all enough to Lord Vader had I actually been granted clearance to go into the pits and work. I didn’t get to do it very often but when I could it was a relief. No matter what else was going on in the Empire, ships engines always needed looking after.

I had started seriously looking after the *Sigiri* after the trip with Thrawn. This had not gone unnoticed by Lord Vader who essentially had the shuttle signed off to me exclusively unless no other was available. I had been so delighted by this I had almost hugged him, but thankfully had managed to restrain myself from this impulse at the last minute. The bad thing about

this arrangement was that because the *Sigiri* wasn’t really mine, other people used her when I was not around which was often enough. The good thing about this was that afterwards there was always something for me to do because despite of the fact that the Empire hired good mechanics, the shuttles were the least cared for. It was the TIEs and the rest of the fleet’s ships that got the brunt of mechanical attention. Only the Emperor’s and Lord Vader’s personal shuttle received such good care, the rest were given a cursory once over to make sure things were working and that was that.

I changed into the coveralls I kept on board the shuttle and vanished into the engine room. As I had feared the last person to use *Sigiri* had left a mess and before long I was cheerfully up to my elbows in hydraulic fluid and engine bits.

Time always passed differently when I was working on engines. It seemed that while the rest of the galaxy continued on at it’s own pace, my world sped up. I could spend hours tinkering on a ship and never notice how late it had gotten. I could not count the number of times that my father or Jyrki had had to almost physically haul me away to eat supper or go to bed because time had just spun away from me.

By the time I was satisfied that the *Sigiri* was in peak running order again, nearly six hours had passed and I was actually exhausted. It struck me as odd, when I cleaned off the grime in the shower that fixing engines would tire me out even more so than a stressful physical workout with Lord Vader but I didn’t question it. With a sigh of relief I slipped into bed and fell asleep. If only my dreams were as peaceful as working on a ship’s engines were.

*Qui Gon Jinn stood at my side. We were both standing on a hill with a landing pad someplace I had never been before. It was not a world I recognized but this was a dream so that did not mean very much.*

*“There will be much change.” He said.*

*“Change?”*

*“All things change in their time, young Merlyn.” He said gently.*

*“Where are we?” I asked changing the subject.*

*“At the beginning. At the end.” He replied cryptically.*

*“That is not helpful!”*

*He laughed. “You always want the straight answers where there are none.” His tone of voice was kind, not chiding.*

*“Why are you here?” I asked, impatience leaking into my voice.*

*“I see much potential in you but like Anakin you have a wild streak, you will need to watch that. The Darkside is seductive and you are at a turning point.”*

*“What is that supposed to mean?”*

*“Be mindful of your emotions. Be mindful of the living force, let it be your guide not your fear or your anger.” He paused for a moment then added, “You cannot go where he is going; you cannot follow in his footsteps.” Qui Gon said gently, laying his hand on my shoulder.*

*I frowned. “I don’t understand what you are telling me, as usual!” I snapped.*

*“I can only serve as a guide, nothing more.” He laughed and then drew a deep breath. “Everything is going to change.” He said and then shimmered into nothingness. “Remember all you have learned, it will save your life.”*

*I shivered as the air suddenly grew cold and the sky dark. I looked up expecting to see storm clouds but instead saw the Executor plunging down towards where I stood. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out. Instead I suddenly found myself in an EV suit out in the vacuum of space. It was the strangest sensation and as the stars whirled about me I felt my stomach churn. I knew I was going to be sick if I didn’t get out of the suit but when I tried to move around to catch my tether line I realised there was none and I was free floating in space and there was nothing else around me, no ship, no safety line nothing. I was utterly alone. The panic I felt swelling in my chest was so great I thought for certain the entire galaxy could hear my heart beating. I had no idea what to do and just when I thought it could not get any worse a loud alarm started to sound in my helmet. I looked at the gauges on my wrist and saw I was running out of oxygen. When I opened my mouth to scream I realised I could not breathe, the alarm in my helmet sounding louder than anything else I had ever known. As the stars spun around me all I could think of was Thrawn and that I did not want to die.*

I woke up nauseated and gasping for breath, soaked in sweat and shivering. The alarm in my dream was the comm by my bed and when I answered it I was anything but polite. The young voice on the other end sounded non-plussed and bored as he told me that I was to take the *Sigiri* to the Battle Station. The Emperor wished to speak with me.

I wasn’t sure what was worse. The dream I had just had or going to see the Emperor. With a sigh I got out of bed, showered and dressed. I grabbed my satchel with my lightsaber, my ident cards, and a couple of books tucked in it, threw a shawl across my shoulders and made my way to the landing bay. I shivered, despite the warmer clothes I was wearing, as I sat down in the pilot’s chair and started the engine warm up sequence.

I had not been to the Battle station before so the docking procedure was interesting. As I navigated my way around the superstructure I could see where it was still unfinished and under construction, but I was certain this was just for show and that the station itself was more than battle

ready. It was an awesome sight. I might have spent longer staring at the technological wonder except traffic control broke into my thoughts requesting clearance codes then giving me my landing instructions.

Once the ship had touched down on the incredibly shiny floor and I had shut the engines down, I slipped my ident cards over my head but left my satchel onboard the shuttle in the cockpit under the pilot’s seat. I didn’t think it was a good idea to visit the Emperor with a lightsaber tucked away on my person. I was so nervous that sandjiggers squirmed in my gut. I had to work hard to calm myself down. I was sure that whatever it was the Emperor wanted from me, it was not good, nothing he did was good. When I walked down the ramp, two stone faced officers were waiting for me. I was a little surprised when they requested to see my identity tags because usually no one bothered but they were not taking any chances.

When I asked what was going on I was given no answer only a filthy look. Once my tags had been cleared I was told to follow them, so I did. I had a terrible sense of foreboding in my gut and the nausea I had experienced in my dream became very real. I had to fight to keep my breathing steady and remain calm. My palms were sweating and cold shivers ran the length of my spine. I wondered if everyone felt this terrible sense of doom when ever they were summoned before the Emperor or if it was just me being paranoid.

To distract me from the sense of impending doom, I concentrated on remembering the way I had come from the docking bay and the landmarks along the way. The battle station was indeed huge and full of people as well, most of whom did not even bother to glance up as I passed by. We entered a turbo lift which was so fast I thought that my stomach had fallen out of my belly. When we reached the top and the doors opened I knew a real sense of fear without any reason. At one of the Officer’s insistence I got off first, they followed close behind me.

One of the Royal Guardsmen who was standing at the side of the closed entrance moved slightly and the officer on my left said. “The Emperor will see you now.”

The doorway to the Emperor’s observation chamber opened and I walked into almost darkness. I stood for a few moments while my eyes adjusted. The pause was enough to allow me to see the vastness of the area I was in and take stock of the astonishing view that was being afforded by the huge round picture window.

“Come closer, young Merlyn.” The Emperor’s voice drifted out of the darkness. “I have something I wish you to see.”

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The room, although huge felt claustrophobic to me. I shivered. I knew or felt that Lord Vader had been here recently. I opened up my senses and searched for him but all that lingered was a vague ripple of his presence along with someone else and nothing more. I took a deep, steadying breath and walked from the turbo lift to where the stairs which led up to where the Emperor was seated. His throne was very much like the one he had in the Imperial palace and it seemed to swallow him whole.

“Yes, my apprentice was here, child. I see your talents are growing stronger.” He murmured but his voice sounded too loud in the darkness. I tried to shut out the sensation of spiders crawling across my brain but I couldn’t. He was far too powerful for that. I shivered and surrendered to his force touch. When I reached the bottom of the steps I genuflected and bowed my head, waiting for his permission to move, to look up. I felt rather than saw his smile. He let me wait for what seemed a very long time before he told me to rise.

“You wished to see me your Excellency?” I asked as I stood, my voice sounded small and child like in the vast room.

“Yes.” He said. “So tell me, what do you think of this new battle station?”

I shifted my stance and placed my hands behind my back. “It’s very ... big, your Highness.”

He laughed. He actually threw back his head and laughed. I shuddered. “Yes, child it is, but that is merely a description of how it looks, I asked you what you thought of it.”

“I don’t know what to think.” I told him quietly. “It’s designed for massive amounts of destruction. It could annihilate a planet in the blink of an eye. It scares me to death. That’s how I feel about it.” I was angry without any real reason. This room, this place was making me edgy and nervous.

“And so it should, child.” He said satisfied. “Come, I wish you to see this.” His hand waved at me to come forward. As if pulled by some invisible rope I climbed the steps until I was standing near him, near the throne.

“Look out of the window what do you see?” He asked, waving his hand vaguely in the direction of the large viewport.

