

The Bitter Twist of Dark 1

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

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

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

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

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

We bowed and began with me on the offensive this time. I liked the leg moves and kicks, they always reminded me of dance and it was part of the Bunduki Arts I was very good at so I got the better of him, while he was powerful and strong he lacked my agility. Instead of trying to focus on what I would do next he allowed his frustration to get the better of him and broke the

rules of trial by completing an illegal hand strike at me. It caught me by surprise as he hit me on the side of my face. When I hit the floor I saw stars.

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

The third section of the trial was to test for combinations of moves and defensive-offensive skills. We circled about and he moved first, I could tell the combination he was going for because it was an easy one to spot through the body position. He had been well taught but there was a certain stiffness in his motions as though he had memorized choreography and was not feeling it by heart. I countered easily and moved into a more complex combination that was not generally used or utilised, but I liked the flow of it. It put Kiol off and he was unable to defend his body, had I been fighting for real it would have hurt him, as it was I just put him on his ass. When he got up his anger was visible on his face. He launched a series of moves that were fast and furious, putting me on the defensive quickly. He was very strong and quicker than he looked but he was oddly predictable and I was able to counter each combination he threw at me until he lost his temper and in a surprise move dropped into riding bantha stance then swiftly and then with a spring spin, viciously kicked me in the lower chest sending me backwards onto the floor in pain. The crowd made a collective noise of displeasure and the one of judges watching us sounded the tone to let us know that our match was now over and that Kiol had violated the rules a second time meaning that he would not obtain the right to step up a level, but that I would. I got slowly to my feet and wondered at the pain in my side. It felt as though he had cracked one of my ribs with that last kick. As I turned to walk off the floor he suddenly came at me, grabbing me by the front of my kej-ji'doh. He pulled me as close to his face as he could and hissed.

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

"What was that all about?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

I swallowed the aching pain in the right side of my chest and did as he asked, grateful to stop moving. The others all clapped me on the back or the shoulders in congratulations but

I didn’t feel so celebratory. As I had glanced around me I noticed that Kiol and two of his fellow students, who were older and stronger looking, were eying me with such a bitter hatred it made me shudder. This wasn’t over yet, not by a long shot. I just hoped that I could avoid any more arguments with them. I didn’t want to give them more of an excuse to dislike me than they already seemed to do. This was one of the disadvantages of working for Lord Vader.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly and each student from the group I was with passed their trials easily. Only one other student from a different school was not passed for his behaviour and for the most part the rest went on without incident.

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

“Merlyn Gabriel!”

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

“What do you want?” I asked.

“You.” Kiol said in a loud clear voice. “I call the Rite of Tet’zais-tjiumei.”

Master Fessi sucked in his breath and the following stillness in the hall was sickening. I turned to him. “What is that?” I asked. I had never heard of it

before. While I was slowly learning about the Bunduki Arts and their history from Master Kjestyll, this Rite was one I had not been taught yet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Some choices.” I said softly.

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

“These rules are insane.” I hissed.

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

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

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

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

“Then I accept, I will not have Master Kjestyll’s name dishonoured. I am not afraid to die.” I said loudly enough for everyone to hear. I sounded braver than I felt.

Kiol grinned nastily. “I call the right to have someone fight in my stead. My brother Riori has agreed to do this.” A taller, more powerfully built man, probably three or four years older than me stepped forward. One of the two Kiols had been standing with. I looked from one to the other now that I was aware of it, I saw the family resemblance. Admiral Griff’s sons.

Master Fessi drew a deep breath. “Unacceptable, ke’ashj Riori is level eight and the match will be far too uneven.”

“It is my right to pick whom I choose. If she is not up to the fight then she can step down!” he shouted.

“I can fight in your stead.” Master Kjestyll told me. “You are still my student and I am considered responsible for you, I can take the burden for you as the match would be uneven.”

“He can,” Kiol said, “but what he doesn’t tell you is that this would disgrace you both.”

I was starting to get cross. That slow burning anger that simmered in my gut was making itself known. I forced it down. Now was not the time to get angry. I needed to be clear headed. “Fine, fine! I accept the challenge and I accept the substitute combatant but I get to choose the weapons, yes?”

Everyone nodded.

“Combat staves.” I said and there was a collective sucking in of breath.

“I protest!” shouted Kiol.

I smiled. I knew from long talks with Master Kjestyll that the Bunduki arts concentrated on a weaponless style of combat, this is what made it so deadly. Most students did not learn how to fight with weapons unless they branched off into some of the more elite training styles that also taught weapon use. More often than not most students who wanted to learn these elite styles went to swords, it was flashier. Combat staff training was considered archaic and was not often taught. I had been playing with fighting staves for a very long time, they had been Jyrki’s weapon of choice and he had taught me well. I took it from the general reaction that my choice was very unusual. It was the first time since this whole nasty affair had begun that I felt I had an advantage. It wasn’t much. My side ached with what I was sure was a

cracked rib and Riori was not just two levels more experienced than me, but also much larger and stronger physically. This was not going to be fun.

“You can protest all you want ke’ashj Kiol, it is you who have called the Rite of Tet’ and you have requested we all abide by the rules, so then must you. It is her right and she has asked for combat staves. These weapons will be provided and examined by a neutral parties, masters Anadiav and Oskarii have agreed to do this as and act as watchers for the Tet’ match.”

I looked at the two Bunduki Masters who had offered to play chaperone, neither were from the either of the schools involved in this fight. “Do I get time to get ready?” I asked.

“Yes, we begin in an hour from now.” Master Kjestyll said. “Master Fessi will take you to a place where you can prepare and meditate. I will join you in a moment. I must confer with the others about this. This is most unusual.”

I nodded and did not resist Master Fessi’s touch as he led me off to a quiet room off the main hall.

I looked at the Zabradi Master. “Why is this happening? How did this get so complicated?” I asked as he gave me a nutrient bar and handed me a cup of juice.

“I do not know. The Rite of Tet’ has not been used in many decades. It is considered barbaric and out of touch. It was a very old method of sorting out conflicts between two individuals. It was created by the original Followers of Palawa many centuries ago. These boys, they want revenge for something the man you work for supposedly did to their families. They know they could never even hope to come close to Lord Vader and you are, in their eyes, an easy mark. They do not understand that this solves nothing.” He sighed. “You need to concentrate and center.” He told me. “This is not a trial test; this is a fight to the death. Do not focus on the negative or the why. Be the stillness.” He said and I did as he suggested and knelt down to meditate. I heard rather than saw Master Kjestyll enter the room and heard Master Fessi leave. I looked up at my Master and our eyes met.

“I am sorry.” He said. “This should not be happening.”

I shook my head. “I seem to attract the lunatics. It’s as if I am a magnet for insane behaviour and bad things.”

He nodded then said. “Listen to me carefully. This boy you fight is very good, but he does not have the variety of training you have had and he has never sparred with anyone on the level of Lord Vader. He will not think creatively, *he is not a dancer*. In this fight you may use everything you have to survive within the few rules there are. Now, that being said I will tell you this, you are capable of winning, but you must kill him or else you forfeit everything.”

He paused then said slowly, carefully. "If you want to walk away, you may and I shall accept that and all it entails. I will not force you to do something your heart will not allow you to do. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "I do." I said but I wasn't so sure. I did not want to be killed or to kill anyone, least of all someone I didn't know over something I had nothing to do with.

"Meditate, center and find your stillness." He said as he began to put pressure on certain points on my back, releasing the stress and the terrible fear I was starting to feel. I did as he said and delved deep into my center, hoping I would make it through this latest bit of idiocy in one piece.

I walked out into the hall and was assaulted by the utter silence. I felt the anxiety as well as the excitement thick in the air. I took a very deep slow breath and looked at my master who stood at my side. I didn't show it but I was scared but that was not the only emotion I felt, I was also angry.

I took my place in the center of the combat area across from Riori and concentrated on my breathing as Master Anadiav handed us each a combat staff. They were beautiful weapons, carved from dark, heavy hard wood. I tested the weight of mine and studied it carefully, then shook my head. He accepted it back and handed me another one. This time I nodded after, once again inspecting it carefully. There actually wasn't much of a difference between the two but I knew that doing that would put Riori on edge. I could tell that while he was very good in the art of pure Teräs Käsi, he wasn't so comfortable with a staff in his hand. I was pretty sure he had studied sword art instead. Most students were exposed at some point in the training to all the possible weapons forms but few choose to follow any, especially the archaic ones. I owed my love of this form to Jyrki. He had wielded a combat staff with such ease and grace that it was almost dance like. The sudden image of Jyrki as he had been when I had known him on Tatooine made me sad. I swallowed that emotion down. I needed to think clearly not get caught up in self pity and maudlin memories. I didn't play with the staff I just stood waiting calmly for the signal.

"The rules are simple. No other weapons. You can discard the ones you have and fight hand to hand only, if you wish." Master Oskarii said. "This fight is to the death, unless either of you wish to forfeit the match and suffer the consequences only one of you will leave this hall alive. There are no other rules. Do you understand?"

We both said we did.

Riori glanced at his younger brother who nodded. I could feel their anger, sense their hatred but it was unfocused. I looked only at my opponent. He was muscular and well proportioned. He played with the combat staff,

testing it, learning its balance. A weaponless fight would have suited him better. I drew a deep steadying breath. *Focus only on the moment at hand; let nothing distract you from the goal.* Master Kjestyll had said.

Master Anadiav gave the start command and both Riori and I saluted the other with the traditional hand gesture and bow, even here in this arena, some sort of honour was being observed.

We circled around each other, staves held with both hands, defensively. I watched his eyes; he was waiting for me to swing so that he could judge my skill. I twitched the staff in my hands a little making his shift to defend and then swung out at him in the opposite direction. He had to move quickly, awkwardly to block me and the loud crack of wood on wood was like thunder in the silent hall. The first attack made, the first block completed. We circled again this time more aware of the other's gait and stance. He grinned at me.

I moved again, spinning on the spot, swinging my staff around letting it slide through my hand so that as it swung I lengthened the end that would strike him, sweeping low. He did not anticipate this move and the staff caught him on the arm, but he stepped backwards enough that the blow landed softer than I had hoped. I ducked as he swung, and felt the air part as his staff swept over my head. He had put a lot of power behind that blow. There was no sudden stop so his follow through recovery gave me time to get a better grip on my own weapon and ready my stance. I swept low, dropping to a crouch and caught him on the shin knocking him down. He rolled and recovered swiftly, as we had been taught. Use the momentum of the fall to pull you back up.

We moved back and forth, wood smashed against wood and our eyes never left each other. Sweat beaded down my back. I could see it glisten on his face, running in rivulets down the sides of his jaw. We were too well conditioned to be tired, but my muscles were starting to tell me they wanted a rest. From the way he kept flexing his fingers I knew that holding the staff was starting to wear on him, He gripped it too hard, white knuckles showed the strain.

We circled. He grinned. I kept my face emotionless but anger coiled in my belly. I could feel it reaching upwards, testing me, and teasing me. It wanted to be set free.

Let me loose, it whispered, let me loose and let me kill...

I gritted my teeth, shutting the seductive voice in my head out. If I gave into that I might not lose the match but I would lose my soul. Some of this must have shown on my face, Riori snickered and grinned at me, taunting me. I swung at him hard. He was expecting such a move and he countered. The sound of the Kanaka wood smashing together ricocheted around the silent hall. He swung around and used the staff to counter my next move but he was

second too slow and I caught the side of his leg with a glancing blow. So far we were just testing each other. Our moves were guarded and mindful but it was getting tedious. If he hoped to tire me he was failing, instead he was touching that anger I wanted to keep locked away.

Let me go, let me go ... it sang to me.

For a single moment I thought I heard Jyrki's voice in my head and my concentration was, for a second, broken and as he sensed this he came at me in a sudden flurry of motion. I was instantly on the defensive, he was very powerful but as Master Kjestyll had often drilled into my head strength could be turned against its user and I dropped into crouching panthac position and swung at his shins. I connected and he went down but recovered faster than I had hoped to swing about and once again I was on the defensive. I don't know how long we went on like this for, it was probably a lot shorter than it seemed and we were both now sporting what would be some pretty impressive bruises under our clothes. He had good power behind his blows, then again so did I; we just came to it from different places. I twisted from the hips, and he used his upper body strength. I knew that he would tire if he kept that up but it was a common mistake with people not used to swinging a big stick.

I annoyed him when I caught him with a surprise move, one I had learned from Lord Vader and hit him on the back of his thigh. It hurt him and I could see he would now have to favour that leg. But his ire made him fast and I wondered if he was not just the smallest bit Force sensitive and just did not know it.

Anger snaked upwards, it curled its fingers about my belly and I had to swallow to fight it back. It was seductive, and I could feel the power it would give me. *Join with me, let me make you strong...* it was like a lover's touch, that ache of lust. I reached down and caressed it just a little. I felt a renewed strength, half hidden, flood through my limbs and I smiled.

Again we circled. Unlike me, he used his darker emotion easily. It came off him in waves; it made him stronger, impervious to the pain that he must now have felt. He swung at me hard and fast. The terrible sounds of wood against wood, wood against flesh filled the hall. I countered and fought back. I should have been in pain but I didn't feel it.

The anger in my belly became a fire in my heart. *Yes, yes* it sang to me as I tapped into it, just a little, just enough. Momentum helped me shift against gravity as I flipped about and almost caught him on the side of the head with the end of my staff. He saved at the last minute but it cost him, a muscle wrenched trying to absorb the blow. He winced, and then he got angrier.

He came at me furious and with a move I would have considered dirty, had this been a normal bout and managed to catch me left shoulder, thrusting with the end of the staff. I heard the pop before I actually felt it as he

dislocated my shoulder. Pain flared and I gasped with it but had no time to consider what to do about it because he smelled blood and came in for the kill.

I am here, part of you, pain is fleeting anger is strength...

My arm hung wrong and the pain coursed up and down it was exquisite. I gulped air and swallowed the agony down.

I heard master Kjestyll's voice in my mind. "*Pain was a moment, get beyond it.*"

Fury wormed its way upwards. It warmed in my gut. This time I didn't push it away and the joy that coursed through me outweighed the pain.

Yes...yes...

I could fight with one arm if I had to. Sparring with Lord Vader had taught me that. It was a technique I had learned through necessity. I swallowed the misery that wanted to break past my fury, adrenalin made that easier to do and I touched the anger that desperately wanted to break free. It coursed through blood and it gave me strength. While I could fight with one arm not working right, it would be easier if it wasn't hanging like a limp flag. If he caught it with a blow again he could tear it from my body or at least do permanent damage. I caught my breath and in a move that surprised him and everyone else, I threw myself at the floor, praying I got the angle right. My shoulder found its way back into the socket messily, noisily. I cried out in pain and rolled over on to my knees then staggered to my feet. I wasn't sure why he had not attacked me in that moment. Perhaps sheer surprise at what I was doing rendered him momentarily stunned. I would never know. When I turned to face him he was smiling openly. I gave him a tight smile back and focused on breathing which was very hard to do.

I could no longer control how I felt. It was choose between pain or anger and anger won. It turned into a wild fury. I laughed as I let it flow through my limbs, flow through me. I opened up to the universe. The force and my rage collided and began to dance.

He was expecting me to be an easy target because he was higher in the levels than I was and I was now seriously hurt but I had some advantages he didn't know about. I moved slower now more carefully, he could use my pain as a weapon against me and I wanted to avoid that. I watched as he flipped in a spin to whirl around and went to hit me on the head. I had to brace my staff with my body as I dropped into one kneel. The staff took the blow not my head but in crouching on one knee I lost the advantage and when he swung again I wasn't ready. The staff smashing into my right side and broke not only the rib that his brother had cracked earlier on, but two others as well. I think I screamed.