I did as he asked. “The fleet, stars...space.” I said. “But people are going to die out there aren’t they?”

He nodded and sat back against the throne, melding once more into the shadows. “You have witnessed space battles before have you not?” He asked.

I turned to look at him, the cowl of his cloak hid most of his face but his eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own. They frightened me. “I have, Excellency.”

“And you feel them do you not? You feel the deaths?”

I swallowed and nodded.

“Lord Vader should have taken better care with you.” He said softly, “For that matter, perhaps so should I. You have many talents you have kept well hidden from us, from me.”

I looked away. I wondered how much deeper he would dig into my soul. *You have a strong, stubborn will which amuses my master but make no mistake you will be broken and then you will be his obedient and compliant servant. And what is more, you will be powerless to stop it from happening.* Lord Vader’s words echoed through my mind. I wondered what it was the Emperor wanted of me but now I was scared to ask. I used the quiet moments to find my center, to breathe and find strength.

“Come closer child.” He beckoned. I did as he asked and came to stand before him.

“Sit.” He said, motioning to the space on the floor at his feet.

I moved as though in a dream, doing as he commanded without thinking about it. I sank to the cold stone floor, one knee tucked under the other which was pressed close to my chest. Without even realising it I was echoing the position of the little statue he had allowed me to see. I watched as he pushed a button on the armrest of his throne, a small compartment opened up and he withdrew something from it. In the dim light I saw the glint of silver, a slender cylindrical object. I knew what it was right away and I looked up at him puzzled, I had already read a lightsaber for him once and I couldn’t tell if this was the same one as before.

“You did so well with the last one Lord Vader brought me...,” The Emperor purred as his fingertips caressed the lightsaber as though he were stroking a kitten, “I thought I would share this one with you as well.”

I could feel my pulse quicken and the knot in my gut tighten as fear shot through me. I knew without asking what he wanted just as I knew this was not the same weapon he had handed me after Bespin on Wayland, deep in the mountain complex. I held my breath without realising it. When he leaned forward to hand it to me, I hesitated, shrinking back from him. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a flash of red, a Royal Guardsman had shifted ever so slightly ready to make certain that I obeyed. Palpatine made an almost imperceptible gesture with his free hand and the guard sank back into the shadows.

“The young lady knows her place; she will do as she is told.” The Emperor said in a quiet voice as hard as durasteel.

I shut my eyes tightly for a second, drew a deep breath then looked up into his face. I had been trained to get past this fear, Master Kjestyll's words echoed in my head almost as if he were at my side. I gave a slight nod and the Emperor's eyes seemed to glow. I did not like what I saw in the expression on his face, glee, satisfaction, and triumph. It reminded me so sharply of Venthan Chassu's last painting that I had to look twice at the throne to make sure it was not made from bones.

"No disobedience, child. You work for me." His reprimand was sharp edged and left a bitter taste in my mouth.

When I reached out to him my fingers were trembling visibly. With a soft chuckle he placed the weapon into my outstretched hand.

"Tell me what you see," He commanded, "As you see it. I know you can do this now. Do not hold anything back as you did the last time."

I bit my lip. How he had known I had not spoken of every detail was beyond me. I was certain the Emperor could not read minds but he always seemed to know, his ability to read people was uncanny. I nodded and held the lightsaber in both hands tightly, opening myself up to its memories.

At first I wasn't sure what to think. These memories were new, just like the weapon. I watched them unfold, like the way Thrawn undressed me, slowly, carefully, bit by bit. I watched as Luke put the weapon together, and then as he tried it out, feeling his trepidation then triumph and relief. I saw as he made his plans to get back his friend, to rescue Han Solo, slipping the weapon into the little R2 unit. The memories jolt forward to a battle on Jabba's sail barge. Jumbled, chaotic. I saw flashes of imagery, Boba Fett falling into the pit of Carkoon. I know I gasped out loud. Boba Fett was part of my life and being fed to the Sarlacc was one of Jabba's favourite punishments but Fett's fall was an accident. I gasped for breath as the fight continued until the sail barge was destroyed taking Jabba with it. After that were only snippets, faces and a space journey to a planet I had never seen before. There was a terrible sense of sorrow then. Luke had lost someone he had loved and admired but I couldn't tell who it was. I could feel the tears rolling down my cheeks as I spoke of what I was seeing out loud to the Emperor. He was right, I had learned some measure of control and despite the overwhelming sensations that accompanied the memories I could describe them almost as they unfolded in my mind. It was like describing a holo-drama to a blind man.

I saw the journey to Endor, vague flashes mostly of fear of getting caught, worry about his friends. Something in Luke had changed from brash young boy to thoughtful young man, bound and determined to right a wrong. He knew that Lord Vader was his father and had accepted it, more or less. He had also known that Lord Vader had sensed his presence. *Im*

*endangering the mission, he had said, I shouldn't have come...* but he had come anyway because he believed he could turn his father back towards the light, that somewhere deep inside Lord Vader's soul there was still good, and because it was his destiny which he could no more back away from it than I could let go of his lightsaber. I took a breath and gathered my thoughts trying to sort out the jumble in my mind. What happened next was confusing, small furry creatures, the Ewoks, had taken them hostage. The images were unclear because Luke's own mind had been on something else, something more serious, more frightening, confronting Darth Vader. I felt it, the moment Luke decided to give himself up and perhaps save his friends. His naïveté and his arrogance were astonishing to me. Even as I said this out loud I heard the Emperor's soft reply.

"That was the failing of all the Jedi." He said. "What else do you see?"

Lord Vader had known. He had felt Luke's presence and there had been no surprise when the young man had shown up, turning himself into the guard at the Alpha base on the Sanctuary Moon. For the first time Father and son faced each other in a quiet sort of calm. When the guard had handed Lord Vader Luke's lightsaber I felt the flash of pride as sharply as though I had been struck across the face. *Your skills are complete, you are as powerful as the Emperor has foreseen...* Lord Vader had said when he had ignited the weapon. It shone with a brilliant green light. For a moment the two men regarded one another, Luke looking for the good in the man he stood before, the father he had never known but had yearned for and Lord Vader contemplating the past, watching, his own emotions in turmoil, as the guards had taken Luke away for the final confrontation. Dawn was slowly beginning to break. For a few moments Lord Vader was torn and then he moved, ready to present his son to the Emperor on the Death Star. His loyalties decided, his path chosen, his downfall complete.

I sat on the floor, my breathing coming to me in short gasps, the lightsaber still clasped in both of my hands. I looked up at the Emperor to tell him I was done when suddenly a new set of memories flashed through me making me whimper. Lord Vader had passed Luke's weapon to the Emperor. I had not expected to see this and what came next shook me to the core. I did not speak the memories that came to me, short and crystal clear. When they were finished I trembled violently but not out of fear, out of anger.

I scrambled to my feet suddenly. I felt the Royal Guardsmen move, a subtle shift in stance. I had a weapon in my hands and I was unpredictable. The Emperor laughed softly. He knew exactly what I had seen; he knew because this was what he had truly wanted me to see. I backed away from him, my knuckles white from gripping Luke's lightsaber so hard.

“Yes.” He said, nodding. The word came out as a long slow hissing caress.

“How could you?” I asked so quietly I wasn’t sure I had spoken the words out loud.

“It is the way of things, young Merlyn, surely you must understand that.” He explained to me the way a father would explain to a small child that fire burns.

“You can’t...! Not after all he has done for you; after all you have done to him!” I shouted. The guards behind me tensed, shifted their stance and readied their weapons.

The Emperor laughed. “Anakin Skywalker would have been the most powerful sith in the galaxy had he not let his pride, his fury better him. He lost power when he lost his limbs, he is *imperfect*.” Palpatine hissed, leaning forward to emphasise his words. “His son is stronger, almost whole and primed to take his father’s place. Lord Vader knows this to be true.”

That was a lie. Lord Vader did not expect this betrayal. Lord Vader thought the object of this game was to turn Luke so that he might serve them both. Vader had no idea that the Emperor was planning to replace him.

“No!” I screamed defiant, angry. This was so unfair that I had no words to express what I felt.

Palpatine sat back in his throne and laughed. “Now you see the way of things, little one. Oh I have such plans for you.” His voice was a sigh, “Your talents make you valuable, your gift of psychometry is so rare. Honed to perfection, what a weapon you will be, reader of things, keeper of secrets....”

“I will never work for you, ever!” I spat out defiantly.

The Emperor chuckled softly. “Oh I think that you will. I think that you would not want to see your adoptive family hurt because you refuse to do as I ask.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You leave my family alone they have done nothing to you!”