For a moment we eyed each other and he grinned. He was certain he had won, certain I would lose and for the first time I wondered if he was right. Then, he made the worst mistake he possible could right then and there. He

laughed. Like a solar flare, my rage leaped upward and I welcomed its burning warmth. I got up. The pain vanished as I rode the wave of fury. It was my turn to smile and that put Riori off guard. Power rippled about me, power that was deep, dark and seductive, Lord Vader's power. I stopped thinking.

I swung my staff upward, parallel to the floor. Using my body as a brace I pirouetted about, a dance move and I caught his left arm on the elbow. With a terrible sound, the arm broke. I didn't stop as he staggered momentarily shocked by the pain. I coughed and spat blood out of my mouth. I had to end this now or else it was going to end me. I spun around again and swung low catching him on the side of his leg. The crack was loud. He went down on his knees and I kicked him hard in the solar plexus. Watching as he flew backwards and lay winded and momentarily stunned on the mat. My anger sang to me and the force ran with it. I was having a hard time controlling this, I laughed because I liked it even though a part of me knew this was not good, this was not good at all.

I watched for a second or two as Riori struggled to get up but that kick had hurt him and he was struggling to catch his breath. I moved in for the kill. I laid my staff across his throat and braced one end with my knee while applying pressure with my good arm so that I slowly began to crush his neck. The dark anger that writhed in my gut screamed at me to end it now, all it would take is one quick motion and I would walk away the winner, but I hesitated. Somewhere deep inside me a voice that was not mine, a voice I knew only from my dreams, whispered past the fury, past the pain, past the fear. 'No Merlyn, don't'. I looked into Riori's eyes and my anger suddenly receded. His eyes were wide and full of fear. I felt his grief. I understood it. This boy wanted to stop feeling empty. He wanted to find a way beyond his sorrow. He did not want to die and suddenly I didn't want to kill him. My anger screamed at me as the power I had felt stirring my blood into a frenzy slowly receded. Suddenly I had Thrawn's words from almost two years ago whispering in my head.

'Everyone has the capacity to kill, some more so than others. It is a choice many must make on a daily basis, whether they wish to or not, those who choose not to often die because of that decision. But it changes you and it makes you harder, colder in ways you cannot imagine. I am certain that if it came down to the blade's edge and you had no other avenue available, you would choose life over death, there is enough steel in you to do that, but I should hate to see that happen.'

I took as deep a breath as I could without starting cough and I staggered to my feet using the combat staff to brace my weight, shaking my head.

"No." I whispered, "I won't kill him."

There was a stunned silence in the hall as I backed away from Riori who was starting to sit up. He stared at me with a bitterness, a hatred that I didn't

understand. I looked around leaning heavily on my staff and caught sight of Master Kjestyll looking at me. He gave me one of his rare smiles that reached his eyes and then he bowed to me deeply, a sign of great respect. I turned to walk away and Master Oskarii looked at me.

"If you leave this hall with Riori still alive you know what will happen." He said quietly.

I nodded. "I know." I looked over at my Master who just acknowledged with a single slight nod of his head. He knew, he understood and he had accepted it. I think he had expected this from me should I get the upper hand.

I hurt and I wanted to go home. I no longer wanted to be in this place. I straightened up as much as the broken ribs would let me and went to walk out of the hall but a gasp from the crowd and a warning shout from Makki made me turn suddenly to see Riori leaping at me. I didn't think, I just acted, leaning on the staff and using it as a brace, I sprang up with all my power in my legs and just as he reached me I kicked at him with every ounce of strength and force that I could muster. I felt that last flare of anger surge and coupled with the force I caught him squarely on his jaw with such brutality that his head was twisted violently sideways. The sickening sound of his neck snapping was like Tusken gunfire in Beggar's Canyon. We both crumpled to the ground at the same time and as I inhaled a deep, painful breath so he exhaled his last. My staff clattered dully on the floor. I laid my hand on his body but there was nothing, no heart beat, no life force. That last move had done something in my chest and I was having real trouble breathing. I coughed and there was blood, lots of it. I looked around but could not focus on the sea of faces swimming about me. People tried to pull me off Riori's body, I think I was screaming or at least trying to. I had not wanted to kill him. I had not wanted him to die. Pain and fear wrapped around me. I fought against the blood in my lungs, the sensation of drowning from the inside out. The last thing I remembered was hands on my face, my Master's gentle hands, and the sound of his voice but I didn't understand what he was trying to say. The world around me swam and when the blackness came I was grateful.

I was aware of floating and the taste of bacta. I faded in and out of consciousness, in and out of pain and in between I dreamed but I could not remember what the dreams were about. When I surfaced and became aware of where I was I panicked. I had never been submersed in bacta before and even with the face mask and oxygen I felt as though I were drowning. The fluid was thick and viscous. It had a terrible taste and it was everywhere, even in my ears. I flailed and fought against the harness, banging legs, knees, arms, elbows, hands against the sides of the tank, until someone sedated me.

When the bacta had done its job I was taken from the tank and moved to a bed. I slept a lot. Everything hurt. It hurt to breathe, to move, to cough. Every motion brought with it its own variant of agony. I was grateful for the drugs they pumped me with that kept me in a twilight of semi consciousness. I had no idea where I was or what day it was and I didn't care. Slowly the world which had fragmented about me began to piece itself back together again.

They knew I was on the mend when I began insisting that I be allowed to shower and get rid of the last of the sickly bacta stench that seemed to permeate everything. Moving still hurt and I was not that steady on my feet. After an hour they all decided that the only way to shut me up was to either sedate me or let me shower. I was grateful they decided on the latter.

I just stood under the hot water, leaning against the wall while one of the med-tech droids helped me scrub at my skin. Even though the droid was surprisingly gentle, it still hurt to be touched. I looked at the bruises on my body in awe; they were works of art in vibrant colours of purples, blues and greens. When I came back to bed, the IV line still miraculously in my arm, the sheets had been changed and a doctor brandished a powerful sedative my way. I didn't argue, sleep was a welcome escape from the lingering pain and the fragmented memory of what had put me in this unnamed medical lab in the first place.

When I woke again, I had no idea how much time had passed but it was early dawn. My mouth was dry and my throat hurt. I could not recall the last time I had had anything to drink. I glanced at my hand, the IV line was gone and a bruise was the only tell tale sign of where the needle had been. I came back into the world slowly and only after a bit did I realize I was not alone in the room. I turned my head to look beside the bed. He was lounging in the uncomfortable chair, with his long legs stretched out in front of him, one leg crossed over the other, his arms folded across his chest. He was still in uniform but he had removed the jacket. His eyes were closed but he wasn't asleep. I moved and that brought him back to the world. He opened his eyes and turned to look at me.

"Welcome back to the land of the living." Thrawn said. He got up and filled a glass of water from the jug on the nearby table. He placed a hand at my back, helping me as I sat up. I took the cup he offered, sipping the water slowly.

"Why is it, Miss Gabriel, that I seem to spend so much time watching you recover from grievous bodily harm in a hospital bed?" he asked setting back down in the chair that was right beside the bed. I searched for anger in his voice but there was none. He just sounded weary.

"You have lousy timing?" I asked. He just shook his head slightly. He did not appreciate the joke. "You appear to attract trouble and brutality the way light attracts moths and ships attract mynocks."

I handed him back the empty cup, which he set on the table. "It's not what you think." I told him. "Lord Vader didn't do this."

He arched an eyebrow. "I am well aware of that." He said tartly.

I lay back down with a sigh. I wasn't in the mood to fence words with him. "When did you get back?"

"Very late last night or very early this morning, depending on your point of view."

"Where is here?" I asked realizing I had no idea where I actually was and had never bothered to ask.

"One of the smaller medical facilities in the Palace." He replied.

"I have no idea how I got to this place." I said.

"No, I do not imagine you would." he said. "You were in particularly bad shape."

My fingers touched the ribs that had been broken, they were still tender and my shoulder ached. "Still hurts."

He nodded. "Bacta is a medical wonder but some things still require time and rest to heal, especially broken bones. How do you feel?"

I pursed my lips. How did I feel? I was not quite certain how to answer that. "I killed someone." I said. "I don't know how I feel yet." If I closed my eyes I could still hear that sickening crack in my mind as my foot connected with Riori's head.

Thrawn leaned forward in the chair and studied my face carefully. "As I heard it," he said evenly. "You walked away from the chance to end the boy's life and it was he who gave you no choice. You showed incredible restraint and mercy. He forced your hand. You took his life out of self defence and not out of blood lust."

I sighed. I wasn't up for debating this. "How do you know what happened?"

"I had the honour of meeting Taisto Kjestyll when I arrived here." He said.

"How is he?"

"Concerned for his student, relieved that you will live and angry at the situation which took place." He told me simply.

"It wasn't his fault." I said. "No one could have seen this coming." I sighed.

"Perhaps...." He said cryptically.

This was not how I had envisioned seeing him again, not how I had imagined welcoming him back. Instead of wearing something pretty, making cheerful banter and being happy, I was laid up in a hospital bed, I looked like hell and I felt tainted some how, ashamed but not for any reason I could put my finger on. I had touched a darkness inside of me and what scared me more

was I had liked it. Part of me wanted to tell Thrawn to go away and leave me alone. I sighed and closed my eyes.

“The doctor informed me that you might be able to leave at the end of the week.” He said after a moment’s pause. He was making small talk and slowly I realised that he was at a loss for words. He didn’t have to be here, he could have just returned from space to his Coruscant apartment but instead he had come straight here and was sitting by my bed in an uncomfortable chair waiting for me to open my eyes. This realization made my heart ache. I looked up into his face and found him staring at me intently. For the first time since I had woken, I met his gaze.

“It’s good to see you again. I’m glad you are back.” I said and I meant it. “How did you know I was here?”

“Word gets around.” He said vaguely. “You’ve managed to become the topic for gossip in certain Imperial circles.”

I laughed a little and then regretted it. It hurt to laugh, it hurt to move. “I don’t remember much of what happened after the fight ended. Riori came after me, even though I had backed down. He won and he still came after me.” I shook my head.

“He didn’t want to win, from what I heard, he just wanted vengeance.”

“It’s all a bit of a blur” I said.

“Not surprising with the injuries you sustained. You have a bad habit of giving people who care for you something to worry about.” He said.

“I’m sorry, that’s not really my intention.” I spoke softly. “I hadn’t planned on any of this.” I felt tears building up in my eyes.

“No, I don’t suppose you did, s’jiu tekari.” He smiled a little and reached over to caress my cheek with the backs of his fingers and then absently moved a stray lock of hair from my face. True to form my eyes started to leak, just a little. “You can be such a distraction.” He told me quietly, with a subtle shake of his head. He stroked away the escaping tears with his fingertips.

“Is that good or bad?” I asked, falling into a familiar pattern of it. His hand was warm on my skin and his touch reminded me of goodness, of kindness and other things I had forgotten about. I reached up and brushed his fingers with my hand and he took it gently in his own.

“I’ll let you know, when you are fit enough to handle the stress.” He said with a slight smile.

I nodded and closed my eyes. I was still so tired. He sat back, withdrawing his hand from mine. I heard him settle back into the chair and draw a deep, thoughtful breath. If there was more conversation I didn’t hear it because sleep got the better of me. When I woke up he was gone with no sign that he had ever been there at all. I wondered if I had dreamed the whole thing. I didn’t feel any better, I just felt empty.

When they finally let me out of the small clinic that was tucked away in the confines of the palace to go back home I was almost jumping for joy. There was nothing I hated more than being cooped up in a med lab facility. The smell of bacta permeated everything, not to mention the cleaning solutions and the medical droids. Even though the small palace facility had been quiet and I had been given a little private room all to myself it was still not the greatest place in the galaxy to be.

Despite my very loud protests I had been taken back to my flat in a repulsor chair, and two of the med-tech aides had come along to carry all the flowers and holo cards that I had been sent during my recovery. I was grateful when everyone left the flat and me alone. It felt odd to be back but I was glad of peace and quiet.

The bacta had done its job healing the worst of the broken bones and internal injuries. The bruising had mostly faded to a sickly purple-yellow colour and I winced just looking at it. My ribs were still tender and my left arm and shoulder were immobilized by a contraption that I was convinced had been invented for torture. I was under doctor’s orders to rest for at least two weeks and despite my desire to get back to a normal life I was grateful. I had damaged the bone around my left shoulder socket when I had popped the arm back in place. Chipped and cracked, the doctor had said giving me a disapproving look. Torn the ligaments as well, so it hurt, a lot. The doctor had prescribed pain killers but I didn’t take them unless I could not bear the pain. They made me stupid, dopey and slow witted.

I was supposed to rest and stay quiet but that didn’t mean that everyone else had to and on my third day home Shiv dropped by with a bunch of bad holo films and take out food. He had been horrified to learn what had happened and was even more annoyed that visitors had not been allowed into the medical facility to see me. It had been a nice evening of the best food I had tasted since before the fight and probably the worst but funniest holos I had seen in a while. Laughing had hurt but it had been worth it.

The day after Shiv’s visit I was surprised when Makki who dropped by later on. He stood sheepishly at my doorstep holding a bouquet of flowers and a holo-card everyone had signed. I invited him in and at first the conversation was awkward, stilted until he burst out with, “You fight like a crazy person, do you know that?”

That had made me laugh which had hurt my ribs which had made us both laugh more. He had stayed for tea and once the awkwardness had passed he proceeded to tell me all about the fight I had been a part of as though he were describing a holo vid to me. It was strange and surreal but also interesting.

“I guess all that training with Lord Vader paid off, huh?” he asked.

I shrugged with my good shoulder. "Maybe. I wish it had never happened though."

"Never killed anyone before, huh?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, why have you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, shortly after my graduation from the Academy, I did a rotation in riot control. Out on one of the mid rim planets, things got out of hand and it got bad. Three of the guys in my platoon were killed and I don't know how many of the rioters were taken out but I know some of them I killed." He shrugged. "It's not the same thing as hand to hand, I guess, but it sure didn't feel great."

"Killing is killing." I told him. He had just nodded. We drank our tea in silence for a few moments before he brushed that mournful topic aside and began to chatter about other things.

I was surprised at the number of get well cards and flowers that were delivered. Even Cati sent a little note but the one person I wanted to hear from was non-existent. I was becoming more and more convinced that Thrawn's visit in the hospital was nothing more than a fever dream I conjured myself. I missed him terribly.

One week after I had come back home, early in the evening, my doorbell rang. My heart took a little leap because I figured it was probably Thrawn and half expected to see a glass or something equally obscure sitting on the door mat, instead when I opened the door I stared into the eyes of my master.

"I hope that I am not disturbing you, ke'ashj Merlyn." He said. He held a large flat box in his arms.

"Of course not." I stepped aside and invited him into my flat, closing the door after him.

"May I offer you some tea, master Kjestyll?"

"That would be most welcome." He said.

"Please sit down anywhere you can find space, I'm sorry it's a bit of a mess." I said as I went to boil water.

I had never known anyone who could sit as still as my master and when I brought in the tray of tea things it was almost as though he were made from stone. He watched as I poured his cup first and waited until I had poured mine, then accepted the cup I held out to him. The fragrance of mint filled the air and I waited until my guest had sipped his tea first before sipping my own.

"Tatooine mint tea." He said with a smile. "It has been a long time since I have tasted this. It brings back good memories."

"My father sends it to me." I said. "I'd miss it."

Master Kjestyll nodded. "Things which remind us of home are precious." He said. "I expect you are curious at my reason for disturbing your rest."

"Your visit is not a disturbance but I am curious." I answered. He smiled.

He drew a deep breath. "I have come for several reasons. The first is I wished to see with my own eyes that you are recovering."

"I am, thank you, although slower than I'd like." I admitted.

He nodded. "You have a strong will to live, but the body needs time." He said. "Secondly, I came because I wished to apologise for what happened...."

I went to protest that it wasn't his fault but he held up his hand. "Please allow me to finish."

I nodded and waited.

"The Rite of Tet'zais-tjumei is an ancient tradition of the Bunduki arts that was brought about as a way to settle conflict between two parties when there were no more options for resolutions left. It was created during a time of great unrest and violence and written in the Palawa Laws as a last resort method of conflict. The Rite of Tet' is hundreds of years old and for the longest time had passed into memory and history, unused and almost forgotten. It was rarely used because of the dire consequences and results. In my life time I had only seen it called once, until now."

I sighed.

"It was strange that these students knew of the Rite of Tet'. It is never spoken of and never taught. For decades now it has been thought lost. Perhaps that was our failing as Masters; we did not think to remember that such a thing existed. We have better ways of solving disputes than death matches." He sipped his tea. "You should be made aware that after this incident, the council of masters has agreed to remove the Rite of Tet'zais-tjumei from the Bunduki laws. Its use will be forbidden. It is unfortunate that it took this event to push us into an action we should have taken years ago, but sometimes we are slow to undo tradition and like to believe that sleeping dogs will stay asleep."

He set his empty cup down and nodded when I offered to pour a second cup. After a moment of silence he continued.

"I and the masters who were at the trials have questioned Kiol Griff about his actions and we learned that it was more or less his older brother's idea. Riori had planned the whole event, including bribing the person responsible for pairing the students together so that Kiol would be paired with you."

"Why?" I asked, interrupting.

Master Kjestyll drew a deep steady breath. "Kiol told us that his family blamed Lord Vader for the death of his father, you know this already. They were furious and devastated, as you can well imagine, at the loss of their father and they had petitioned the Emperor to punish Lord Vader for his part in the tragedy."

I opened my mouth to protest but Master Kjestyll cut me off. "I am aware of the situation that occurred and where the blame actually lies is of no interest to me." He said. "The end result is the same; the Griff sons wished for retribution and after going through all the appropriate channels decided to follow a more unusual route. They learned from the Emperor, who had paid the family a visit after the memorial service, of the Bunduki trials and that you would be attending. I am unsure exactly how talk on the subject came about but given that the boys have been studying the Bunduki arts since they were very young, I think we can assume it was simply part of the conversation. The Emperor likes to be kept well informed about everything and if he took time out of his busy schedule to pay his respects to the family he would have known all there was to know about them. I can only surmise that it was after they learned who you were and that you would also be at the trials that they went about formulating their plan."

My mind reeled. The Emperor. Why was it that when ever I seemed to end up on the wrong side of someone's stick, his name was almost always attached to it somehow?

"Kiol told us that Riori had researched you, asked questions to students who had contacts in the Palpatine School. He was convinced that you were a lesser opponent. In many respects he was right, you began your training very late, and your skills in certain areas is less refined than perhaps it could be but he was gravely mistaken to think that you would be easy to kill. They did not anticipate your skill with a combat staff, or that you would even choose such a weapon. They, of course did not know you are also a force user and they had no way of knowing that you are often tested and tried under the hand of Lord Vader."

He paused and sipped at the tea. "The boys hoped for revenge, they had hoped to hurt Lord Vader by killing you, instead they compounded their family's tragedy. Kiol has been removed from the Corellian school for his part in this incident. He will no longer be taught the Bunduki arts by a recognized trainer or master. It is he who is to be shunned. The youngest of Griff's sons had no active part in this so he will be allowed to continue his training but that will be difficult I fear. He must live with the shame his brothers have brought down upon their family, and I do not think he will remain at the school long." He paused. "Kiol was at a loss to understand why you walked away from ending the fight the way it should have been ended, he did not understand why you did not kill his brother when you first had the chance."

I looked at my Master. "I did not want to kill him."

He nodded. "I watched your face. I watched you struggle. You fought not only Riori but also yourself. Your powers grow but so too does the conflict within you."

I shook my head. "Why did he not accept that he had won?" I asked after a while.

"Because by walking away, by letting him live it was not he who had won the fight but you. Riori had built you up to be an extension of Lord Vader in his mind and when you proved him wrong he could not bear it."

I felt tears well up in my eyes and I fought them. "Stupid waste of life." I spat angrily.

He agreed with a nod. "You fought well, child. I was proud of you and the choices you made, which brings me to the third reason I came here. Three days ago, the masters and I had a conference and they have informed me that they wish to award you this." He handed me the flat box to open. "I am in agreement with them." He said.

I took the box from his hands and unwrapped the elegant paper, opening it to find a green coloured kej-ji'doh. I lifted it out of the box in awe. "You fought with much honour and with skill far beyond your given level. I know that you held back on applying the lessons Lord Vader has been sharing with you as well as using your unique gifts. You are a good student, ke'ashj Merlyn. You deserve this."

I looked at the kej-ji'doh in awe. This meant I was being stepped upto level seven. I had not heard of this sort of thing ever happening before and was a little overwhelmed by it. "Thank you." I said after a few moments.

"There is something you wish to ask?" he asked watching my face.

I nodded. "I wanted to know if it would be possible to perhaps train with the other students from time to time. I had no idea what I was missing by being trained alone."

He grinned. "It is already something that is being arranged. I have spoken of this with the Emperor and Lord Vader."

"Does the Emperor know what happened at the trials?" I asked.

"I do not believe that there is much the Emperor does not know, child. I suspect that Lord Vader informed him of what have taken place after his visit to you in the medical facility."

I looked at Master Kjestyll in surprise. "Lord Vader came to the hospital?"

He nodded. "He arrived back from space the morning after the trials. He contacted the school, I presume to see how well you performed. He was told by master Fessi where you were and informed about what had taken place. He was not pleased."

"He's never pleased." I said with a sigh.

"He ordered you to be moved from the med-lab where you had been taken for emergency treatment. It was his personal medical facility you were transferred to. You were given the best care possible; probably it saved your life. There was a lot of internal damage and you did not do yourself any

favours when you so violently relocated your shoulder. I am told you damaged the socket bone badly. There was some serious reconstruction work required. We will be doing much in the way of rehabilitation work before we can resume your training. I am quite sure that shoulder hurts far more than you are willing to admit.”

I looked at my arm in the tight sling to keep it and my shoulder joint from moving at all. He was right, it did. It hurt with a ferocity that was almost unbearable at times. The pain medication worked when I actually took but I was scared to take more. In the back of my head I was afraid that if Jyrki came back I would be too stupid to do anything about it.

“I am told you will have to rest at least another week, perhaps two and that your next check up is in two days time.” He said. “So, we will meet the week after next for breathing and relaxation techniques. Now that, for the time being, you are not so mobile I think it is the perfect opportunity for you to learn stillness. After that brace comes off, we can start to build up strength in your arm once more.”

I made a face. The regular check up and prodding schedule that had been set up by the doctor who had over seen my recovery rankled on my nerves. It had meant that I would be spending a lot more time than I liked being examined and poked at by medical droids and the doctor. He had let me return to my own flat reluctantly on the insistence that I adhere to a strict regime of rest. If something were to happen to my recovery it would be his hide not mine he had told me crossly. I had not been the best of patients. It hadn't occurred to ask what he had meant but now I had a better idea. I could not imagine for a moment that being Lord Vader's personal medical team was a happy job, although the gruff doctor seemed quite capable of taking what ever got tossed his way. He was a very no nonsense sort of man. He reminded me a great deal of Doctor Thracer, the one who had saved my life on board the Vengeance. I had been glad to hear from Thrawn that the doctor had survived the ship's destruction but Thrawn had been very uninformative on what Doctor Thracer was doing now. I hadn't pushed the issue. I was just glad the man was alive.

I poured more tea and then sat back in the chair, running my hand through my hair which I had not bothered to put up. Using Zenji sticks required two hands. It was all I could do at the moment to keep it clean and brushed out. Even so it was long and tangled easily.

“How have you been coping with what happened?” Master Kjestyll asked breaking me out of my thoughts.

“I haven't.” I told him. “I try not to think about it to be honest. I tell myself that it was unavoidable and not my fault, but somehow those lies don't really work.”

“Yet those simple facts are the truth.” He said gently.

I nodded. “I don't know what to think or how to begin to sort out how I feel. Perhaps if this had happened two years, I would be more of a mess, but now I am just sort of numb and sad that it happened at all. I am also glad to be alive, but I feel as though it was a trade off, a piece of my soul for the right to still breathe and I don't know what to think about that. I don't remember much about the actual killing and I think that's a blessing, surprisingly enough I don't even dream about it. I still have nightmares about being held captive by Jyrki, but not about killing Riori, it doesn't make sense.”

Master Kjestyll watched me carefully. “That is not such a surprise,” he said. “You knew Jyrki Andando; you did not know the sons of Admiral Griff. Theirs was not a betrayal of your heart, his was.”

“Perhaps.” I said. “Or perhaps part of me just doesn't care much any more.”

He looked at me for a long time then said. “I do not believe that is the case.”

I sighed. “I thought I would feel more some how, worse, but mostly I feel nothing.”

He nodded. “Give it time.”

I stifled a yawn. I was surprisingly tired.

Master Kjestyll smiled and got up. “You must rest and I have stayed too long already. I will be in touch. We will have much work to do.” He said pointing at my aching shoulder. Then, looking at the new Khaji-dho which I held on my lap, he said. “Wear that with pride. You earned it, it was not a gift.”

I saw him to the door and nodded at his words. “Thank you for coming, master.” I said.

He looked at me for a moment. “If you should need me, contact me.” He said.

I nodded.

“And thank you for the tea, it was very good.” He added and he bowed.

I returned his bow and watched as he left my flat. I cleared up the tea things and went back into the living room. I found myself staring out of the window at the Jedi temple in the distance. So many unanswered questions rattled about in my head and now there was that niggling sensation of something else. I sighed loudly as I thought about the Emperor visiting the Griff family and then suddenly the whole series of events at the Bunduki trials. While nothing supported any evidence that he was behind it, I knew in my heart that somehow he had set the wheels in motion. Perhaps planted the idea in Riori's mind, mentioned how things used to be done. It would have been nothing big or obvious, just enough of a hint here and the right word there. The question was why? Did he want me dead? Or did he want something else? Or was he, as Lord Vader had once said, just testing me and if so why?? What

ever the reason it gnawed at me and for the first time since the fight I felt that nasty little worm of anger wriggle in my gut.

With the latest version of Cynabar's Droid Datalogue in my hands I made my way into the office despite the fact that I was supposed to be under strict *'stay at home'* and rest orders. I was bored of sitting at home doing everything except look at the holocron cubes uncle Vahlek had taken from the Jedi Temple. It wasn't as if sitting at my desk was stressful or strenuous and there at least I could get something constructive done. I greeted my droid and made spiced coffee and as I sat at my desk reading through the pile of internal memos and news-reports I was grateful that some things never changed.

I was in the middle of reading a report on the latest terrorist attacks by the Justice Action Network. They had sabotaged and destroyed the Calabar Queen, a yacht from the Imperial Corusca line when Lord Vader marched in.

"You are not supposed to be here." He said with his usual cheer.

"I was bored." I replied. "Why are you here, I thought you were not due back on planet for another three days or so."

He looked at me and then said. "I am saving you from your boredom." He said. "I have a list of things that need updating and sorting out." He handed me a data file.

I skimmed through it and nodded.

"I take it since you are here, you feel up to doing some work." Which was Vader speak for *'you seem to be recovering'*.

"Yes, I am feeling much better thank you, though my shoulder still hurts like hell. Master Kjestyll thinks that with serious work it will heal well enough..."

He waved a hand at me. "Enough babble, a simple yes or no would suffice." He said. "I require the new probe droids as soon as possible, no later than the end of the week. The rest you may accomplish as you see fit. I will not be on planet long, so if you want to reach me do it via the 'net.'" He said.

"Yes, my lord." I said looking at the data pad again.

"I was supposed to meet with Xizor tomorrow afternoon, you will cancel that." He added.

"Yes, my lord."

"Oh and do not bother to send me the schedule for Winter Fete when it crosses your desk. I have no intention of being here for it. If you wish to attend that nonsense you may do so at your discretion."

"Yes, my lord, thank you."

"And there will be a public unveiling of the Flag ship, the *Executor* scheduled some time soon, make certain that my calendar is cleared for this

event and you will also be attending. Dress appropriately. The details will be sent to you." He paced as he spoke.

"Yes, my lord, as you wish."

"My personal physician has informed me of your recovery status; while I understand your need to work, you are of little use to me lying in my personal med lab."

"Understood. I won't over do it."

He stopped pacing long enough to stand, hands clasped behind his back, to stare out of the window. "Your master informed me that you fought very well at the trials as well as against the boy you killed."

"Killing him wasn't on my list of things to do, you know." I snapped then clapped a hand over my mouth.

"Perhaps not but it was an inevitable conclusion to the challenge issued, was it not?"

"Well, it was either him or me." I said sipping at my coffee.

"Master Kjestyll tells me that you surpassed your level trial and were elevated two levels above your previous one."

I nodded.

"You did not disappoint me." He said. This was Vader speak for *'I am pleased with your performance so I think I will let you live another day.'* He whirled around and strode over to the desk. His cloak flared impressively behind him and I was sure he did this just for effect. "Follow me." He said making a 'come here' motion with his hand and before I could even think to question him he was on his way out of the office.

I did as he had commanded and followed him. I had to trot to keep up. He made his way down the hallway, into the older part of the Palace, past where my flat was, turned left and continued down one of the smaller hallways until he reached a set of double doors. He opened the room up and much to my surprise he let me walk in first. I gasped out loud when I saw what was in there.

"You have proven your abilities; it was about time you had a proper place to train." He said.

I looked around the room. It was amazing. This had been an unused meeting room at one time; I had explored it almost two years ago. Now it had been transformed into a beautiful training room, complete with a sprung floor, a barre and full length mirrors along the wall kitty corner from the stunning, tall windows that over looked the north face of the city. Against the other wall was a weapons stand with two of the most beautiful combat staves I had ever seen. I had no idea what to say. For once he had rendered me speechless.

“It has been suggested that you should start training with others of your class, to do so in the old room you usually work in would be a disgrace and reflect badly on me. You will use this room from now on.” He said.

I just looked at him and nodded. Had he been anyone else I probably would have hugged them in delight but hugging Lord Vader was not something I ever wanted to even think about attempting. So instead I mentally sent him a telepathic *thank you*. He got the message.

“Perhaps if I have time, when you are fit I shall train with you myself and see just how far along you have come.” He told me. “Now, you have work to do, do you not?”

“Yes, my lord.” I grinned. My grin broadened into a huge smile when he handed me the key to the room. He just shook his head and stalked out of the room leaving me to lock the door and head back to my office.

The next hour or so was spent cancelling Lord Vader’s meeting with Prince Xizor, the prince’s office wasn’t impressed and the woman I spoke with was just plain rude. That didn’t bother me much, when one works with Lord Vader rude becomes a way of life.

The droid manufacturer was a bit testy. It wasn’t the number of probe droids being ordered that put him in a tizzy but rather the when they had to be delivered. He was quick to shut up when I reminded him about the money he stood to lose should Lord Vader take his business some place else...I didn’t have to mention that he might also forfeit his life.

I was about half way through Lord Vader’s list and on my third cup of spiced coffee when the door to my office opened and Thrawn walked in. My heart caught in my chest and I felt a jolt of electricity shoot through me, as though I had suddenly walked between two power couplings. Apart from his brief visit to my bed-side in the med lab, I had not seen him in well over a year. He had not changed. He was still tall and slender and moved with a languid, jax like grace. It had been a while since his hair had been cut severely short and I liked the length it was now, it made his face less hard looking. He smiled as the door closed behind him.