His hand waved in a dismissive manner. “On the contrary my dear, shall I reveal your father’s controversial smuggler’s past to you? Tell you of some of his less appealing qualities? He should have been arrested and executed long ago for the crimes he has committed and continues to commit against this Empire. And do not think I do not know about the Tze’yusha’Jin Akosh, his actions during the clone wars alone merit my wrath. If you wish to protect them you will serve me.”

“So you use my love for my family just as you used Vader’s love for Padmé.” My voice was low and cold. Hatred for this man who sat before me coursed through my veins.

“Vader’s passion made him easily pliable but he has become old, useless to me. He defies me to suit his own needs. His son will replace him as my apprentice and stand at my side as I bring order to this galaxy and crush this ridiculous rebellion once and for all! You will comply because you do not wish to see the people you care for hurt. You are not quite as easily manipulated as I had hoped but I do believe you can be coerced and perhaps this will actually have the desired effect.” His words were a snarl competing with my anger which buzzed in my brain like angry hornets. I saw his hand twitch and felt the Guardsman closest to me move. “You may go now, we will speak later. I have much for you to do and you have much to learn about being in my service, girl, first of all, obedience and compliance. I shall enjoy watching you take these lessons to heart.”

I didn’t think then, I simply acted out of rage, out of desperation and whirled about igniting the weapon in my hand. Green flashed through the air as I swung out at the guardsman behind me but before I could even strike the lightsaber was swept from my hands by Palpatine’s force pull. His laughter filled the room.

“Yes, your anger is a powerful thing. How your Jedi mother would weep to see her daughter turning to the dark side. In time you will make a fine addition to my stable, but not yet, I think. You still have too much defiance but we will break you of that when the time is right....” He told me, patting the weapon he now held in his hands.

I was so angry I was shaking. Somewhere inside of my head a voice I knew from dreams was shouting at me to calm down, to think but I ignored it. Fury raged through me, a blinding storm of terrible emotion that would eat my soul whole if I let it. “I hate you.” I hissed and I meant it.

“Yes, I know,” He replied almost tenderly, “And I will use that emotion wisely, I can assure you.”

“He will never forgive you for this.” I hissed through clenched teeth. *Neither will I*, I thought.

“His forgiveness is not sought nor will it matter. He will be dead and I will have a new apprentice at my side, a more powerful apprentice.” He replied softly.

Bereft of words I simply shook my head slowly. I had not expected this; I had not thought him capable of such betrayal. As deeply as I loathed him in that moment a tiny part of me deep inside sensed he was wrong but I was too stunned, too angry to voice it. He just smiled at me then, almost lovingly, the way a master will smile at a trained pet which has finally learnt the lesson being taught.

“Escort Miss Gabriel to her shuttle, see that she arrives safely at the beta landing pad. She is of value to me, keep her from harm... until it is over.” Palpatine said as two uniformed guards stepped out of the shadows.

They both gave curt precise military bows and the Royal Guard who had come up behind me gasped my arm tightly.

I have never liked being taken by force and the Royal Guard's touch shoved me over the edge. I struggled wildly, screaming at the Emperor, berating him for what he was about to do, hating him for the betrayal of Lord Vader, hating him for what I knew he wanted to do to me. I was beside myself with fury and utterly out of control. I wondered briefly if this is what it felt like to go mad. Somewhere in the bottom of the darkness a gentle voice pleaded with me to find calm, to back down and while part of me ignored this voice another part listened. Slowly I came back to some semblance of sanity. The Guardsman who held me was very strong and I could feel his fingers digging into the flesh of my arm but the pain helped to clear my head. No matter how hard I struggled I knew I didn't stand a chance against these men or the Emperor and there was nothing I could do to prevent what came next but it didn't stop me from railing against it.

I was all but dragged to a second turbo lift, struggling all the way. I could feel Lord Vader's presence so close it was as if he were standing next to me but I could not reach out to him with the force, there was something blocking me, he was shutting me out. It's a trap! I screamed at him with my mind but my mental warning fell on deaf ears. In the scope of his world I was no longer important, all that mattered to Lord Vader was turning his son and pleasing his Master. For the first time in a very long time I felt very small and very alone. It was only the vague hint of Qui Gon Jinn's ghostly presence in my mind that brought me back from the brink of utter despair. I stopped struggling then and the Guardsman released my arm when we reached the docking bay where my shuttle was.

The two officers followed me onto the *Sigiri*. I was shoved into the co pilot's chair, a blaster held tightly to my head by the shorter of the two men while the other piloted the shuttle off the Battle Station to the beta site on the Endor moon. Neither of them spoke a word to me. I could feel their disdain and dislike of me coming off in waves. Had it not been for the Emperor's words to take care that I was not harmed, I wasn't at all certain what else they would have done to me. I had seen looks like they gave me before and it made my skin crawl. As it was they did nothing except maintain guard. The trip took no more than thirty minutes and in that time I had formulated my plan. I drew a deep shuddering breath and began the process of calming down to find my center. *Be the stillness you seek....* I would need all of my wits about me if what I wanted to do when we landed was going to work.

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The shuttle came down on the small landing pad with a rough bump. The officer at the helm did not have an easy touch with her. I sighed as I watched him shut the engine down and then add a landing lock code on the consol computer. It made me smile a little, Jyrki had taught me all about basic locking codes and the one the Imperials generally used were simple to undo.

I unbuckled myself from the seat and stood up, pushing the blaster that the pinch faced officer still held to my head away from my face with the back of my hand.

"Relax; I am not going any where." I said coldly. I augmented this with a not so subtle force suggestion that he might want to put the gun away before it blew up in his face. It seemed to work and he holstered the weapon slowly, as if in a dream.

"How long do you intend to keep me here?" I asked calmly.

"Until my orders state other wise, *little girl*." He spat. He wasn't happy about being on guard duty.

"Well then, can I at least get something to drink?" I asked, ignoring his insult. "I'm not going anyplace and you have the gun."

The man looked at his companion, who simply shrugged. "She's just a girl what can she do, like she said, Sijac, you're the one with the blaster." He said and unbuckled the straps as he got up from the pilot's seat. "I could use a drink myself." He added glaring at me, "Babysitting is thirsty work."

We left the cockpit and made for the small galley. On the way I feigned nausea and begged to open the main ramp for fresh air. I planted a subtle suggestion in both men's minds that being covered in my vomit would not make the Emperor happy. Fifteen minutes later, a cup of tea in hand I sat on the bottom of the *Sigiri's* ramp watching the sky above. The guard named Sijac was pacing restlessly on the ground in front of me. He did not like waiting and he was unhappy with this particular assignment. The other, whose name was Egann, was calmer, more stoic and like me had taken a seat to drink his tea.

I sat with my hands cupped around the mug staring out at the view. This moon was lush and green, beautiful in an untouched sort of way. It was completely different to my own home world but there was something oddly familiar, as though I had been here before. As I tried to understand why this was, I suddenly had to fight from choking on the mouthful of tea I had taken as I gasped in surprise. I had felt a tremor in the force, a very subtle shifting of power. It rippled about the galaxy the way wind plays with a gauzy curtain and felt for all the world like a cold caress on the back of my

neck. I shivered and wished I could see what was happening above the moon on the space station. What ever it was it didn't *feel* good.

The beta site was several kilometres away from the alpha post and was little more than a small secondary landing site with an automated monitoring station. We had landed on the further most landing pad, on top of a small hill which allowed me to look over the valley below. There wasn't much to see, except forest and over in the distance the generator dish that kept the Battle station's shield in place. I could hear scattered shots of blaster fire off in the distance. The fighting had begun. I sighed as I stood up. The sensation that I had been here before nagged at the edge of my mind and I couldn't shake it but I could not place it either.

"There is supposed to be a big space battle, do you mind if I turn on the comm to hear the chatter?" I asked.

Neither men objected, nor, as I had hoped did they follow me into the shuttle. I was reasonably sure that Egann, the one who had piloted us down and put the lock code on the console had no idea of my pilot and slicer skills. He wasn't worried about me trying to take off without them because he was certain I couldn't. It made me smile when people underestimated me.

Once in the cockpit I dug out my satchel from under the pilot's seat and slung it over my shoulder. I also took a few minutes to get a look at what kind of land lock I was dealing with. I smiled at the simplicity of it but left it in place. I didn't want to give either of the two men a reason to distrust me or want to either lock me up in a cabin or secure me somehow. Undoing Egann's work would take only a few minutes once I had dealt with the two of them. I turned on the comm to listen to the chatter, loud enough that the two officers could hear it from outside. There was surprisingly little being said. It was as if the entire fleet were holding its breath waiting for a signal, the Emperor's signal. His plan was to give the rebels enough rope to hang themselves then pull the noose even tighter laughing as he did so.

I desperately wanted to reach Lord Vader but even calm and clear headed I could not break through his silence. He knew I was there, reaching out to him but he was busy, his mind was elsewhere. There was nothing else to do except wait. I just did not know what I was waiting for. After a few minutes I went back outside, with the wrap slung about my shoulders my satchel was hidden. Both men glanced at me, they were bored, if they noticed anything different about me they didn't mark it as unusual.

I went back to sitting on the ramp.

"So, you hear anything?" Egann asked.

I shook my head. "The comm is quiet. I guess the Emperor ordered radio silence." I replied.

"Gonna be a slaughter for the rebs!" Sijac snorted. "Good thing too!"

I simply nodded. Each death was like a pinprick on my soul, I was glad I wasn't close enough to feel it or see it happen. Our heads turned when blaster fire sounded closer now. I could hear shouting and the sounds of AT STs and AT ATs tromping about the forest below. There were screams not all of them human. I shivered and pulled my wrap closer about my shoulders.

In my lessons with Master Kjestyll we had often discussed fighting and battle techniques. One of the questions that had been first and foremost on my mind was timing. How did one know when the time was right to strike? I had asked.

"Some people never know, they do not tend to live long." He had replied, "But others, like you have an instinct. You listen to your inner voice and you simply know. It is a moment when everything aligns and you see the path before you clearly, you see the moment to act. It is then you either do or do not. In that singular point in time and space all is decided, life or death. You will know." He had reassured, then added with a sly grin, "Or you will die. Either way, the choice is made and the outcome known. It is the waiting that drives men mad."

I didn't mind the waiting part as much as I probably should have. I had refilled my cup on the way out the shuttle and for all appearances seemed calm, content to sit and sip tea while all around us a battle waged. It was very surreal. I knew that Egann did not mind being here with me too much, but his companion, who was impatient and angry, itched to be in the thick of things and resented the task he had been given of watching over a stupid girl. I ignored him and spoke to Egann instead, engaging him in light conversation, asking about his life. Most people are only too happy to talk about themselves and he was no exception. In the half an hour that we sat there I learned he had a wife and two daughters. That he enjoyed his job and was content to make his way slowly through the ranks until he retired. He had trained as a TIE pilot but his eyesight was not perfect and so he had been placed elsewhere.

Through him and Sijac's interruptions I learned enough to know who I needed to take out first now all I needed was the perfect moment in time. It came when the shield generator blew up, the explosion rocking the ground around us. None of us had been expecting this but I took advantage of it and slipped my lightsaber from my satchel. I would only get one chance so it had to be perfect. As the fighting in the distance drew closer, both of the men, sent to watch over me, forgot I was there and had turned their attentions to the forest.

"We should go down and see what's going on!" Sijac said.

"And do what?" Egann had asked.

I got up quietly and walked to where they stood, at the edge of the landing pad trying to see the battle below. They didn't notice me move,

Master Kjestyll had trained me well. I struck Sijac first, hitting him hard at the base of the skull with the butt of my lightsaber. I heard bone crack and I wasn't sure if I had actually killed him but I didn't have time to see because Egann had turned around, whipped out his blaster and had it trained on me. What stopped him from simply shooting first and asking questions later I will never know, but in that split second hesitation he had lost. In the seconds between his hesitation and then action, I ignited the lightsaber and deflected the blaster bolt that came at me back to him without even thinking about it. It hit him squarely on the right shoulder and he went down in agony. It was almost too easy. I stood over him and put my foot on his chest.

"You have a family; do you think they want to see you dead?" I asked as I pointed the lightsaber's tip near Egann's throat. He gritted his teeth against the pain of the blaster burn and shook his head. He didn't need to be told to toss away his gun.

"I'm leaving now." I told Egann. "I expect that eventually someone will find you both or you can go and get help, but the rebels blew up the Death Star's shield generator so some part of the plan to trap them has gone very wrong. If I were you I'd start thinking up a story, one that uses the word rebel rather than little girl."

"Who are you?" Egann asked.

I just smiled. "Lord Vader's personal assistant."

He gave me a look of utter disbelief and grunted in pain. The blaster burn to his shoulder was bad but not life threatening. I reached over and, as my uncle had once shown me, put pressure on a certain spot on his neck.

"Wha...?" Egann began but his eyes rolled backwards into his head before he could ask his question and he lost consciousness. I reasoned it was better to have him unconscious than to leave him lying in pain and this way I didn't have to worry about him trying to stop me while I undid his handy work.

I bent down to Sijac's side and touched my fingers to his neck, there was a pulse. Some small part of me was grateful I had not killed but another part of me, the part that was still angry and wanted revenge, wasn't. I didn't need to kill, I just needed to get away.

I went inside the *Sigiri*, hitting the ramp switch to close and made my way to the cockpit. If Egann had thought his lock out would stop me he was wrong. In a matter of moments I had helm control and as the engines began to whine in warm up I strapped myself in. Though it only took a few minutes before I was lifting the shuttle off the landing pad, it felt like an eternity. I flew away from where the bulk of the fighting seemed to be taking place and set the ship's shields to maximum. The last thing I wanted was to

be blown out of the sky by stray fire, enemy or friendly. I set course for the Death Star.

Darth Vader had to be warned about the Emperor's treachery and since I could not reach him through our usual, unconventional communication channels I would go the conventional route and show up in person.

As I began to clear the moon's surface, sweeping low over the beta command post I could see the flashes of battle being fought on the ground below. I set my system and adjusted the instrument panel so that I could see the battle which h was being waged in the space above me as well. It was strangely contained. The rebellion had moved in close to where the fleet was stationed and the dog fighting was tight between x-wings and TIEs. I frowned when I realised that none of the command ships were firing at all but when a sudden burst of brilliant green light shot from the battle station I understood why. They did not need to fire their weapons; the Death Star would do that for them. I was still too far away to see any live details, but the blips of light that vanished on my screen as ships exploded caught my breath and made me queasy.

Despite her fast engines and all my extra tinkering, no prayers or wishing would make the *Sigiri* faster than she was, trying gain altitude and break from the clutches of the moon's gravitational pull. She rattled and shook as she flew through the upper atmosphere and only when a sudden silence engulfed me did I know that I was flying free in space. When I saw the battle and how uneven it was, even from as far away as I was, I gasped. The Emperor's plan was a bold one and I shivered involuntarily. He had not meant to simply beat the rebellion at their own game he meant to wipe them all out. I caught my breath and fought to stay calm. I needed to reach Lord Vader and warn him. I opened my self up to the force, feeling its strange warmth flow through me, around me and in its wake I felt Lord Vader's presence, mingled with that of the Emperor's and a third touch which I could only assume was Luke Skywalker's. It was a strange thing to feel their presence and know that up on that terrible unfinished ball of destruction someone's life hung in the balance. I mentally called to Lord Vader but either I was just too far away to be heard or he was deliberately blocking me.

All around I felt conflict and agony. As I drew closer I began to see the shape of things and I felt that shift in the force again, this time not so subtle. I also felt surprise ripple through me but the surprise was not my own. I didn't understand it but I knew urgency when I felt it and cursed the fact that no matter how hard I pushed her, the *Sigiri* was not going to be any faster.

It has been said that a single misstep can change the fate of a man from fortuitous to disastrous and so it was in this instance. Even though I

did not see what happened, I sensed it. A great wave of sorrow washed over me and something else, anger hatred and a sudden release of fear. There was an astonishing shift in power as though a great spring which had been pushed as tightly as it could go had suddenly snapped back shattering everything in its path as it did so. Something in the force broke. I clutched at my chest and gasped at the pain of it, an invisible shockwave spun out all around us with the battle station at its epicentre. Something had happened, something in the force had shattered, something that would change the face of the Empire forever. The terrible ever present power of the Emperor had suddenly vanished.

I had to force myself to take a deep breath, willing my nerves to be steady. Even at my ship's top speed I was too far away from the battle station to make any difference so when the *Executor* plunged into the battle station I was dumbfounded by the sight of it. Still heading toward the Death Star some part of my shocked brain registered what I was seeing and I changed course. At that very moment I felt a presence touch my mind.

*Lord Vader.* I whispered both out loud and in my head.

I had never felt him so strongly before and something had changed. There was no more anger.

*Go!* He said telepathically. *Go now!*

*My Lord, it's a trap... the Emperor...*

*Too late for warnings now, girl.* His words echoed in my head, sounding strange almost calm.

*My lord, I can help, I am coming!*

I felt his smile even from such a distance, I felt it. *I release you from my service, Merlyn Gabriel; now go before you also die here, go!* His voice in my head was full of peace but before I could say anything back to him I felt him sever the tie that had bound us for over four years.