“I thought you were under strict orders to rest?” he said sitting down in the chair nearest the desk.

“I am.” I said, suddenly realising why he had not come to visit me before now. I tried to contain my delight at seeing him and failed miserably.

He glanced around. “This is your office, not your flat.” He said.

“I see your time in the unknown regions has not lessened your powers of observation any.”

“And your time in the bacta tank has not dulled your sharp tongue.” He crossed one leg over the other and folded his hands on his lap. His expression was that of a man thoroughly enjoying himself.

“Well, while bacta is a wonder it unfortunately cannot fix all ills.” I told him, sipping my coffee.

“So, my dear, why are you not resting at home?” he asked.

“Because I was bored out of my mind and it’s not as if there is a big difference in sitting at home or sitting here.” I told him. “Except that here I get to talk to people and barked at by Lord Vader. So far it’s been a good day; he’s kept his barking to a minimum.” I said.

“Have you eaten yet?” he asked.

I shook my head and glanced at the chrono to see what time it was. “Actually, I haven’t even thought about it.” It was later than I had thought and I realised that I was hungry.

“In accordance with your doctor’s orders, I hereby declare you are now done for the day and you will now accompany me to a late lunch or an early dinner.” He said standing up.

“Well, it needs to be something I can eat with one hand; I am a bit tied up at the moment.” I motioned my head at the sling holding my arm firmly against my chest, which was hidden by my top.

“I think something suitable can be arranged.” He said, waiting for me to shut the computers down and sort out my desk.

“I should go home and change if we are going out.” I said. I was wearing a pair of comfortable wide legged trousers and a roomy, square cut top that went over the trussed up arm easily. I could not move that arm to get in and out of sleeves very well.

“You look fine. We won’t be going any where fancy. A little trust Miss Gabriel.” He smiled.

With nothing else keeping me at my desk I got up and joined him. With a hand warm on my back, he escorted me out of the office, out of the palace to his waiting vehicle. We didn’t speak as he drove away from the Palace and as we neared our destination I smiled.

“We’re eating at your place?” I asked as the speeder came to a stop at the personal landing pad.

He smiled as he got out and was at my side before I could even open the door. I slipped my hand in his and he helped me out of the vehicle. “I want to get out of my uniform and then we can discuss where and what to eat.”

“Ah.” I nodded as we walked into his flat. It had been ages since I was last here. It was a stunning apartment, high up in the Coruscant skyline with lots of space and light. It was tastefully decorated with elegant furniture and beautiful works of art. I smiled as I saw the ma’arilite sculpture that I loved so much.

“I’ll just be a moment, make yourself comfortable.” He said as he vanished into another room.

I wandered around, looking at the artwork and the stone sculpture. I moved around it, captivated by the shifting lights that danced within the stone. His flat smelled of a wonderful mixture of spices, some exotic soap and something indefinable. I was studying his book collection when he reappeared. Instead of the olive Imperial uniform he had been wearing he was dressed in casual black dress slacks and a long sleeved, form fitting crew necked shirt. I knew we were not going out to lunch because his feet were bare. I gave him a smile, he looked good in black.

“Find anything interesting?” he asked, nodding at the book shelf.

I shook my head. “Was just skimming.” I said. He made my stomach flutter. I was trying not to show the nerves that suddenly rippled through me and I felt almost as though I could not breathe. I just stood there, looking at him. He motioned for me to come to where he was standing.

“How is the arm?” he asked as I stood in front of him, my heart pounding, my mouth dry.

“Healing, slowly.” I mumbled. I didn’t want to talk about it. Two fingertips lifted my face upward to look at him.

“I did not expect to find you in a hospital when I returned.” He told me. There was a catch in his voice.

“Well, it wasn’t really my plan to be there.” I said.

“No I don’t suppose it was.” He said quietly and reached over to brush a lock of hair from my face. I had not bothered to tie my hair up; I needed two hands for that.

I wondered if the world had stopped, after all this time apart, he could still make my hands tremble, my heart race. I leaned into his touch with a sigh and perhaps that was the signal he had been waiting for because he pulled me to him and held me as tightly as he dared without hurting me. He buried his face in my hair and inhaled. I felt rather than knew what was on his mind but he didn’t want to say these thoughts out loud and I understood this because I didn’t either. There were no words adequate enough to describe the sensation of just being held. All the letters in the universe could not come close to the reality of it. I just closed my eyes and breathed him in deeply. *Home*, his scent, his arms, and his warmth it all reminded me of home. He let go of me just enough so that I could look up into his eyes, so that he could cradle my face in his hands. He looked tired, just a little, and there was a weariness about his eyes that I didn’t remember from the last time we had been together. My gaze never wavered when I met his glowing, red stare. If passion was a stillness then we had enough for the whole galaxy as we stood there looking at one another without words. It was if the entire galaxy was holding its breath, waiting. I hated waiting.

“I think this is the part where you kiss me now.” I prompted for lack of anything else to say.

He did. Carefully, gently, completely as though in the time we had been apart he had forgotten what I tasted like, what I felt like. Home, I thought as I lost myself to his kiss. I slipped my arm around his waist and held on to him as tightly as I could. Words that had never been spoken rattled through my brain wanting to escape, wanting to be heard. I bit them back and answered his passion with my own. This wordless conversation was eloquent and fulfilling. I had missed him, missed this. Warm and sweet, he tasted of everything good.

Before desire took over completely, he drew back from me. I dropped my head down to rest it against his chest, concentrating on catching my breath. He stroked the tangles from my hair and didn’t fight when I pulled away from his warmth. There was no doubt about the fact that we complicated each other’s lives and while I could not speak for him I knew that in some indefinable way he also completed mine. I just wasn’t sure how.

“Welcome back to Coruscant.” I said looking up at him.

He smiled as he caressed my face. “If that is the sort of welcome I am going to receive when I go away I shall do so more often.”

“Don’t you dare!” I said crossly. “My hand is still recovering from having to write all those letters!”

He laughed and pulled me to him again, forgetting my arm in the sling so that I yelped when it bumped hard against his chest. He apologised and stepped back. “How long before you are free of the brace?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, at least a few more days. The shoulder is really messed up.”

He nodded not saying what he really wanted to say in favour of keeping the mood light. “It does make pre emptive strikes against teasing a little difficult.” He said, “The plan was to seduce you, not hurt you.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Well, seduction sounds like fun but lunch is a necessity. I’m hungry, what were you planning on making?”

“I thought we’d order in, I know a great Zabracki place that delivers. Very spicy.” He said.

“That sounds wonderful, I love spicy food. Traditional Tatooine cuisine is very hot.”

He picked up a menu and handed it to me as I sat on the couch. I had never eaten Zabracki food before so after reading through the list of offered dishes a few times I gave up and handed it back to him. “You pick.” I said. “What about something to drink?”

“I thought I would surprise you.” He said.

“And then?”

“That’s a surprise as well.” He said, “But you are under doctor’s orders to rest so it’s nothing strenuous.” He took the menu from my hand and then

placed the food order. Once that was done he vanished into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of a deep burgundy wine.

I took the glass he offered. He touched his to mine and I whispered the Cheunh toast. I sipped it and marvelled at its rich, deep flavour.

“Chall berry wine from Naboo.” He said. “I keep a good supply in the wine cellar; this was a very good year.”

“You have a wine cellar?” I asked looking at him over the rim of the huge bowl glass.

He smiled. “Doesn’t every well bred alien?”

I shrugged with one shoulder. “I don’t know. I am not on such close personal terms with too many well bred aliens.” I gave him a look.

“Careful, Miss Gabriel the evening is still young.” He warned.

You don’t scare me!” I told him.

“Oh?”

“Okay, maybe just a little.” I said. “But in a good sort of way not a Jyrki-Vader sort of way.”

He had to turn away from me because he’d almost choked on the sip of wine he was taking. I guess it would have been undignified to see him splutter wine everywhere. Drinking and laughing at the same time didn’t really work.

The food, when it arrived, was delicious and spicy. We ate slowly, catching each other up on the news and the details that somehow had not found their way into our letters. Thrawn spoke in his native language and I attempted. Writing in Cheunh was one thing, but speaking it aloud was quite another. More than once he ended up laughing at something funny I had not meant to say, but practice with a native speaker was priceless and there wasn’t an abundance of Chiss around so I didn’t let my embarrassment at making mistakes stop me. As was tradition, we kept the conversation at the dining table light but when we moved back into the living room, wine glasses in hand, we began to talk of more pressing, serious issues.

He asked about the Bunduki fight and I told him everything I remembered, then I told him what master Kjestyll had told me. He was quiet and thoughtful as I spoke about my fears, my suspicions about the Emperor’s interference. He reached over and stroked my cheek when I recalled, haltingly about the actual moment when I killed Riori. I told him how I felt about it all, because I knew he would ask and when I was finished he just nodded. I didn’t feel much like getting into a huge discussion about it, there wasn’t much to discuss so I asked him about his time in the Unknown Regions, changing the topic. He didn’t mind.

He refilled the glasses and took a thoughtful sip. “We are setting up small bases out there. Enlisting other worlds not wholly associated with the

Galactic Empire to be a part of it. It is easier to convince these worlds, these people’s to be a part of this Empire without actually enforcing all of the bureaucratic nonsense or that ridiculous Tarkin Doctrine because it is all so far away from the Core. We provide the security and stability of the Imperial world without the restrictions that will eventually bring about this Empire’s downfall.” He said candidly. “Of course, I tell you this in confidence.” He added.

“I understand.” I told him. “And what would I say to anyone else anyway? The gossip around the court is that you get sent away in disgrace because you over step your place with the Emperor one too many times.” I said. “It’s not my place to correct these idiots.”

He nodded. “That is the idea. The less people actually know about what I am doing, the better. The xenophobia of this empire is a major handicap to its growth, so the fact that we have contact and work with many alien species would not be welcome. Plus the megalomania and interference of the Emperor himself is something that we avoid due to the distance. As long as the reports are positive and the numbers add up, Palpatine doesn’t much care what goes on so far away provided it is not a threat to his seat of power. The original idea stemmed from possible enemies that could come from beyond the boundaries of this galaxy, Far Outsiders, my people call them but this project has grown into something else, something larger more encompassing. I must admit I am quite pleased with its progress so far.”

“How long are you staying here, then? In the Core, I mean?” I asked.

He shrugged slightly. “Difficult to say. I have business here at the moment and much to discuss and plan with the Emperor. While I have managed to accomplish a great deal in the time so far, there is still much more to be done. I have need of certain facilities and technologies which I have yet to convince the Emperor of, as well as the need for more man power and ships. All these things cost money and must be budgeted for in such a way that the rest of the High Command does not suspect what is actually going on. If the council of Grand Admirals were to find out the real truth behind my mission in the Unknown Regions it would spell disaster for the project. Their jealousies and petty grabs for power would come into play and they would see my work as an attempt to thwart the current regime or that I was trying to create my own empire and eventually over throw this one. A ridiculous notion, I no more want to rule an Empire than I wish to go nude sun bathing in the Dune Sea on your home world.”

I giggled at his last sentence; the image was just too funny. He just smiled and topped up the wine glasses with the last of the bottle.

“What is it like out there, so far away from the Core?” I asked.

He drew a deep breath. “Worlds are further apart, there is less trade and commerce and beings generally tend to keep themselves to themselves with a

few exceptions. The Chiss Ascendancy is out there but, as I have explained, we are a cautious people so our space expansion is long term and progresses slowly. It is not the Chiss way to go in and conquer any one. The Csillian Government is unhappy with my work in the Unknown Regions, they view my and the Imperial presence there with great distrust. I have long since given up trying to explain my methods to them. Eventually, it is my hope they will come around to seeing my view on these things.” He sipped his wine thoughtfully. “You’d like it, I think, out there. There are some gorgeous space anomalies and some of the planets are astoundingly beautiful, very unlike anything I have seen here. We have been mapping out the region as we go; this is what takes the most time actually. That and getting to know each new species we come into contact with. I think this is the part that has the majority of the command staff under me confused. While they don’t come out and ask me directly they do question why we spend so much time collecting language and cultural data on each of the new planets we explore.”

“Well, Imperials are not exactly taught to appreciate culture, alien species or art, are they?”

“No, it is a major flaw in Imperial thinking and a huge opportunity missed, I think.” He said. “Speaking of art,” he said getting up. “I have something for you.”

I watched as he vanished down the hall into another room. He came back holding a box carefully in both hands. I set my wine glass on the table and took the box when he offered it.

“I found this on a small world called Nejrion IV. Its inhabitants are quite peaceful and very intelligent; a highly advanced civilization of beings that have developed some of the most amazing technology I have seen in a long time, primarily in the areas of communications and passive defence systems. They don’t feel the need to fight because their defensive capabilities are quite astonishing. Unfortunately their technology and Imperial technology would be utterly impossible to combine. Still, they agreed to co operate with us and were very open about sharing their linguistic and cultural data. I saw this piece in one of the artisan workshops they allowed me to tour and I knew it had to be yours.”

I opened the box slowly and took out the gift, wrapped in a fine tissue paper. Carefully I unwrapped and was rendered speechless by what sat in my hands.

It was sculpture about the same size as a small melon. It looked as though it had been carved from a stone that greatly resembled the dark coloured ma’arilite I loved so much. The sculpture itself was abstract; carved into the shape of a wave or maybe a sand dune, something curved and sinuous. It was hard to say exactly what it was representing but the true amazement came from touching it. As my fingertips brushed the glass smooth

surface so ripples of vibrant, dancing colour was left in their wake. It was amazing, my touch altered the colour of the sculpture, making it move, come alive.

“The stone is called Ndajat’je, and the light effects are a molecular change triggered by touch. For each species the effect is very different.” He said and brushed the stone with his own fingers. I smiled, in the wake of his touch the stone had rippled and the colours were oranges and red-golds not pale greens and blues tinged with pale yellow as they had been for me.

“Why does it do that? How does it work?” I asked.

“I do not know and the Nejri would not tell me. They enjoy their mysteries and said that keeping the magic of this art a secret maintained the beauty and the value. In this particular case I didn’t see a reason to press or argue.”

“Mysteries are good for the soul.” I smiled, stroking the stone, delighting in the dance of colour and light that this created.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

I nodded. “Very much. It’s beautiful and I don’t know what to say. You always give me the most astonishing things. Thank you.”

I set it carefully on the table and reached over to stroke his face. Wrapping my hand around the back of his neck, I pulled him to me and gave him a kiss to thank him. The wine made me bold and a sudden flare of lust made me needy. The kiss turned hungry as passion overrode any common sense I might have had.

It was awkward to kiss sitting side by side and the shoulder immobilizer made it even more difficult. Before he had a chance to do anything I moved first and straddled his lap, much more comfortable and much easier to kiss him. He tasted of Chall wine and my lips still tingled from the spiced Zabracki food. I sensed his hesitation and drew back to look at his face, to try and read what he was thinking without using the force. His hands rested on my hips and for a moment there was perfect stillness.

“I am quite certain this is not what your doctor had in mind when he prescribed rest.” He said.

“I don’t need rest.” I said bluntly, almost crossly. “I need you.” I was tired of waiting, tired of the games, tired of the long separations. I wrapped my hand around his neck and pulled him to me and kissed him. I didn’t want to hear any more about doctors or rest I just wanted to be with him. He ran his hands up under my shirt; they were warm against the skin of my back. Only when he touched the straps of the shoulder brace I was forced to wear did he stop, hesitate, sigh and withdraw.

“A’mysk’a...” he began but I shut him up with my fingertip on his lips.