I felt his life force ebb and then vanish. In that moment I understood he was dead but I could not comprehend it. There was a terrible tearing of my soul, a physical pain that hurt as nothing else ever had. I know I screamed in denial but my voice was drowned as the comm channel exploded with frantic voices screaming that the battle station was about to explode. Rebels and Imperials alike scrambled to clear the immediate area and I was no exception.

I swung the shuttle around, heading away from the Death Star so that when it blew up I was mostly ready for it and half the calculations for a hyperspace jump had already been computed. The blast and the light from the explosion were beyond anything I had ever seen, but I didn't feel that. What I felt was death, the Emperor's, Lord Vader's and a part of my soul. The *Sigiri* lurched and rocked violently, if I had not been strapped in, I would have been flung across the cockpit. My instrument panel went wild

and alarms screamed at me. Years of training took over and I numbly went through the motions to fix the problems and sort out the damage the explosion's shock wave had done to my ship. As fast as I could, I got out of the planet's gravity well and hit the hyperspace jump switch. I had no idea where I was headed I only knew I had to leave.

*Go!* Lord Vader had said. It was the last order he would ever give me and because there was nothing else for me to do, I obeyed him one final time.

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The *Sigiri* came out of hyperspace shuddering violently. I woke from my doze disoriented and confused. I had been dreaming but the images in my head made no sense to me. For a second I had no idea where I was and then everything came flooding back. The emptiness I felt in the pit of my gut was so physically painful that I had to fight the urge to throw up. I would have cried if there had been time but alarms were screaming at me. My sorrow could wait and I shoved it deep down inside of me.

The *Sigiri's* engines had over heated and there had been more damage done by the shock wave from the Death Star's explosion than I had thought. I wasn't sure if I could fix it but I was pretty sure I could nurse the hyperdrive until I reached a safe place to set down and get repairs. I patched up the engine as much as I could then I consulted the star charts to see where I was, grateful the nav system was functioning properly.

I had flown quite far and according to the charts I was somewhere out on the edge of the Mid Rim past a planet called Rakata Prime. I didn't know much about this planet and there was very little in the database so I made the decision to avoid it. I had no desire to find myself on a rebel friendly planet in an Imperial shuttle. I sighed as I ran through the data-base looking for Imperial friendly planets and found a name I knew. Nirauan.

I sat back in the pilot's chair with a sigh. *Thrawn*, I thought. He had told me about this planet, he had built a secret base of operations on it. I wondered where he was and if news of what had happened had already made its way out to the Unknown Regions. I had tried to contact any Imperial ships who would have been close on the emergency frequency but there was nothing but static. Long range communications in that region of space were unreliable because the HoloNet system was not fully set up so far away from the core. I punched the coordinates to Nirauan into the nav computer and prayed the engines would hold until I got there.

I was truly tired but I couldn't sleep. I should have tried but every time I closed my eyes all I saw was the *Executor* as it crashed into the Death Star and the sensation of being torn apart from the inside out as Lord Vader

had died. I couldn't bear it so I buried it and spent much of my time in the engine room babysitting the engine and the hyperdrive. I was grateful for the small mercy that I was at least on a ship I knew well and had spent many hours in. I forced myself to think rationally and concentrate on what I would tell Thrawn when I finally found him. I wasn't sure he would be at the base on Nirauan but I had to try. It never even occurred to me to go back to Coruscant or to make contact with any of the other ships in the fleet. I had been so torn apart by the Emperor's planned betrayal of Lord Vader that I had not thought about anything else. When the hyperdrive alarm peeped to let me know I was entering normal space I was curled up on the engine room floor, numb and exhausted.

Nirauan was a small arboreal planet, the second of three, which orbited a weak red star. Thrawn had spoken of its strange terrain, beautiful vegetation and natural lakes. The base itself had been built over an existing structure and vaguely resembled an outstretched hand. *They call it the hand of Thrawn*, he had said jokingly as he told me about some of the people who he had stationed there. As I approached the planet I broadcast my Imperial security clearance codes on the Imperial emergency channel. It did not take long to get a reply. I was asked for more identification and I gave it, after a moment's pause I was given landing instructions. I followed them to the letter not wishing to make what I was sure would be a difficult meeting any harder.

As I styled the shuttle to land I could see why the place had been nicknamed the Hand of Thrawn, there were five towers which reached up out of the base. It did, from a certain angle, resemble like a hand. All they needed to do to make it perfect, I thought wryly, was paint it blue.

Once the *Sigiri* had touched down, her engines shut off and the boarding ramp lowered I gathered my courage and went to meet who ever was waiting for me. I was shocked to see a friendly face and even more so to see no armed guards or angry troopers waiting for me.

"Miss Gabriel? This is a pleasant surprise, did Lord Vader send you?" Voss Parck stepped forward to meet me, motioning the two Chiss at his side to relax. His smile was genuine but he could not hide the puzzlement he felt.

"Commander Parck..." I began but suddenly lost the ability to speak. Emotion swept through me like blast fire and I had to cover my mouth to stop the sob that threatened to spill out. I fought to calm myself and stay steady on my feet.

"Are you okay? You are as white as a snow lilly." He asked taking me gently by the arm and leading me out of the landing bay into the facility itself.

I shook my head. "No, no not really."

"Your shuttle shows signs of damage, there's a lot of carbon scoring, were you in a fight, some sort of skirmish or an ambush?"

"Endor." I whispered.

He gave me a quizzical look and a slight shake of his head.

"Endor?"

"Have you not heard?" I couldn't believe that he did not know.

He shook his head. "There has been no news from the Core for the last twenty-six hours, apparently the Holonet is having technical difficulties. We have been in a long range comm blackout and the secondary channels are all silent. Has something happened?"

I choked back a strange urge to giggle and glanced at the two Chiss who eyed me with suspicion. "I think we had better speak in private." I said.

He did not argue against it and led me to a small meeting room, his hand on the small of my back. His familiarity was comforting despite being a breach of decorum. I sat down hard on the nearest chair, grateful for the solidity of the conference table. With my elbows on the table I buried my face in my hands. Parck turned to the two Chiss and asked them to leave. One of them went to argue but Parck held up his hand. "Miss Gabriel is Lord Vader's personal assistant. Grand Admiral Thrawn trusts her, so should you. Please wait outside."

They didn't like it but they did as they were asked.

"Now," He said, "First things first, you look awful can I get you something to drink, to eat?"

I shook my head and drew a deep breath. "Where's Thrawn?" I asked, getting to the point.

Parck shook his head. "We don't exactly know. He goes out into the Unknown Regions and he's out of contact range. We are still trying to establish solid Holonet links but there are pirates and traders, as well as several alien species that disapprove of this technology have a tendency to destroy the emitters. Communications at long range out here are difficult. The Admiral generally goes out for two months and unless there is a serious emergency we don't hear from him until he returns." He said. "Miss Gabriel, if I may ask, what is going on? Why are you here?"

I drew a deep steadying breath and said, "They're dead, Voss."

He stared at me blankly, not understanding.

"The Emperor and Lord Vader, they are both dead. The *Executor* was destroyed. It crashed into the battle station." I was amazed at how steady my voice sounded while I told him the news.

He paled visibly and sat down in the chair beside me. He leaned towards me, his face hard and angry. "If this is a joke, it's in very poor taste." He said.

Tears welled up in my eyes and I had to fight from breaking down. “Joke?” I asked, now my voice did tremble. “You think I flew all the way out here in a damaged shuttle to joke with you about this?”

“Forgive me, but this news, it’s difficult to believe.”

I just nodded, blinked away the tears. “I know. I was there, I saw it with my own eyes and I still don’t believe it. Download the *Sigiri’s* logs; you’ll see it to be true.”

“The Emperor is dead? How do you know, did you see him die?” He was still trying to process the unthinkable.

I shook my head. “I felt it. His presence in the force vanished, violently. It was the same for Lord Vader...when he died... they are both dead. They were on the battle station when it exploded. There was no way anyone could have survived that.”

“The battle Station? The new battle station? It was destroyed? How is that possible?” He ran a hand through his hair, visibly distraught by the news.

“The Emperor laid a plan to trap the rebels and destroy them by feeding them the technical data to the battle station, he hoped to lure them to Endor and wipe them all out but something went wrong...,” I stopped to steady myself. “Something went dreadfully wrong.” I hid my trembling hands under the table.