“No.” I said. “I waited for you to come back. I waited for well over a year, with your teasing letters and hints of things to come. There is no one else

in my life like you, like this and you didn't bring me here this afternoon just to chat. I feel your desire, it is as powerful as a sandstorm, so don't tell me to sit back down like some good little girl, because I won't do it!"

"What do you want?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know... exactly, I just know it involves you."

He smiled. "For the sake of not rushing into everything all at once would you be happy if we just continued our ... conversation?"

I drew a deep steadying breath. "Why do you keep me at bay? Do I not interest you?"

He sighed and made a face. "My dear, if I *were* disinterested you would not be in my home, sitting on my lap having this discussion. Has it never occurred to you that perhaps I wish for our first time to be if not perfect at least as close to as possible? That I want to see you whole and unhurt when I undress you and see you naked? That I want to feel only your skin beneath my fingers, my body and not this uncomfortable looking thing they have strapped to you to keep your shoulder and arm from falling apart? That I do not want hurt you or add to your current pain?" He looked at me. "There is so much more to this than just fulfilling some physical need. It is a special thing, even for a man, contrary to what you may think, and especially so for a Chiss. I want it to be something you, we remember and smile about not look back and regret because wine addled our senses and too much time apart made us impatient. Being bedded for the first time should not be a drunken, hurried affair."

I didn't know how to answer that. The combination of drink and desire had made me selfish in my need. It had never occurred to me that he would be interested in more than simply coupling. My experiences in the field of men had ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous but nothing had prepared me for one who actually cared more about me rather than his own pleasure or weird ideals and self interest.

I just leaned into him, resting my head against his shoulder and sighed. He wrapped his arms around me and held on snugly. I couldn't help but think back to the first time we had met, to the first time when I realised he was trouble. Well, he was still trouble but I had gone past caring what sort of trouble he was. I lifted my head up to look in his face, usually I had to look up because he was a lot taller than me but sitting in this manner made me equal in height and I looked directly into his eyes. My hand traced the contours of his face and he watched me carefully.

"Okay." I said after a while. "So converse with me then, let's see what new tactical linguistic tricks you have learned in the Unknown Regions." And with my permission he proceeded to demonstrate just how artful a conversation without words could be.

I blame it on the wine that once we had stopped exploring every new possible way to converse with a kiss and had returned to side by side sitting on the couch, cuddled and close, talking of idle things, I fell asleep. When I woke up I was fuzzy headed and clueless about where I was. There was a pillow under my head and a soft blanket had been draped over me. I felt as though some wampyrats had died in my mouth and kicked sand in my eyes in the process of their death throes. As a rule I never napped in the afternoon because when I did it always disorientated me. I got up slowly and noticed it was dark out. There was one lamp on in the living room, in the corner and soft music playing from some where down the hall. With the blanket wrapped around my shoulders I went into the kitchen and downed two glasses of water. Then I went in search of Thrawn.

There was light and music both coming from the room at the far end of the hallway, the door was slightly ajar but I knocked anyway. I wasn't so comfortable in his home yet, that I felt I could just walk in every where.

"Come in, A'myshk'a."

I pushed at the door and walked in part way. I looked about the large room in awe. It was a study that doubled as a library. The walls were lined with books and the large ornate desk at the far end of the room was obviously an antique. He was sitting in a well worn, comfortable looking high backed chair, in his hand was a book; his finger marked the page he had been reading. This was his favourite room.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

"How do you feel?"

"Like a herd of creatures died in my mouth." I told him. "What time is it?"

"Just after two in the morning." He answered, placing a marker in his book and getting up. "Come with me."

I followed him back down the hall to the 'fresher and watched as he dug out various things from a drawer in the cupboard under the sink.

"Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap and what ever else you might need." He said, he brushed past me and vanished then returned with a towel and a facecloth. "Would you like a cup of tea?" he asked as I just stared numbly at him.

I nodded and waited until he had left before I gratefully unwrapped the new toothbrush and cleaned my teeth. I felt much better after washing my face with warm water, the scent of the soap reminded me of him. There wasn't much I could do about the rat's nest of my hair so I just left it. I would go to Bam's hair salon as soon as I could and get him to sort out the mess. By the time I was feeling like a human again and had wandered back to the kitchen, Thrawn had made white chaeya leaf tea.

“I should go home.” I told him, sipping the hot drink.

“If you want to I will take you, or you could stay here till morning.”

There was a moment’s pause as his sentence sunk in then I said carefully, “I hate to break this to you but your couch is not that comfortable, you know.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Well, I do have a perfectly good bed I am willing to share.”

It was my turn to look at him. “I thought you wanted to wait before you ...we... well you know?”

He smiled. “I do, but it wouldn’t be the first time you have just shared my bed.” He said.

I considered his words and my options then said. “I need something to sleep in then, I hate sleeping in my clothes.”

He nodded. “I think something can be arranged.”

I sipped my tea thoughtfully then asked. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want me to stay?” I asked.

“Partly because if you are here, I know you are safe and not getting in to any mischief.” He was partially kidding but there was a hint of truth behind his grin.

“You can’t protect me from the galaxy.” I told him flatly.

He looked at me carefully, “No, I dare say I cannot.” He said. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It was never my plan to become attached to anyone during my time here. I joined the Empire with one thing in mind, how best to serve and protect my people, yet here you are, in my life.” He sipped at his tea and then continued. “When I received the news of what had happened at your Bunduki trials what surprised me the most was how I suddenly felt.

Fear is not an emotion I tend to experience often, so it took me by surprise. I cannot tell you when you became important to me but you are. I want you to stay because I missed you and as you put it, over a year apart is too long.”

“Why did you not say that in the first place?”

He just grinned and left the kitchen. When he came back he handed me a pair of neatly folded, brand new pyjamas. The material was soft and fine, the colour of pale moonlight. I set my cup down and took the offered night clothes. I looked at them in my hand and felt the world shift ever so slightly. Staying the whole night, sharing his bed, sharing his world was something new. This wasn’t like before when we were either on some crazy assed mission to an unknown planet or he was trying to help me recover from Jyrki inflicted trauma. He was giving me a place in his private life and I knew once I stepped onto this path there was no going back.

“I will take you home if that is what you want.” He said again, as if reading my thoughts, giving me the choice.

I looked at his face for a moment. “You know, I wondered if you had missed me at all while you were gone. I mean, I know you wrote and sent gifts and stuff but I wondered about it all the same. Most of the time we seem to be dealing with one crisis or another, we don’t often have quiet times when nothing bad is happening or we are not on the job or when I am not doing something really stupid. I thought that maybe I had imagined there was anything serious between us but I guess this answers those questions, doesn’t it.” I wasn’t sure if I should be terrified or elated. It was a very odd sensation. I felt as though I were holding my breath.

His expression softened. “It is what it is A’myshk’a, not more, not less. I would be lying if I said you were not on my mind when things were quiet and I had time to reflect but a man in my position can afford little in the way of emotional attachments. They get in the way and they complicate things...you...”

“I know. I complicate things.” I finished for him.

“Well, I enjoy some complications. They make life interesting, challenging, and worth while.”

“Glad I can help in that area then. If I challenge the Emperor’s favoured tactical genius then I must be doing something right” I said and flounced off to the bathroom to change before he could find a suitable retort.

The night clothes were miles too big for me, so I suppose typical for a girl I stuck with just wearing the top which came down to mid thigh. The material was a brushed silk and very soft. He just laughed when I came back into the kitchen and handed the pyjama pants back.

“Well, I can see I have finally found a use for the tops I never wear.” He smiled.

“You’re too tall.” I said which earned me his trademark arched eyebrow. “I would just trip and break my neck or something if I wore those.” I flapped the arm in the sleeve that was way too long at him. He caught it and rolled the sleeve up just past my wrist. He poured more tea in my cup then left the kitchen.

I drank the warmth down and welcomed the quiet sense of comfort I felt in this place. As if it were truly safe and nothing could harm me here at all. I had not realised that even in the new flat in the Palace I was not completely at ease. Somewhere deep in my subconscious I was still very afraid. That realization made me sad. When Thrawn came back he had changed, ready for bed. I could smell toothpaste and the soap he used lingering in the air. I set the half finished cup of tea back on the counter and let him take me by the hand to his bedroom which was large and airy and had its own ‘fresher attached to it. The room was sparsely furnished. The bed was made from the same antique wood that his desk in the library had been made from and I wondered if they had been part of an estate collection. The bed clothes were

plain white and the rest of the furniture was elegant but simple in lines and design. On the walls were three paintings. Two I didn't know but could see why he had picked them for this room. The third, the one directly across from the bed made me stop dead.

"When you said it was in private collection, you didn't say it was in *your* private collection." I whispered pulling my hand out of his to stand close to the Isona Medeglia painting of Tatoonine. The view she had painted was one I knew well and I felt a sudden pang of homesickness.

"Then I would have not seen you make that face." He told me.

"It really is stunning." I said softly, more to myself. I felt his fingers touch my arm and turned to see him staring at me. The expression on his face made my heart thump painfully in my chest. "If you want me to behave, stop giving me that look." I told him.

"Well then come to bed, I'll turn out the lights and you won't see me look at you."

I did as he suggested and crawled under the covers. I curled up on my right side, the only way I could sleep comfortably with the shoulder brace and waited for him to turn off the light. The room went dark and I heard him, felt him get into bed. I wondered how I would fall asleep because suddenly I was all nerves and jitter.

He slid an arm around my waist and curled his body protectively around mine. His warmth, his presence was surprisingly soothing. He began to talk to me in Cheunh, telling me how he had been able to track down and buy the Medeglia painting. His voice was a lullaby. To my surprise I drifted into sleep easily.

In the quiet of the early dawn I woke up. The light from the rising sun was still pale, its quiet colours meandering their way into the night sky, mauves and pallid pinks. At sometime during the night Thrawn had rolled away from me, sleeping on his back, his face turned towards the window. I moved carefully so as not to wake him and not jar my aching shoulder.

I watched him for a few moments, marvelling at how different a person's face looked when they were asleep, how peaceful and free from the concerns of daily life. He was so beautiful to me and I wondered how anyone could hate him simply because he looked different, just because he was not human. I resisted the urge to reach out and stroke his face. It was early and I didn't want to wake him. Just watching him made my heart skip a beat, I wondered if that was normal.

I had never considered myself a particularly romantic person and after the resounding blow to my ego from Jyrki when I had declared how I had felt to him romance, such as it was, was a thing I shied away from. It was a word in the books that Bel secretly read and then left lying around for me to secretly

read after her. I despised the women in these ridiculous stories. I hated the men too but that didn't stop me from pouring through the books anyway, just to see what would happen.

I had asked Bel once why she read these books and her reply had been surprisingly shy.

"Because in real life there is no such thing as romance." She had told me. "There are no larger than life heroes and no perfect men. These books are trashy, I know that, but I like them anyway because they aren't real. Love is a horrible thing, Merly, it just hurts you." She had said and I couldn't disagree with her because from my perspective at that time, she had been right. But, looking back I wondered, what had I known about that particular subject? Not very much. Unlike Bel I did not think romance was terrible but it was a bit of a mystery and I kinda liked mysteries....

I puzzled over the man that lay asleep next to me. He was considerably older than I was, alien and brilliant. He had told me on more than one occasion that he had not given much thought to having someone, anyone close to him in his life. His job came first, yet every now and then he offered me an opening, a small place in his world and I didn't understand why. I often thought about this but I never dared to ask him about it. My own insecurities had nothing to do with him and he knew his own mind better than any one. If he decided I was a part of his life then who was I to question this?

I got out of bed slowly, and stole the robe he had slung over the back of the chair I suspected was there solely for that purpose and went to the kitchen. I made a pot of tea and then drank a cup leaning against the counter, watching the sun rise. This moment in time, this perfect stillness was something I had learned to treasure. That moment of the day before the air, the people, the world wakes up and everything comes alive.

Thinking about Bel and her crazy romance stories made me smile. I had been young enough the very first time I had found one of her holo books lying around that most of the innuendos had escaped me entirely. My crush on Jyrki had still been in its early stage and I was pretty clueless about the concept of sex and lust and its vocabulary. So reading this book had prompted many questions, not the least of which was about the strange descriptions of male and female anatomy.

I had asked Bel about one particular line describing what I thought was a description of the male reproductive organ and she had turned beet red, almost impossible for a Rodian and had spluttered some explanation about how I might want to go to the library and look stuff up. It was very confusing. So I went and asked Jyrki next who had simply regarded me with his brittle blue eyes and then asked; "Yer smarter than that, Mouse, read something real not that rubbish." He had said and with that he had turned his back on me and gone back to work. That a he had blushed had totally escaped my notice.

On that particular day there had been no one else about so I had gone to my father, shown him the troublesome passage in the book and asked him to explain it. Much to my surprise he had, clearly in plain language that made sense to me without visible embarrassment or hesitation.

We had studied biology in school and I had learned the very basic ins and outs of human anatomy and a little about being female. It had been Bedi who had helped me when I had first started my period and after that, I guess, everyone just assumed that someone else had taken the time to explain the ins and outs of human reproduction and all its complications or they had all hoped to avoid it.

So for over an hour my father and I had talked, or rather he had talked and I had listened. At the very end of his detailed explanation of sex and how it all worked I was still perplexed about a few things.

“What’s still not clear, pet?” he’d asked.

“Why does everyone get so weird about this subject if it’s so natural?” I had asked.

My father had just smiled. “It embarrasses people. It’s such a private thing and what makes it so difficult for people to talk about is not the actually act itself but all the emotions and the feelings that go along with it.” He had sipped his drink and continued before I could ask even more questions. “Merly, sex is not just about making babies and continuing the species, it’s something that allows two adults to share their love, show how much they feel for one another in the most vulnerable, intimate way possible. It’s the emotions that mess people up and makes us different from, say banthas. It’s almost impossible to explain, you will just have to learn from doing and I hope that doesn’t happen until you are very, very grown up.”

“Why?”

He had shaken his head at my never ending curiosity. “Because I am your father for one thing and if I have anything to do with it, men won’t be coming close to you until you’re a hundred and fifty and I’m dead, it’s a dad thing so don’t ask for more explanations than that.” He had said with a smile. “Also because it’s a special time and you should share it with someone you truly love who loves you. Your first time is precious; don’t throw that away on just anyone.”

I had nodded but I had not really understood. After a moment’s silence I’d asked a question that had made my father choke on his tea.

“So papa, why do they call it a *flaming hot rod of desire* and not a penis?”

Once he had stopped coughing up tea he had just shaken his head. “You’ll have to ask the writers of those stupid books that question, pet. I have no idea. I can tell you this though; if I was a woman and read that I’d be more tempted to run as far away as possible. This description makes men sound like

diseased weapons rather than something good.” And that had been the end of my first serious lesson on human sexuality. At least I had a better idea of what happened in general, what went where when and what could occur afterwards. The discussion on the emotional baggage that accompanied sex, lust and love came a lot later, after I was in the throes of a broken heart and impossible to live with and then it had been Bel who had come to the rescue.

Now, in the quiet of the kitchen this conversation came back to me. For well over two years Thrawn had courted me, ignited a passion that was breath-takingly intense and shown a compassion for my well being that often left me baffled. I wondered what my father would make of my relationship with this man, for that matter I wondered what to make of it all. I was so deep in thought that I didn’t hear him get up and come into the kitchen to join me.

“Credit for them?” he said as he poured himself a cup of tea.

“Man parts.” I answered without really thinking about what I was saying.

He just stared at me for a moment then decided it was too early to ask for an explanation, planted a kiss on my head, took his tea and went to sit out on the balcony. I followed him and we sat in silence watching as the sun lit up the city with a soft red- gold light. Only when I was cold enough did I go back inside and decide it was time to get dressed. I would wash up in my own flat, I wasn’t so comfortable here yet that I felt I could just hop into the bath. I cleaned my teeth and washed my face, by the time I was done Thrawn had showered and dressed.

“Are you really busy this morning?” I asked as we drove back to the Imperial Palace.

“I could spare a couple minutes, if that is what you are asking.” He replied.

“I wanted to show you the book Bel bought for me; I think it might be something you’d like to borrow, Tiveria Sekanis’s poems are really wonderful.”

He smiled. “For that I can make time.”

For the remainder of the trip through rush hour traffic I watched out of the speeder’s window and marvelled at how busy this planet was. We landed at the bay closest to where I lived and walked in silence to my flat. This part of the palace was, thankfully, quiet at this time of day so it was unlikely that anyone would see us together or ask awkward questions. While, for the most part, pairings between Imperial Officers and palace employees was ignored, it was still not officially allowed. The last thing I wanted was another Entertainment Holo-Net scandal or to get either myself or Thrawn into serious trouble, I had enough of that in my life as it was.

Coming back to the palace made me melancholy. I had not wanted the last twenty four hours to end. There had been a magical quality to the time I had spent in Thrawn’s home, as though the rest of the galaxy and all my

troubles no longer existed. Coming back meant facing reality. I was lost, deep in my thoughts as I dug my card-key from my pocket. It was Thrawn's arm suddenly braced in front of me, stopping me from moving forward brought me sharply back to reality.

"What the ...?" I asked looking up at him then following his gaze. My heart caught in my throat. The door to my flat was open and the lock had been ripped out. "Oh!"

Thrawn drew his side arm and motioned for me to stay back. I ignored him and went to barge into my home, angered beyond belief that someone would actually break in to my home. He grabbed me by the arm. "Stay here!" His tone scared me. It was the voice of a man unused to having any order disobeyed ever. I swallowed my anger and nodded my understanding, watching as he entered my flat in a way that reminded me sharply he was first and foremost a military officer.

"It's clear. There's no one here." He said when he reappeared from inside my flat after what seemed an eternity. I pushed past him and walked in through the ruined door and just stopped dead at the total destruction that had once been my home. I didn't know where to look first. It was as if someone had let an enraged rancor loose. Everything that could be smashed, broken or ripped had been. For a moment I was shocked into a numb stillness and then anger writhed its way from my gut to my brain, followed closely by a sudden realization that I had things I truly valued, that I was afraid to lose. I ran into the bedroom, ignoring Thrawn's protest. It didn't matter to me what else had been destroyed I just needed to make sure the most precious things I owned in the galaxy had not been discovered. This was how Thrawn found me. Kneeling on the bedroom floor holding the wooden box which held his letters to me, the holocrons, and the few other treasures I owned. I was at a loss for what to do next and angry beyond words.

"I'll notify Palace security." He said touching my good shoulder. I looked up at him. "You will need to look around to see what is missing and give a report." He added. I just blinked at him for a moment, then putting the box down I got to my feet. It was then, looking around, did I realize the extent of the damage done. All of my beautiful dresses, my shoes, and clothes had been taken from the closet, slashed to shreds and strewn all over the room. My voice caught in my throat and I covered my mouth with my shaking hand. This wasn't a simple break in, this was vicious and personal.

Thrawn activated his comm and contacted security, giving them details. He watched as I began to touch things, not pick them up or disturb how they were but just brush them with my fingertips. He finished speaking to security and went to try and stop me. I shook my head at him and continued until something gave up its secret to me. I gasped making him step forward but something in my expression made him stop mid stride.

"What is it...?" he began looking at my face.

I was beside myself with fury. "Jyrki." I spat.

There was a moment's stillness which was broken by the sudden arrival of half a dozen storm troopers and security agents. I picked up the wooden box and left the bedroom. I didn't know how this could be explained, how could Jyrki have not only slipped back into the palace unknown, unnoticed but violently break into my flat as well. I brushed past the troopers and security agents to go back out into the hallway. I heard Thrawn giving them details but I didn't pay attention. I was blinded by anger. Only one of the things I had touched had given me any information but it had been enough. I had seen Jyrki's face twisted in rage as he slashed at my formal dresses. The thing that disturbed me more was that he had not been alone. I had no idea who the second person was, I had seen nothing of them, just sensed that there had been a presence, that someone else had been there with him. I slid with my back against the wall to the floor.

Thrawn finished with talking to the security agents came out to squat down beside me. "You need to give a statement." He said gently. I nodded and he helped me up. "Give that to me." He said taking the box that I had draped my arm over protectively.

The lead security agent, named Tam Erskari, was a tall, lanky man with soft blond hair and hard brown eyes. I told him everything I could and watched him mask his disbelief when I explained how I knew who had broken in. He didn't say anything but he didn't have to, his scepticism was obvious but I didn't care.

"At first glance is anything missing, Miss Gabriel?" he asked.

I looked around the chaos that had once been my living room. The stormtroopers, having no one to protect or shoot had retired outside the apartment and the other three agents were in the process of gathering what ever evidence they could.

"No, I don't think so. I don't have much of value, I guess mostly the clothes and they just destroyed those." I said. For the first time since discovering the break in my voice caught in my throat and I had to fight the wave of emotion that engulfed me. I bit back the threatening tears and fought the sadness in favour of anger.

He nodded taking notes. "Do you have any enemies who would do this?"

"I already told you who was responsible, Agent Erskari. His name is Jyrki Andando." I said not bothering to hide my annoyance.

He nodded and noted it again. "Anyone else? Anyone who works inside the palace?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't really know that many people here all that well." I said which was true. "Working for Lord Vader doesn't exactly make me popular, you know." I said. "But I can't think of anyone who would do this."

He gave me an unexpected smile and nodded. "Well, I am afraid we'll have to seal off the place until our investigation is concluded. Do you have a place to stay?" he asked.

I sighed and opened my mouth to tell him I had no idea when Thrawn answered for me. "Yes, Miss Gabriel will be under my protective custody until this matter is cleared up." He said. "Lord Vader will expect nothing less than the best for his Personal Assistant."

Agent Erskari nodded without raising an eyebrow and made further notation then left us to go and confer with his other agents.

"Under *your* protective custody?" I hissed at Thrawn under my breath.

He arched an eyebrow. "Yes. You do not have any place else safe to stay, do you? So you stay with me."

I opened my mouth then closed it again. "No way!" I told him, raising my voice so that the security agents all stopped what they were doing and looked up at me. Thrawn clenched his jaw and then not so gently taking me by my arm led me out of the flat into the hallway. The stormtroopers had all vanished. I guessed there was not enough action for them.

"What is the problem?" he asked.

"I don't need a babysitter, especially you!" I hissed.

"I thought you enjoyed spending time in my home?" he asked.

I blinked. "That's entirely different and you know it!" I said.

"Merlyn, please do not fight me on this, you will not win." He said his tone of voice changing from concerned to authoritative.

"I don't want to live in your home. I want to live in my own!" I told him. "This is ridiculous!"

I was trying his patience. He drew a deep steadying breath. "I know that, I understand that but you need a safe place to stay away from the palace until this gets cleared up and security here can be sorted out. Jyrki Andando is a wanted felon and still he manages to not only elude the authorities here but get into a secure area right under everyone's noses and perform acts of vandalism. This isn't a game; your life is at stake." He said firmly. "You will not be a prisoner, you are free to come and go as you please, but at least I know you will not be attacked in the middle of the night at my place and if that should happen, well, I am a very good shot with a pistol." His attempt at a joke didn't go well with me.

This was not how I wanted things to be. I was furious, I desperately wanted to bathe and wash my hair and I was in pain. To top it all off, he was right about everything he had said.

Suddenly I looked at him. "Did you know this was going to happen? Is this why you wanted me to stay with you last night?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment and I wasn't sure if I had crossed a line or not but I didn't care. "If I *had* known, Jyrki Andando and his accomplice

would be in custody and we would not be having this discussion." He said coldly. His words made sense and while I wanted to stay angry and direct my fury at him I couldn't, he was not the enemy. He knew he had won this round by the expression on my face. "Go and pack what you need for at least a week."

"A week...?" I began.

He cut me off. "Just do as I ask." He said in a tone of voice that stopped any further argument from me.

I stared at him, tight lipped and frustrated then turned abruptly on my heel and went back inside to salvage what ever clothes had been left untouched and gather the things I would need. As I began to look more closely at the damage that had been done to my home I realised that all my books had been strewn around the room. I knelt down and picked up one of my books. It was the antique one that Bel had bought for me. As I tried to straighten out their damaged pages I began to cry.

"Merlyn...." Thrawn's voice was soft in my ear as he squatted down at my side. "This man will be found and dealt with." He said, taking the book out of my trembling hand.

"Books can be replaced, you cannot."

"Why is he doing this?" I asked.

"Well, that is the question isn't it?" Thrawn said thoughtfully.

I nodded, indignantly wiping the tears from my face and got to my feet and continued to pack what I could. When I had stuffed a bag as full as I could Thrawn took it and the wooden box before I could protest.

"Miss Gabriel, we'll notify you via your comm when we have completed our investigation." Agent Erskari said. I just nodded numbly and then because there was nothing else to do I followed Thrawn back to his vehicle. There wasn't much to say and I was too angry to start a conversation just because the silence between us was heavy and uncomfortable.

I followed him back into his home, a place that two hours earlier I had delighted in and felt lost. He didn't say much as he led me down the hall to where his study was and opened the door across from it. I sighed and felt some of the fury in my gut lessen. He put my bag and the wooden box down on the bed. It had never occurred to me that he might have a spare room in his flat but then again I had never actually seen the whole place either.

It was a nice room, spacious and light, tastefully decorated. There was a bed, a beautiful dressing table, a comfortable chair next to a small bookshelf filled with books, a small desk with a holo terminal, a built in closet and a floor to ceiling window that opened up onto a small balcony. Before I could say anything to him he had vanished only to return with a set of towels.

"I know it isn't what you are used to, but you will be safe here." He said then added, "I'm sorry about this, I truly am."

I just looked at him.

“I’ll have someone drop a vehicle off for you to use.” He said and then he handed me a card key. “This is yours. I told you, you are not a prisoner here, but I do remind you that you are under doctor’s orders to rest and it would seem to me this is a good opportunity for you to do so. Take the pain killers that were prescribed instead of suffering.” He said.

“How did you know I wasn’t taking the meds?”

He smiled slightly. “You don’t always do a very good job of hiding the fact that you are in pain.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say so I just nodded my head again.

“There’s plenty of food in the kitchen, help yourself, you’ll find where everything is. I will return when I can although I don’t know when that will be. I am in meetings all day and goodness knows how long they will go for.” He said. “If you need anything you have my personal comm, use it.” I walked with him out to the flat’s personal landing pad.

“Thank you.” I said after a moment’s awkward silence. I should have felt grateful but I didn’t. Instead I was resentful and cross.

He cupped my face with one hand. “This *Pash’kja’anta* will be found and dealt with appropriately.” He said.

I nodded but I didn’t believe him. Jyrki was too good and he had inside help. For a moment we just watched each other, his hand warm on my face, and then with a slight nod he turned, got into the small air speeder and left. I watched until I could no longer see him and then went back inside, closing the doors behind me. This was not how I imagined my life turning out, this was not how I imagined spending time with Thrawn and I was furious at the situation Jyrki was creating. There was nothing else to do except dig out clean clothes to wear, run a shallow bath, try to wash my hair and do as Thrawn had suggested, take the prescribed pain killers and then see what else the day brought. Still, I thought grimly as I stripped off my clothes, heaven help Jyrki if I ever got my hands on him because I would kill him and not even think about it. I wasn’t sure what he hoped to achieve with his acts of terrorism but if teaching me to hate was one of those things then he was more successful than he knew.

By late afternoon, despite taking the maximum allowed painkillers prescribed I had not been able to sleep or even settle. After a bath and a fairly frustrating attempt at washing my hair I had dressed in comfortable clothes and made a pot of white chaeya leaf tea. Neither the painkillers nor the tea were enough to relax me instead I became more and more addled. Sometime close to midday panic completely clouded my judgement. I broke down and used the holo-net to contact my uncle. I needed his help, I needed his advice. What I got was my father.

“Daddy?” I was surprised. “I was trying to reach Zte’sa Vahlek.”

“Merly? Is everything alright?” he asked. “Vahl’s off planet, when he’s unreachable he routes his calls to me. What’s wrong, pet?”

I shook my head. Suddenly I didn’t know what I wanted to say.

“Merly, what happened to your arm? Are you okay?” my father asked, suddenly worried.

“An accident, it’s nothing, I dislocated my shoulder.” I said then promptly burst into tears. I felt as though I were four years old again and had skinned my knees or something. It was ridiculous and I felt stupid. The fuzzy, blue holo image of my father made me realise how far away I was from my home. He spoke to me the way he always had when I foundered and after the crying jag had ended I told him about the break in to my flat. I didn’t tell him the truth about my shoulder.

“You’re sure it was Jyrki?” my father asked when I was done.

I nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Where are you now? Are you safe?” He asked.

“I am in protective custody.” I said, hoping he would not ask for any details.

He just nodded. “When Vahl checks in, I’ll get him to contact you.” He was angry but the light years that separated us prevented him from doing or saying anything else other than comforting me.

When the connection was severed I had another crying jag then decided I was being foolish and took the holocron from out of the wooden box. For the next four hours I sat on the bed in Thrawn’s spare room, listening to the girl who would grow up to become my birth mother talk about her daily life at the Jedi Temple. She was vibrant and chatty, smart yet vulnerable. She talked to the holocron almost as though it were her best friend. She spoke of her training and her routines at the Temple. She often spoke about her friend Rikka Nari who I knew as Rikka Blane. It was odd that I would find comfort in the words of a long dead, ten year old girl but that was what happened. Listening to my birth mother talk about her fears and troubles made me forget my own. Learning how to operate the holocron was a bit of a challenge but eventually I figured it out and could go forward or backwards easily. After watching almost three months of Akali L’uanna’s life I stopped the recordings and just sat holding the cube, lost in thought.

I sat on the bed, knees to my chest, chin resting on my knees. I thought about my birth mother’s life and how strange it must have been to grow up without a family. It made me realise how lucky I was. I wondered if the Jedi kept records on all the children and people who had lived at the Temple, if I went back if I would find out anything more about my mother, perhaps who her parents had been, my grand-parents. Then I wondered if there were records about Jyrki and that thought made me shiver, not in a good way. I lay back and tried not to follow this thought up. I didn’t want to go back into that

building but the more I tried not to think about it the more that became the logical conclusion. With these thoughts in my head I eventually fell asleep holding the holocron in my hand.

A soft but persistent peeping sound broke into my sleep addled brain and woke me up. It took me a few seconds to realise it was my comm, dopey and slow, I activated it.

The image shimmered into place. "Zte'sa...?" I rubbed the sleepiness out of my eyes.

"Lei'lei, did I wake you?" My uncle asked already knowing the answer to his question.

I just nodded. "That's okay, what time is it? Where are you?"

"It's mid afternoon here," he said not being specific about where 'here' was. "On Coruscant it's past one in the morning. What's on your mind, your father said you tried to reach me?"

The panic that had gripped me earlier had subsided and now I wasn't sure what to tell him.

"What happened to your shoulder?" he asked. "Kit said you sounded panicky, what's going on?"

I took a deep breath and then I told him everything. I told him about the Bunduki trials and about the break in. They were not connected but I didn't want to lie to my uncle, I wasn't sure why this was but I wasn't about to start.

"You didn't tell Kit about the trials did you?" my uncle said. "He would have mentioned that when he told me about your *pest* problem."