“What happened?” He asked gently.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I have no idea.” I said. “I was not on the *Executor* or the battle station at the time, I had been doing a...a job for the Emperor and I was on the Sanctuary Moon, waiting.” I didn’t think he needed to know the whole story. I wondered if he would even believe it if I were to tell him. “By the time I was in the air to return to the *Executor* all hell had broken loose. I was about half way to the station when I saw the flag ship plunge into it. After that word came down to clear the area because it was about to blow up. The *Sigiri* was caught in the shockwave when the death star blew. I didn’t stick around to be captured by rebels; I just got the hell out of there. I don’t know what happened to the fleet or anything. I don’t know any more than this, the Emperor is gone, everything has changed.” The words caught like hooks in my throat and I clenched my teeth tightly to the sob that wanted to escape from doing so.

“I just don’t know how to believe this, I don’t know what to do, ...I ...”

I looked up at him so sharply he stopped mid sentence. “The Emperor is dead and so is Lord Vader. Nothing, no one could have survived that explosion.” I said. “I have to tell him, I have to tell Thrawn! He’s the only one who can sort this out; he’s the only one who can make sense of it!” I could feel the hysteria rising in my voice and fought hard to back it down.

Parck leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. “The only way to get a message to him is to go to a rendezvous point where they will still be within standard long range comm distance, drop a booster beacon and wait for them to hear the signal.”

“Give me the coordinates. I’ll find him.” I said firmly. I had it in my head that Thrawn could fix this terrible mess and I was not going to be dissuaded from this. That perhaps Sate Pestage, who was technically now in charge of the Empire, would have a back up plan for just this scenario had not even occurred to me.

He gave me a thin smile. “Merlyn, you look as though you are running on vapours, your shuttle is badly damaged and you are in no shape to go anywhere....”

I waved my hand at him and stopped him from speaking. “There is no one else who can tell him what I know. I have to find him and every minute I sit here talking about it is a minute wasted that the rebels gain. Thrawn has to know, I need to find him. Please, Voss, you know I am right.” I could have pushed with the force but I didn’t, I didn’t need to. He could see by my expression that I would not back down. I didn’t give him time to reconsider either. “Please....”

I knew he wasn’t happy but that he had no counter argument. I had won. “Okay, but you will take a different shuttle, one that isn’t damaged, with an escort.”

I shook my head. “No, no escort. I do this on my own. I’ll accept a different shuttle, that way if there are rebels out here and I get caught I can lie about who I am, say that I stole the ship to escape. I won’t compromise your work out here and an escort of Imperial pilots will do exactly that. It would raise too many questions if I were to get caught. This place needs to stay a secret. You need to trust me, I am a good pilot and I know what I am doing. I won’t risk anyone else’s life for this, there has been far too much death already!”

He didn’t like this but he wasn’t going to argue either. If the news I had told him was correct, then I was right and Thrawn had to know but the secrecy of this base had to be maintained.

“Well, I guess we should get ready then but I insist you get a decent meal and at least an hour’s rest. It will take that long to prep a ship and copy over the data from the *Sigiri*. One hour will not make much of a difference now.” I knew from the tone of his voice that he would not budge on this so I nodded, oddly grateful.

He got up and opened the door, spoke to one of the Chiss guards and then motioned for me to follow. “Kshar will show you to guest quarters, I’ll have the quarter master send you clean clothes, and toiletries. I’ll arrange a wake up call in an hour and then you and I will share a warm meal.”

I wanted to throw my arms around him then and hug him for his open kindness and for taking me seriously. Instead I just nodded and followed the Chiss Parck had called Kshar. It was a short silent walk and the small guest area was sparse but serviceable. I thanked Kshar in basic, not wanting to give it away that I spoke his native tongue. A few moments later a knock at the door told me the clothes and toiletries Parck had promised were delivered. I took the pile gratefully and then locked the door. I lay down on the bed and let go of the breath I had been holding for what seemed like forever. I didn't think I would sleep, but I did. An hour later a knock on the door woke me up.

Showered and wearing clean, unmarked coveralls, I sat at the table in the small Officer's mess eating the first warm meal I had in ages. I had no idea what I was eating but it was filling and hot. As I soon as I had finished my meal, Parck explained how their communications system worked, showed me on a small data pad where I was heading and the codes I would need to activate the enhancement beacon.

"It's a very bad area of space though, I would feel better if you were not going alone." He said as he handed me the datapad. "We have had trouble with hit and run attacks from unknowns."

I shook my head. "You know I'm right. I stand a better chance on my own." I did not want to have to worry about someone else. I did not want to be responsible for anyone else. I needed to do this alone. "Did you get the data off the *Sigiri*?"

He nodded. "Yes, and just so you know, your hyperdrive motivator is shot among many other things, it's a miracle you made it here alive. The gods must smile on you, I think."

I wasn't so sure about any smiling gods that but I wasn't going to argue with him. "Did you read through the data?"

His business like expression changed to one of sorrow. "Yes. We are trying to establish communications with the Core now, to see how bad things really are but I suspect that who ever was left in charge initiated a total HoloNet lock down and placed Coruscant under martial law until some of this mess can be sorted out. I hope we'll know more in the next forty eight hours or so."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "This is such a terrible mess."

"Well, if anyone can sort it all out the Grand Admiral can." He said optimistically. "I've had the crews ready a lambda class shuttle called the *Aeolian*. She's a solid little ship, used to be an ambassadorial shuttle so she's more comfortable than the transport shuttles but Thrawn had all the older ships' weapons upgraded, as well as their nav systems and star charts. She may look like an old girl but she's feistier than she appears. She's also

unmarked and has a set of fake ident markers if you need to run under the radar, so to speak. The chief mechanic assures me she is in excellent running condition."

"I need to get a few things off my ship and then, if everything is set, I will leave." I said getting up. Time was running out, I felt it even though the unimaginable had already happened. I needed to find Thrawn.

Parck nodded. "I've had the quartermaster stock the *Aeolian* fully and added couple of changes of clothes for you; I don't know how long it will take the Grand Admiral to respond to the signal, could be anywhere from an hour to three days so I thought it best to be prepared. Come on, I'll escort you."

On impulse, before he could open the door, I leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I don't know how to thank you."

He blushed furiously. "I think you just did. I just hope that I haven't signed your death warrant by letting you do this." He said a little gruffly. He had deep misgivings about letting me go on my own and there was no way for me to alleviate them. I wasn't sure that he was wrong either but the drive to tell Thrawn was stronger than my common sense and I was far from thinking clearly.

The *Aeolian* had seen better days but Parck was as good as his word and she was a solid ship that had been well taken care of. I took my tool kit and my satchel off the *Sigiri*, when I had flown from the *Executor* I had not exactly planned on what had happened next so I didn't have much in the way of belongings on board her.

"Take good care of my shuttle!" I said to Parck as I turned to board the *Aeolian*, "She saved my life."

"I will see to it myself." He said. "You have all you need? All the data and codes? How to activate the signal booster beacon? And you know what to do if you need help from me or you run into trouble?"

I nodded to each of his questions feeling a little like a kid heading out on her first trip alone. "Voss, I'll be fine. I'll find him and tell him what has happened and he'll come back and fix this mess. It will be fine." I spoke the words calmly but on the inside I wasn't so sure. What had happened at Endor had shaken me to the core and what I was about to do made the hair on the back of my neck prickle and stand on end.

"I don't have to tell you I don't like this one bit. The area of space you are heading into is known to be a hunting ground for scavengers and pirates." He frowned. "If anything happens to you Thrawn will have my hide." He said almost whispering. The worry in his voice spilled out into his features. "He's not a man to speak of his private life but I know him well enough to understand you are someone precious to him. I do not want to be the one who let you go to your death."

I nodded. "Well, I will just have to make sure nothing bad happens then." I said more firmly, more confidently than I actually felt. "A little trust, Commander." I said. Thrawn's words not mine and I didn't really believe them but I didn't know what else to say. Parck nodded and I knew he had also heard these words before. I turned to leave.

"Good luck, Miss Gabriel." He said softly. I turned around and looked back at him. I nodded and then shivered as Navaari's words echoed through my mind. *It is bad luck to look back.*

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According to the data Parck had given me, Thrawn and his fleet were at least thirty-six hours away from Nirauan at the shuttle's top hyper-speed. With the co-ordinates for the beacon drop punched into the nav computer and the automated pilot there wasn't much else for me to do. Falling back on old patterns I spent a lot of time in the engine room. I was nervous about being on a ship I was unfamiliar with and the only way I knew how to deal with that was to get to know her from top to bottom. It also kept me busy and being busy kept me from thinking too much about what had happened.

The worse moments came when I found myself idle, when I was making something to eat or trying to sleep. Most of the time, when the memories would flood back, my hunger would vanish and the sight of what ever I had cooked made me sick. I found it odd that I couldn't cry. There was a giant knot in my gut waiting for some trigger, some escape but there was no release. There was just felt a terrible emptiness that gnawed at my soul the way hunger ate at my belly. Sleep, when it came, was fitful and filled with dreams of things I couldn't decipher. Gone was the gentle guiding voice of Qui Gon Jinn, almost as if he had never existed. All I remembered when I woke up frightened and sweat soaked, were vague images of things I did not understand and the Emperor's dreadful laughter.