"I don't like to worry papa. It's not related to Jyrki and it was an isolated incident." I had downplayed the seriousness of what had happened but my uncle was not stupid and worse, he knew what the Rite of Tet' meant. I had seen the expression that had crossed his face when I had mentioned it; even with the holographic distortion I knew he was angry.

My uncle sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You are the silliest girl I know." He chided. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

I took a deep breath. "I need to go after him, Zte'sa. I can't just sit here and let Jyrki wreck my life. But I need to know how to find him first?"

My uncle regarded me for a moment and the holo graphic image of him flickering as the signal wavered. "You don't."

I did not want to hear these words. "Zte'sa, if I don't deal with this then I will be scared for the rest of my life or until he kills me first! I can't live like this!"

The hardness in his expression was unmistakable and I knew I was not going to like what he had to say next. "Listen to me very carefully when I tell you not to even think about doing what I know you are thinking about doing. From the looks of it you are in no fit state for a showdown with a man who is

obviously obsessed with stalking you. What would you do when you found him? "

"I don't know, shoot him?" I answered crossly. It annoyed me that he was right.

My uncle shook his head. "Lei'lei, I am not joking about this. Leave it alone." There was a nasty warning in his voice. "When the time is right, a confrontation will happen. Don't push it before you are ready to fight him on equal terms. Right now, it sounds as though he is playing with you, push him and he will go over the edge. He'll just try to kill you. Right now you are not exactly ready for that confrontation, are you?"

"What do you know about it!?" I asked raising my voice.

"Far more than you will ever understand." He said very quietly.

"What am I supposed to do, sit back and wait until the next time when he shreds me to bits instead of my clothes? Spend the rest of my time hiding, too scared to step outside? This is not how I want to live my life, I won't do it!" I was shouting now.

"Are you safe where you are?" he changed the subject abruptly, the calm tone of his voice never changing.

I nodded. "Yes."

"And the appropriate people know what is happening and are dealing with the situation?" he pressed.

"Imperial security knows, Intel knows, I think by now the entire blasted galaxy probably knows but it doesn't seem to matter! He gets by the security, he has inside help! How in the name of the sarlacc do I fight him? He's like a ghost!"

My uncle ran his hand through his hair. Wherever he was it was windy. "Listen to me and listen to me well. I want you to promise me you will not try to hunt him on your own." He said and then waited. I said nothing. "Lei'lei, when the time is right I will help you if that's what you want. I will track this man for you and I will deal with him myself but right now I am a thousand light years away on a job and I need to know you will not do anything stupid. So, please promise me you will sit tight and let others do their work."

After what seemed forever I gave in. "I promise."

He nodded, visibly relieved. "I am in the middle of something I can't get away from right now but when I am done we can deal with this, I will help you. I give you my word. It's bad enough he seems to be able to evade Imperial security without you inadvertently helping him!"

I was angry but he was right. I nodded. "Okay, okay! I get the point!" I wasn't going to make him any more promises. Maybe I wouldn't be able to track or go after Jyrki but I could still, maybe find out more about him. I had not made any promises about not going back into the Jedi Temple.

There was a sudden sound of blaster fire in the back ground and my uncle turned to look over his shoulder then back to me. "I have to go. I'll be in touch. If you are some place safe, stay there!" he told me and then in the middle of another volley of blaster fire he disconnected the holonet.

I sat in the bed, holding the transmitter in my hand and realised I was trembling. Blaster fire? What had that been about? He had not told me where he was or what he was doing. He hadn't looked scared just annoyed and surprised. I sat back against the head board and sighed. The sound of the door to the bedroom opening made me jump.

"I heard voices, is everything alright?" Thrawn asked. He was holding a pistol in his hand. He had been sleeping and my shouting had woken him.

"It was my uncle wanting to make sure I was okay." I said, blinking as he switched on the light. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

He didn't answer the question and we just stared at each other for a moment. Something fragile wavered between us. He lowered the gun and nodded. I realized I didn't know what to say, how to bridge this apparent gap and suddenly my hatred for Jyrki doubled. Not only was he destroying my physical life, my home, and my things but somehow he was somehow managing to destroy everything else I cared about as well.

"I don't suppose you have any brandy in the house, do you?" I asked, breaking the silence.

He nodded and turned to leave. I followed him. He went to his bedroom first; re holstered the gun and pulled on his robe. Then wordlessly he went to the kitchen with me in tow. I watched as he pulled out two brandy glasses and dug out an unopened bottle of Corellian brandy. He poured a generous glass and handed it to me. He touched his glass to mine and we drank in silence.

After what seemed an eternity I said. "You must think me incredibly ungrateful."

He leaned back against the counter, folding his arms across his chest and regarded me carefully. "No, my dear, far from it. I think you are angry and scared and that you don't know what to do about it." He said.

He had pretty much hit the nail on the head. As I sipped my brandy I nodded.

He continued, "I understand how you feel perhaps better than you might think, A'myshk'a. Were the situation reversed I imagine I would be lashing out as you do now, that's what happens when one gets backed into a corner, but tell me this; would you rather be locked in an Imperial safe house under the watchful guard of security agents you do not know and who do not know or care about you? Babysitting you would be just another job and I guarantee you they would not have decent Corellian brandy in stock."

"Well, when you put it that way..." I couldn't help the little grin and was relieved to see the expression on his face soften. The tiny shadow of doubt receded but my anger at Jyrki remained.

"So, what was the shouting about?" he asked after another lengthy silence.

"Just my uncle reminding me that I am as stupid as I am brazen." I said. "He made me promise not to go after Jyrki on my own. I protested."

Thrawn raised an eyebrow. "You were considering that as an option?"

I nodded.

"Then he's right."

"I know that!" I said stamping my foot like a spoiled child. "That's what makes it so annoying. I feel utterly useless, helpless. I don't like it!"

"No, I don't imagine you do." He said gently.

I just gave him a look that said *what would you know about this?* He ignored it.

"He's quite mad, your friend Jyrki. Perhaps when he first broke into your flat in the palace to rescue you, this wasn't the case. He was truly concerned and thought he was doing the right thing but something tipped him over the edge. When you did not go along with his rescue attempt it pushed him in the wrong direction. You became a mission. He kidnapped you believing you would come around to his way of thinking. That turned into a battle of wills." He sighed. "In his head he is trying to save you from what he believes is the ultimate evil. He is obsessed, violent and very clever. This is not a particularly good combination." He paused for a second. "He knows you well enough to know what buttons to push and I think that somewhere along the line he is hoping you will try to find him, in fact I am certain he is actually counting on this fact. Setting you up, driving you in a certain direction. Your uncle is right. The best thing you can do right now, is nothing which is the hardest thing of all."

I wondered, as we stood together in his kitchen drinking the smoothest brandy in the galaxy how it was he always knew what to say. Suddenly, I didn't want to lose him or these quiet moments that lay between us, open and easy. He had never talked down to me. He had always been honest and for reasons I could not fathom he seemed to enjoy my company. I just looked at him and my heart just seemed to stop. Almost since the day I had started to work for the Empire this man had been in my life. He had become my friend, my shoulder to cry on or sleep on and something much, much more, something indefinable and precious. He had shared his world with me, his language, and in as much as he was able to his life and its secrets. He watched me watch him but he kept his expression unreadable. Silence hung in the air as I put the brandy glass down and went to him. Wrapped my good arm around his waist and held him tightly. I heard the clink of his glass against the stone of the

counter, and didn't fight it when he lifted my face upwards, the world paused for a moment and then he kissed me gently. He tasted of brandy and hope. His hands were warm, one on the small of my back, the other under my hair, around the back of my neck, pulling me to him closing the small black hole that had threatened to open up earlier. I would not let Jyrki destroy me; destroy my life and all that was beautiful in it. I pulled back from Thrawn's embrace and looked him in the eyes. As much as my heart suddenly pounded in my chest, I had never been more certain of anything in my life.

"*Kej a'mai vamarae.*" I told him in his native language, beautiful, succinct and to the point.

He looked at me steadily for a moment, "Are you sure?" he asked.

I smiled, my face cupped in his hands. "Absolutely." I said. "I am not drunk on too much wine, my mind isn't addled and time together is something we seem to have been given. I don't want to wait any more for the perfect moment because what happens if that never comes? I don't want to die, if that's my fate, under Jyrki's hand without knowing pleasure under yours."

He nodded, his thumbs caressing my cheeks. "You are certain you wish this now, here and with me?"

I wondered why he would ask again and in such a manner. It had a strange ring of formality to it.

"Yes." I told him. "I want this, now, here and yes, with you. There is no one else."

He drew a deep breath, the expression on his face softening. "What about your shoulder?"

"You won't hurt me." I told him. "No more waiting." I said, shaking my head. Three seconds seemed like three millennia.

He said nothing as he took me by the hand from the kitchen to his bedroom. In the soft light of the small bedside lamp I watched him as he undressed me slowly, carefully as though I were a precious piece of art until I stood before him naked, except for the shoulder brace. I felt like a small wounded avian, a little scared and a lot foolish but before I had time to contemplate any of this he had removed his own clothes giving me something else to look at, something else to think about besides my own shyness. He watched my face as I studied him. It wasn't that I had never seen a man naked before but never one like him and certainly not like this. To my eyes he was extraordinary and I wasn't quite sure what to make of this new situation.

He smiled, sensing my hesitation and uncertainty. "Even with that ridiculous shoulder contraption, do you know how beautiful you are?" He brushed my face with his fingertips.

Beautiful? I had never thought of myself in that way, but through his eyes that is what I was. Even wounded and scarred, he saw beyond all that and

the intensity of the moment made me blush. He didn't give me time to contemplate an answer. Under the touch of his fingers, I trembled and felt that wonderful swell of desire that seemed to bloom out of the deepest part of my being. His mouth followed where his fingers had explored, my neck, my shoulder, and my body. I know I whimpered but the sound seemed very far away. When he paused I opened my eyes, wondering what was wrong only to see him smile. He pulled me to the bed and under his guidance; I lay down, hesitant, expectant and uncertain of what to do. Looking at him as he lay beside me I wondered if maybe I had gotten in over my head. This was uncharted territory and he definitely had the tactical advantage.

He traced the vivid white scar on my thigh, the permanent reminder of our time on Myrkr. I watched as his fingers danced on my skin, creating sparks with each contact. His touch was slow, languid and teasing. I felt as though I had swallowed a power coupling which had gone into over load inside of me. I looked into his face searching for answers, or at the very least a how-to manual.

"What are you doing?" I gasped as his hands executed some very interesting manoeuvres.

"In order to know how to achieve the ultimate goal in any ...first strike situation... it is of vital importance one knows exactly how best to navigate the strengths and weaknesses of one's opponent." He whispered.

"This is your plan of attack?" I asked, shivering under his touch. "You're going to explore me to death?"

He gave me a wolf's smile. "You require very careful study, my dear. Who knows what little surprises you might have in store for me?"

"You make it sound like I might explode or something." I said.

"One can only hope...."

When I didn't have an answer for that, he laughed.

Careful of my shoulder he shifted his weight to lie on top of me, covering me. His skin was warm on mine. Where he was gentle, I was nervous.

"I won't break." He said.

With my free hand I traced the contours of his muscles, the strength in his arms, the beauty of his face, the silk of his hair. Still, my fingers trembled, tentative and shy.

"Let go, A'myshk'a." he murmured, giving me the permission I needed. His mouth explored mine, slowly, carefully. I returned his kisses shyly but passion was beginning to win over my cautiousness and my nerves. "Let go your fear and follow me." He whispered in my ear, the warmth of his words causing goose bumps to ripple along my arms.

I let the breath I had been holding out slowly and pulled him to me. His scent was a spice-drug and desire clouded my brain. He was taking his time, careful and calculating. Allowing me to explore and map out the unknown that

was his body. Touch and taste, murmur and sigh. This was not some mad hurried romp in the sand, or an angry power play borne out of lust and drink, this was an elegant waltz and I was a beginner. With his hands, his mouth, his body along with words he whispered in his native tongue he began to teach me how to move to the oldest dance in the galaxy.

Time spun in ever direction. Under Thrawn's artful guidance I learned what it meant to be bound to another in every sense of the word. I was awkward and uncertain but he was patient and, as he had told me once before, an excellent teacher. In this dance, he owned me but somewhere deep inside of me I knew that I also owned him. He moved like water as I arched my back to meet him and gasped as our bodies collided. The power coupling which burned itself to a fury deep within me finally exploded. For a moment I thought the galaxy around me had exploded along with it, but it hadn't and slowly, in his arms I came back to myself. When reality hit coupled, cradled, and safe, I wept silently.

"*Tjen'täjsei.*" He whispered in my ear. *Complete*, he had said. I looked up at him, not understanding what he had meant. He did not explain.

He stroked damp hair from my face. "Are you in pain, did I hurt you?" he asked. Fingertips brushed at my tears.

I shook my head. How could I explain the terrible, wonderful muddle of emotions that boiled inside my body and brain? I couldn't think straight, let alone make sense of how I felt. One of life's greatest little mysteries had just been very eloquently explained to me. There was no going backwards. The world had just shifted around me once again and I was in a place I had never been before. This was a moment, small and rare, and I was afraid that if I blinked I would miss it.

"Then why are you crying?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea." And the tears turned to laughter. I reached up and stroked his face, his hair, while he just smiled and shook his head.

"Women, no matter the species, are a complete and utter mystery sometimes."

I just looked at him and then asked. "Can we do that again? It was ...fun."

This remark earned me his trademark arched eyebrow and a smirk. "Given the appropriate amount of time, that could be arranged."

We separated and shifted to accommodate each other's body, curled one around the other. Pale blue wrapped around pale white. It was an extraordinary moment and had it been one of Bel's romance novels maybe we would have stayed like that for a long time, staring into each other's eyes, perhaps finding just the right words to say, sweet and caring but he just watched me silently and I was too restless at heart to lie still.

"I didn't finish my drink." I told him after a moment. "It would be a shame to waste such good brandy."

He just smiled and we got up. He handed me his robe as he slipped on his pants. I vanished to the 'fresher and when I came back he was leaning against the counter in the kitchen, glass in hand more or less where we had started from but somehow, now the world looked completely different. The silence in the kitchen was deafening and suddenly I was scared but for whole different reasons than two hours ago. I took a huge gulp of my brandy, nearly choking on it because I did not know what to do or say. He watched me carefully for a few moments and then slipped his arm around my waist and drew me to him. His kiss wasn't timid or gentle; it was extremely possessive, quelling the irrational fears and questions that rattled through my addled head.

"Better?" he asked.

I nodded. "How do you always know what to do?"

"I am extremely good at reading the situation at hand." He said.

"Oh." I said taking another drink.

He just smiled.

"This complicates things doesn't it?" I asked after a while.

He made a face. "No more than it already was, but it does change things a little."

It was my turn to make a face.

"It is what it is, sj'iu tekari." He said gently. "You worry about things that haven't happened. I see that on your face. Don't ascribe actions to me based on your past bad experiences with another. I am not that person. Let go of your ghosts."

"So you mean you are not going to unceremoniously dump me now that you have had your wicked way with me?" I was teasing but there was a sliver of truth in what I said.ook his head. "Where do you get these ideas from?"

"Bel, mostly."

He raised an eyebrow. "Well, I guess I shall have to work on changing your views on this subject."

"Well," I said with a shy smile. "That could be fun."

He laughed and then after what seemed a quiet eternity, with his hand on the small of my back, led me once again into the bedroom.

"Now what?" I asked, feeling very loose end-ish and awkward. "I'm not tired."

"Good, neither am I." He said.

"Then why are we going back to bed?"

"The appropriate amount of time has passed." He breathed in my ear.