Time seemed to move the same way the hyperspace field did, strangely in whorls of light and shifting matter. I lost track of it. I lost track of myself and spent a lot of time just sitting in the cockpit staring out into hyperspace. It was terrible loneliness here to be but I didn't care.

Many people could not travel in space alone. It made them go crazy. All that empty blackness, some people just couldn't handle it. There were stories about ghost ships and haunted moons, dead zones where, if you flew in, you would never come out. I had heard them all as a kid at the docking bay, listening with rapt attention to the stories the spacers told, sometimes paying the price with terrible dreams of lost souls and scary

monsters. As with most childhood demons these passed when I grew older but the fascination with space did not.

I had never flown out beyond the Outer Rim before; the furthest away from the Core I had ever been was to Hjal and then Nirauan. This was different. I was in uncharted territory now. There were no official maps of this part of space only what Thrawn and his people had charted and those maps were basic and sparse because, while Thrawn liked to do a thorough job, his fleet was not large enough or set up to do a proper surveillance and cartography. Still I studied the charts Parck had given me carefully. So much uncharted territory, a few planets dotted here and there along with an occasional marked anomaly.

I wished I had brought Thrawn's letters with me. I desperately needed his voice, his words but instead, at his insistence, I had left them behind as I now felt I had left my life behind. I didn't know what to do. The minutes passed like hours and hours moved like months. The space around me was endless and empty, even in the swirls of hyperspace I knew there was nothing out there except more space and for the first time in my life I was afraid of it. So, I sat in the pilot's chair of a ship that I didn't feel at home in and stared out of the cockpit window, unable to cry, unable to mourn, unable to let go.

When I finally dropped out of hyperspace into the area Parck had given me as the designated communication zone, I was beyond tired and I couldn't recall the last time I had actually eaten something solid. Despite the good store of provisions Parck's quartermaster had laid in I had no appetite. I slowed down the impulse engines and came to an idling stop in the specified coordinates.

It was vast, this area of space. The pin pricks of light indicating stars and maybe solar systems were very far and few between. It almost seemed as though someone had spilled a giant bottle of black ink but it had not quite covered everything. I shivered. I checked the long ranger sensor but there was nothing else out there, at least nothing that could be picked up. I was utterly alone. I set the long range transmitter to the frequency Parck has given me and put it on repeat. There wasn't much else to do except deploy the booster beacon and to do that I had to get it ready to drop from the cargo bay which was a manual job.

The beacon booster was small and unlike anything I had ever seen before. Different technology, Parck has explained, which Thrawn had 'borrowed' and tinkered with. Parck had shown me how to activate and deploy it, not a difficult procedure but fiddly. I was just setting it in the drop cradle when the proximity alarm started beeping loudly. It scared the sand jiggers out of me, but I figured, I hoped it was actually Thrawn's fleet. Despite Parck's warning it never occurred to me to think other wise. I set the

beacon in the cradle and closed it up. Maybe if I had been less tired, less self absorbed, thinking more clearly I would have sensed what was coming next but as it was I didn't and it took me utterly by surprise.

I was half way back to the cockpit when the first blast struck. I was flung hard into the bulkhead, smashing my head violently against the durasteel. For a moment I saw blackness and a burst of stars, accompanied by a shard of pain so sharp it sucked my breath away. I stood trying to find my balance, one hand braced against the bulkhead the other holding my head. I could feel blood ooze between my fingers.

Before I had time to consider the consequences of what had just happened, a second blast hit and the shuttle rocked violently again, more alarms began to scream at me. Without thinking about it, I ran then because I hadn't put the ship's shields up. Shields drew a lot of power and I hadn't thought I needed them here, the sensors had said I was alone. I had not been thinking at all and now, through a haze of pain, I was cursing my stupidity. I had truly thought there was nothing out here, just me and a whole lot of space. Rebels, I whispered to myself but in truth I wasn't so sure. Parck's words about pirates and scavengers were coming back to haunt me.

By the time I was seated in the cockpit who ever had been firing had done so again. I didn't think they wanted to blow this ship up because they were targeting mostly non essential areas but I wasn't used to being fired on. I had never been trained as a combat pilot and my heart was racing. My anxiety changed to fear when I tried to activate the shields but couldn't, the second blast had been well aimed and the shield generator had gone down. The *Aeolian* didn't have a back up. I flipped switches and revved the sublight engine up to full power because my attacker was two steps ahead. The targeting computer showed me where the enemy was and I strapped myself in bringing the weapons on line. I could not recall ever being so afraid or feeling so alone before. In that single moment I knew despair.

*Use the force...*

The voice suddenly washed over me so clear, so close that I thought for a second someone else was standing in the cockpit behind me, whispering in my ear. I must have banged my head harder than I thought. I was hearing voices now. The voice sounded similar and I gasped at its touch, which was both reassuring and painful. I looked around me to make certain but there was no one else, other than me here along with an awful lot of empty space and someone trying to blow me up. I was over tired and jumped up on adrenaline plus I had more pressing things to worry about than hearing voices or seeing ghosts.

I swung the Shuttle about, following the blip on the targeting computer to try and face my opponent. When it came into view, I was breathless. It was a design unlike anything I had ever seen and I understood

then that this was a species I had never come across before; they were not part of the Emperor's galaxy. I targeted the ship and fired. Parck had not been kidding when he had said the weapons had been upgraded and who ever had been firing at me was not expecting my ship to have teeth. But they still had a shield and mine was down.

We danced, a waltz done with ships against a backdrop of darkness with silence without music. We swung around each other, firing our weapons, hitting and missing, only to back off and then reengage. At some point I stopped being scared, there was no time to be scared, no time to consider what might happen there was only the now. I stopped trying and simply did. The sensation of being watched was stronger than ever and for the second time I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

*Merlyn, use the force....*

I felt a subtle nudge and I stopped thinking.

The shuttle took hard hit to the portside and I knew before the dash board began to light up that something vital had been damaged, I could hear it in the sound of the engines. Alarms screamed at me but I didn't hear them. I drew a very deep breath and found the stillness. In the last weeks that I had spent training with Lord Vader, reaching that core and finding that part of me connected to the force had become easier. Everything I had ever been taught was coming into play, right here, right now. I saw in my mind's eye the ship that was attacking me swing around to disable the engines and I knew they wanted my ship more or less whole, they didn't care about the beings inside, they were trying to disable the shuttle not blow her up. Pirates or scavengers, I didn't know. I didn't care. I was beyond tired.

*Merlyn...*

I closed my eyes just as the ship fired at me again, sparks exploded from the consol. The *Aeolian* shuddered terribly and spun out of control. I battled with her and brought her back into line just as another shot hit me. The main engines began to fail. There was a back up hyperdrive but I couldn't access it, something on the main consol had shorted out in the last volley of fire. I swore violently as the ship that was after me began to swing around to make its final move.

*Now girl, now...!*

Whose voice whispered in my ear I didn't know but it held an urgency I couldn't ignore. I didn't think, I didn't breathe I just fired. I had hit the unknown ship many times during this skirmish, and because the *Aeolian's* guns were just better I had weakened my opponent's shields. The voice in my head guided me even as I fought to keep my ship steady, the terrible scream of engines about to blow sounding louder to me than anything else I had ever heard. *Just a little more, old girl*, I whispered, *just hang on a few seconds more...* Without looking I knew I was dead on target

and I fired again. Guided by an unseen hand, my aim was true. I hit the one weak spot my enemy had. The explosion was huge and momentarily blinded me.

The *Aeolian* was tossed about, a grain of sand in a storm. I just gritted my teeth and shut my eyes tightly, holding on to the steering control for dear life. I felt it as the main engine failed and the ship spun aimlessly, uselessly. I felt the momentary lurch as the gravity plating lost power then reversed as the back up generator kicked in but even from the cock pit I could tell it wasn't functioning right either. The screaming of alarms, the stench of burning cables and wires brought me back to reality sharply. When I shook off the shock of what had just happened I realised that my troubles were only just beginning.

My head throbbed savagely, all the jerking and spinning about had not helped. As a wave of nausea swept through me I wondered if maybe I had a concussion but there wasn't much time to do anything about it. I stumbled down to the engine room, bracing myself along the bulkhead because the shuttle was listing badly. My worst fears were confirmed when I began to assess the damage. The main engine was a mess, and the shield generator had been completely fried. Main life support was failing and the back up generator wasn't in good shape. Who ever it was that had been attacking me had known exactly where to strike. My guess was that they had either attacked lambda class ships before or had scanned me without me knowing about it. Either way, it didn't matter any more, what mattered now was getting power back on line, without it I was dead in space relying solely on battery back up and that had a very limited life span.

After half an hour I knew. No amount of tinkering or fixing would sort out the main engine and the back up was failing fast. A vital part had been badly damaged and there was no way for me to repair or jury rig a new part. I was so frustrated I screamed out loud. I had spare parts onboard of the *Sigiri* but I had not thought to bring any with me. I never occurred to me I would need them and I was going to pay for that now. I was well and truly screwed.

I turned my attention from fixing the engine and the generator to seeing how best to conserve what power I did have left so that at the very least I had breathable air and some warmth. Space was very cold and with minimal internal heating the ship would turn into a giant freezer, not something I looked forward to. I didn't deal well with cold.

I knew the moment the back up generator died. It spluttered spewing sparks all over the place and the gravity plating went offline again until the battery back up kicked in. All I could do was hold on and pray. My head ached and my guts churned but when I tried to throw up there was nothing in my stomach so there was no mess but it didn't make feel any

better. Low gravity came back online, enough to give me weight. I knelt on the engine room floor, my head down to try and stop the dizziness and suddenly remembered I had not deployed the booster beacon. At least I thought ruefully I could still do that and whispered a silent thankful prayer that the manual release still worked.

I shut down as many non essential systems as I could, anything that I did not require I took off-line until the only things left were heat and life support. I turned the heat down as far as I dared and closed off as much of the unused areas of the shuttle that I could. What didn't need to be heated wasn't. The batteries had an approximate life span of six or seven hours and I hoped I could increase that to ten. When I had done all I could do in the engine room I made my way back to the cockpit, picking up a bottle of water and some blankets on the way. Already the shuttle was cooling down and I shivered. In a few hours it would be very cold, not enough to kill but more than enough to make me uncomfortable. I grabbed the med kit and scavenged it for pain killers. My head throbbed violently now and it was making me miserable.

Once in the cockpit I settled into the pilot's chair hoping no more strange ships or pirates showed up, if they did I was dead. I double checked that the signal I was broadcasting on the frequency Parck had given me was still being sent out, noted that the booster beacon was also online and then because there was nothing else I could do I waited.

I flitted in and out of a doze and time passed slowly, oddly. Memories and dreams jumbled together as I sat huddled under the blankets, cold enough to reconsider my decision to drop the heat but I knew I had made the right choice. I could live without heat for longer than I could live without air but I wished I had brought my Dantassi clothes, especially the warm ones Navaari had given me on Hjal.

Thinking about Navaari made me sad. It occurred to me in this moment that I might not actually survive this. I had no idea where Thrawn and his fleet really were, as Parck had said it could take them up to three standard days to reach the signal point if they were on the outer limits of its range. I didn't have days; I had hours. So I began to record letters. I wanted the people I loved to at least know what had happened. I should have felt fear even anger or sorrow at this but I didn't, instead I felt nothing. As I spoke my words to my family I wondered how they would take it. It didn't seem right somehow to die so far away, so alone but it was somehow fitting.

I spoke to my father as though he were with me, telling him how much I truly loved him and how sorry I was for all the fights, all the pain I know I had caused. I addressed Bel and Bedi as well. I left a similar but shorter version for my uncle but it did not seem like enough. What was there to say? I didn't really know so I babbled a little and then said a quiet

goodbye. As the pain in my head grew worse, it became a struggle to concentrate.

With the letter to my family done I began to dictate my letter to Thrawn. I spoke in his native language because what I had to say to him I didn't want anyone else knowing. I told him what had happened at Endor, everything I could remember from the moment I had been summoned to the Emperor's chamber on the battle station to escaping the blast from its destruction. I tried to be clear and clinical about it but I wasn't sure how I came across. I kept forgetting what I had said and had to back track to pick up the thread of it. My mind was having trouble focusing and the cold was starting to get to me. When I had nothing more to report on that incident I started a second letter, a personal one but I didn't know how to tell him what I felt for him, I couldn't utter the words I carried in my heart because it seemed to me that if I did, then I really would die and in that moment I knew I didn't want to. Not like this, all alone in a region of space so far away from my home that I could not even see the planet on the chart. I decided then, that if I could not tell him what I felt in my heart to his face, I would not speak the words at all. Silent unwanted tears pricked my eyes, rolled down my cheeks and splashed on the broken consol. These tears brought no relief and did nothing to ease the terrible pain I still felt inside, they only made it worse.

In the end I gave up trying so all that was on the data recorder for him to hear was that I was sorry, my voice a trembling whisper as I spoke. I didn't know what to say. How could I express the extraordinary grace his gifts of passion, and caring had given to me? All that he was to me could never be spoken in words. In my mind I could see his smile, sense his warmth and remember the power of his touch. His voice was a caress in my soul I would carry with me until the moment I died, I clung to its memory, but it wasn't enough. *I am bound to you...* he had said and the memory of his words made me ache with sorrow.

Here, now all alone on this broken ship I could not show him what he meant to me, I could not even speak it. I wished at that moment that the force or what ever this gift was that I had would allow me to pour these sensations into the data chip so that when he touched it he would know, there was only him and no one else but I knew this was useless effort. In the end all I could hope for was that Thrawn would understand because he always understood. When I was done I put the data recorder where it would be found, the messages were protected by an Imperial code which only he would know. I had every faith that he would find me, just not that he would come in time.

I closed my eyes. I was so tired and my head hurt so much that all I wanted to do was get away from the pain. None of the meds I had taken

seemed to work and the cold was making me sleepy. In the back of my mind I knew this was wrong, that falling asleep was the very worst thing I could do but I no longer cared. A part of me had died at Endor, when Lord Vader had severed the tie between us something within me had broken.

He had been a terrible ruin of a man who had done unspeakable things in the name of an Emperor, in the name of a master who had twisted his soul. But at one point he had been a person who had loved, who had given freely and cared deeply about those around him. He had not been born evil he had been made that way, betrayed by the one man he had admired and looked up to above all others, betrayed right up until the bitter end. How I hated Palpatine for this. Lord Vader would forever be reviled through out the galaxy, even though it was the Emperor's evil that had made him what he was. No matter what lay behind it all, Darth Vader was the symbol of all that was terrible.

But I ached for a loss that I couldn't comprehend. As much as I had feared him, had been frustrated with him and hurt by him I understood that part of me had also loved him and now he was gone. It hurt more deeply than I could have ever imagined. I did not understand the thing that had wound our two lives together and neither had he or anyone else. Not even the Emperor could sever it and he himself had said as much. I remembered his words clearly... *I sense that you have formed a bond with him that will be difficult to break...* well, now it was broken. And so, it seemed, was I.

I was certain the rest of the galaxy would rejoice Vader's loss and they had a right to for all that he had been. But I would mourn his passing. I would probably be the only one. I was one of the only people who knew who he had been before the dark times. I had seen when he had been the hero of the galaxy, their beacon of hope in a terrible war. I had seen him love unabashedly, willing to die in order to preserve what he held dearest. As he had hated so he had loved. If he had one true fault it was that he was passionate, too much so and it had ruled and ruined him. No one would remember him as a hero only as a vile demon who had done terrible, terrible things but I had known him better and the pain of it broke my heart. I didn't try to stop the terrible sob that broke free from my chest. I simply buried my head in my hands and wept.

When the crying stopped, my head ached so fiercely that I wondered briefly, if this was punishment for caring so much about a fallen man. Sick to my stomach, I closed my eyes and began to drift into a deadly sleep. I felt it creep up on me warm and seductive and I welcomed it. As the world of troubles around me began to slip away I could have sworn I heard a voice, a man's voice whisper in my ear. Telling me to breathe deeply, to concentrate and find my center.

*"Meditate and find peace there...."* He said gently.

I remembered similar words from a recent lesson. It seemed strange to hear the same advice from an unfamiliar voice, a kind voice. I whimpered, sorrow and fear creeping into my consciousness. I could have sworn I felt the subtle brush of someone's hand warm and gentle on my cheek but I opened my eyes there was no one there. I was hallucinating or dreaming or both.

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

I did as I was told. I drew deep steadying breaths and meditated. I found that center, that quiet place deep within and it was there I settled my mind. Nothing else existed, only this place, only this warmth, only this strange sense of calm. If this was death then, unafraid, I was happy to accept it. I no longer felt the throbbing ache of my head, the nausea or the terrible sorrow of my heart. I slowed my breathing right down, as I had been taught, becoming the stillness. Everything around me melted away and as I drifted further into the darkness that called to me I knew only peace and nothing more.

END OF BOOK 2