"Oh..." My heart thumped and I gulped at my drink before he removed the glass from my hand.

“Hey!” I protested.

He took me back to bed, substituting my brandy with his lips. A trade I wasn't going to dispute.

“Is your shoulder up for this?” he asked, stroking the one that wasn't all strapped up.

“Pain management is part of the Bunduki training.” I told him.

“What else is part of this training?” he asked with a wolfish grin.

I just looked at him. “Don't you have a galaxy to save or meetings or something?”

“In two hours actually, I have budget talks with HC and Palpatine.”

I laughed. “You hardly slept at all and you have to meet with the High Command and the Emperor? Don't you need to get *some* sleep before dealing with them?”

“Chiss,” He said, “have amazing stamina.” and then he kissed me before I could find a suitable retort. The rest of our conversation was more or less wordless.

The worst thing about coming back to my flat was not facing the destruction of my things, or the fact that I was alone trying to clean it up with one working arm but the strange sense of violation I felt. That Jyrki had broken in and done all this and no one had been alerted, no one had heard or seen anything amazed me. When I had expressed this thought to the security agent in charge of my case he had merely shrugged.

“The older part of the Palace isn't as easy to protect, Miss.” He had said. “I would suggest you request accommodations in the new residence wing. We have much better security and better surveillance systems there.”

I had nodded but I knew that was the last place I wanted to move. I had seen the new residence wing and it had reminded me of a prison not a place to live. Too many locks, too many security guards and far too many holo vid recorders keeping track of every little thing a person did. Plus I hated the design and the more modern style of architecture. It was a trade off, safety versus privacy.

By mid afternoon I was tired and the pile of destroyed clothes and things to be thrown out was far larger than any of the other piles I had started. I was furious at the wanton destruction of my material life but there wasn't much I could do about any of it. I was taking a break with a cup of tea when a soft knock at the broken door interrupted my feeling sorry for my self.

“Hey, Rim Girl!” Shiv said as he walked in. “I heard you were here thought you might want some company.” He motioned for me to stay seated on the couch and came to me. “What a bloody mess.” He whistled.

“This is tidy compared to three hours ago!” I told him.

He gave me a hug and did that kiss kiss thing. “You poor thing. Maintenance says they'll have the new door by tomorrow afternoon and security said there will be a better lock system in place. I came by to see how you were holding up?”

“I'm doing okay, just tired.” I said.

“Well I don't imagine you would get much sleep after this.” He agreed. I had to bite my tongue. “I heard a rumour that it was Admiral Thrawn who saved the day?” He was digging but I didn't mind.

I nodded. “He happened to be with me when I discovered this mess.” I said.

“I heard he took you in, ‘protective custody?’”

I made a face. “Oh for goodness sakes!” I swatted his arm. “You are so nosy!”

“Well...?”

“He has a place away from the palace and a spare room. He was kind enough to offer it and I was too much of a mess to think twice about accepting. It's not what you think!” I said but it was exactly what he was thinking and I was pretty sure he could read that on my face.

“Uh huh!” he nodded giving me a grin then his expression turned more serious. “Are you really okay? I mean first that,” he pointed to my shoulder, “And now this, you don't have much luck.” He said.

“I don't know about that. I was lucky I wasn't here when the break in happened. I mean it's not as if I am in the best of shape to be fighting at the moment.”

“When you put it that way...” he looked around the room and caught sight of the pile of wrecked clothes. “I guess we need to go shopping soon?”

I grinned. “Yeah, they didn't approve of my wardrobe I guess, every single one of my dresses was shredded.” I sighed. “The girl at HR said to provide a list of everything that was damaged or destroyed. Apparently news of this break in reached the Emperor and he was ‘most distressed’ to hear about it. They said they'll replace everything but I'd have to shop for my own clothes. Cati will have something to say about the destruction of her works of art I am sure.”

There was a moment's silence and then Shiv looked at me seriously. “Why would someone do this to you? Does this have something to do with that fight thing that almost killed you? I heard rumours that someone put a contract out on you.”

I sat back. “No, this is a different thing, not related.” I said wondering if the part about the contract on me was true. If it was, things could get awfully interesting and awkward around here pretty fast. I hoped it was just gossip doing what it usually did, running wild.

“So put me to work and maybe we can go out for Corellian cheese cake afterwards or does the Admiral have you on a strict curfew?” he grinned. I rolled my eyes and with Shiv at my side began to finish the job of cleaning up and sorting out my wrecked home.

By the time we had done as much as it was possible it was later than I had thought. I turned down Shiv’s invitation for late night tea and desert at our favourite café and went back to Thrawn’s. While I wasn’t under any sort of curfew, I was reasonably sure that something would be said about me staying up all night sorting out my flat, doctors orders to rest and all that, I didn’t need that sort of grief. The apartment was empty and silent. I glanced at the chronometer and sighed. It seemed that late nights were the norm rather than the exception when one worked for the Empire. I washed up, changed into night clothes and made myself tea. I was bone weary but not tired and I knew that lying in bed would be futile and annoying so I curled up on the couch with a book.

He came in well over an hour later. He glanced at me but said nothing and the look on his face told me to leave him alone so I did. I knew that look well enough because I had worn one just like many a time after a normal day with Lord Vader. I went to the kitchen and poured us both a brandy. I handed him the glass wordlessly when he joined me on the couch twenty minutes later. He had showered, his hair was still wet and he smelled like spice and soap. He had changed out of his uniform and, wrapped in his robe, he was ready for bed. He sipped his drink thoughtfully and then reached over and kissed me on the forehead.

“Thank you.” He said.

“Were you in meetings all this time?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, if there is one thing the leaders of this Empire love to do it is to listen to them selves talk.”

“I take it they weren’t productive meetings?”

“Sometimes I have to really wonder how this Empire can run at all. It is no wonder there is a Rebellion brewing. If the bureaucracy and self interest of the majority of the advisors and High Command doesn’t destroy us, then the megalomania of the Emperor will.” He told me with an angry shake of his head.

“I thought you were involved in budget discussion?”

He nodded. “That was this morning. Military spending is out of proportion with the money that needs to be assigned to infrastructure and support systems, especially for some of the Outer Rim planets. The way these people talk you would think that nothing exists beyond the Mid Rim. It is no wonder that smuggling is out of control and the petty thugs who run the Outer Rim planets have more control over the populations than the Imperial garrisons and outposts do.” He shook his head. “Zaarin’s new TIE designs

were also unveiled. Very impressive, but the costs of producing these ships will far out weigh any advantage they will give us over the X-Wing designs the Rebellion is using. It will be very interesting to follow this project and all its possibilities.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “To top it all off, I heard the most ridiculous thing I have heard in a long time this afternoon. The Emperor has started building an improved design of battle station, to replace the original one that was destroyed at Yavin.”

I blinked at him, it was the most critical I had heard him speak in a long time. “Why does he want to build another one?” I asked in disbelief.

Thrawn shrugged. “Ego or perhaps he didn’t like it that his last toy was broken, I have no idea.” He said. “Vader not was overly impressed and made no bones about showing his displeasure. Sparks were flying between him and Palpatine.”

I couldn’t help the short laugh. “Lord Vader is rarely impressed with anything like that. He was against the first one as well; he thought it was a total waste of time and money, man power and technology. He wasn’t quiet about it then so it doesn’t surprise me that he hasn’t changed his mind.”

He nodded. “Yes, I am well aware of how Lord Vader feels on this subject. We have often discussed it.” He said. “At least he is honest about his opinion on this matter and not a weak minded fool, nodding his head in agreement to further his career.” He sipped his drink. “The problem is that in order to pay for this monstrosity taxes will have to be increased and there is a new demand for slaves to construct it.” He spoke the word slave with utter distaste. “How Palpatine and the rest of his yes men think this will hold the Empire together, is completely beyond me. Fear will only serve to drive the already growing unrest further rather than quiet it. Hate and fear are not good motivators, despite what most people seem to think.”

I sighed. “Maybe you should run for Emperor.” I joked. It earned me a slight smile.

“I have no interest in ruling an Empire, sj’iu tekari; I wish to see law and order in place but that will not happen if the current government insists on following this narrow minded path. You cannot marginalise the alien and Outer Rim populations and expect them to cheerfully tow the line.”

“Can you change anything?” I asked.

“That will remain to be seen.” He said. “It is not going to be easy with the likes of Tigellinus, Zaarin and the rest of the council of twelve, along with the Moff, bickering over how gets more power and rights over territories. It is a waste of time. These men who are supposed to helping run this Empire efficiently are effectively driving it deeper and deeper into debt.” He shook his head.

“It doesn’t make you very happy, being here on Coruscant, does it?”

He looked at me for a moment, reached over and caressed my face. "Forgive me, I am tired. Normally I would not let these matters get under my skin." He sipped at his brandy thoughtfully. "I usually enjoy watching the political dance that goes on at these meetings but today it was just tedious." He said. "I apologise, here I am burdening you with all this nonsense and I have not even asked you how you are?"

"Well, I am fine." I said with a smile.

He finished his brandy and nodded. "You look exhausted and I'm tired so let's go to bed." He said. I didn't see any reason to disagree. After cleaning my teeth I joined him and curled up into his warmth. I lay in the dark of the room, in the circle of his arms with a billion things on my mind but no words to express them. I sighed.

"Stop thinking and go to sleep." He told me, stroking my back. Surprisingly enough, under his hypnotic touch, I did but it didn't last long.

I woke with a start, sitting straight up in the bed gasping for breath. Whatever had brought me out of my sleep did not linger in my waking mind long enough for me to remember, but the fear it left behind was enough. The disorientation receded slowly and as I remembered where I was I realised that I was alone.

I got out of bed and pulled a blanket over my shoulders then went in search of Thrawn. I found him on the balcony dressed in nothing more than the loose pants he slept in. He was seated in a chair with his legs stretched out and crossed one over the other and a cup of tea in his hands. I wondered how he could sit out in the cold of the pre dawn wearing next to nothing. Without the blanket I had slung across my shoulders, I would be shivering.

He looked up at me when I stepped out onto the balcony. "Did I wake you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Is there more?" I asked pointing at his cup. He nodded so I went back inside to fetch myself a cup of tea.

"So why are you not asleep?" He asked.

"I might ask you the same question."

He laughed slightly. "Yes, well sometimes I need to think, to meditate more than I need to sleep. What is your excuse?"

"Bad dreams, but I don't remember what they were about." I told him.

"They will pass." He said gently.

I just nodded then asked. "What is on your mind? The meetings?"

He didn't say anything for a moment, sipping at his tea and staring out into the never sleeping city. "Partially, mostly I am trying to sort out my next moves within the confines of my time here." He said. "I have certain goals I wish to accomplish. I have to work out the best way to achieve these things. I find that sitting in the quiet of the night often aides me in my thinking." "t's too chilly out here to think, but then again you don't get cold do you?" I asked.

He grinned and shook his head; we had often had this conversation. "Not like you do. I find it quite refreshing actually, but then I don't come from the giant ball of sand with an over abundance of solar power."

I shook my head at his teasing. I was leaning with my back against the balcony railing, the soft wind tugged at my hair. "I like my sandbox home!" I said.

"Mmm, I know." And we looked at each other and smiled. We came from opposite ends of the galaxy, from planets with climates that could not be more diametrically opposed and some how we still managed to get along. I marvelled at how comfortable I felt with him, here in this place. It should not have surprised me really; we had known each other for a long time and had shared a lot. Perhaps the fact that actual time spent in each other's company was limited and precious made these moments together more remarkable. I didn't know and I wasn't sure I wanted to know either. Just like some secrets, some mysteries were not meant to be unravelled. When I truly thought about it, aside from my family, this man knew me better than anyone else in the galaxy, perhaps even better than my family.

"When will they get your flat sorted out?" he asked breaking me out of my thoughts.

"The door will be done tomorrow, I mean today, and the cleaning crew is scheduled for the day after. I have to be there to let them in because the new door comes with a new, high tech locking system. Then if I understood the HR girl right they will deliver new furniture to replace the damaged stuff in the afternoon after the cleaning crew is done. So I guess things will be finished at the end of the week."

"So you will stay in that flat and not move some place else?"

"The alternatives are not all that appealing. The new residency wing is more like a prison and off palace living is expensive." I said. "Besides, I really like living in the older part of the palace and all my stuff, well what's left of it now, is there."

He nodded. "How do you feel about it?"

I sighed. "Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"Scared." I said.

"Then why stay there?" he asked.

I sighed. "Because if I do leave then Jyrki wins and I lose by giving into my fears. I won't do that. I just don't really know how to live this way. It is starting to feel as though I am waiting for him to make his next move rather than live my own life."

"So you will choose pride and fear over safety and peace of mind?"

"You make it sounds as though I have a choice." I snapped.

He drew a deep breath. “A’myshk’a, I have a proposition for you. One I have been considering discussing with you for a long time.”

I nodded, listening.

“I know that you want to move back into your own home, maintain your independence and I understand that but I want you to keep the key to this place.” I went to speak but he held up his hand to silence me. “I am more often than not off world and this perfectly good apartment, which I own outright, is empty and unused for long periods of time. After your kidnapping I thought about it carefully then I had your name added to the papers on this flat. Should anything ever happen to me, ownership will be transferred to you.” He said.

“Why would you do that?” I asked very quietly.

“Partially because I want to know that you have a safe place to go that is away from the confines of the Imperial Palace and secondly I would feel a lot better knowing someone who truly loved art would be looking after mine.” He said. “And I wanted you to know that you are welcome here, any time whether I am here or not. This place is as much yours now, as it is mine.” He said and then watched my face carefully.

I had no idea how to respond to this.

“Is this a good silence or a bad silence?” he asked after what seemed an eternity, beckoning me with his hand to come closer.

I took a deep breath, put down my cup and came to him. He took my hand in his and pulled at me to sit on his lap. I just rested my head on his shoulder. His fingertips brushed the wind from my hair and I could feel the beat of his heart as I leaned against his chest. No one had ever given me what he had, the beautiful books and treasures. My hand went to the pendant I never took off. Now he was giving me a safe haven and I had no idea how to put into words how I felt. He watched me carefully, waiting.

“Why did you wait until now to tell me?” I asked. “It’s been well over a year since that *delightful* little event.”

He nodded. “I wasn’t certain you wouldn’t see it as interference and then you left the planet for Tatooine. I felt you would be safer there than on Coruscant. Telling you wasn’t necessary, but now,” he shrugged slightly, “well, the situation has shifted somewhat.”

“The situation?”

“You and I. *This* situation.” He said looking at me as he lifted my chin up to make sure I got the full meaning of his words.

“Oh.”

“I am reasonably certain had I made this offer some time ago it would have been very politely refused outright. Lack of independence is not one of your problems and I suspect you would have felt awkward about co habitation in what you would see as my space.”

I nodded. “You’re right about that. So why now?”

He shook his head a little and smiled. “The desire to keep you chained to a desk under the watchful eye of storm troopers is starting to become overly tempting. This seemed a better compromise.”

“That’s not really an answer, you know.”

“Of course it is, it’s just maybe not the one you expected to hear and, for the record, you have still not answered me.”

“Because I don’t know what to say.” I told him after a moment. “Thank you seems too small for something so huge.”

He stroked my hair. “Will you consider the offer then?”

“Yes.” I nodded, yawning. “But you won’t mind if I chose to stay in my own place?”

He shook his head. “Of course not, I merely wanted to give you a second option.” There was just a hint of untruth in his words but in this case I didn’t mind.

“Options are good to have.” I nodded. “Now, will you come back to bed with me? It’s freezing out here and I don’t need to watch the sun rise for a third day in a row.” I asked getting up.

His answer was simply a smile.

“Can you move it slowly?” the Doctor asked.

My shoulder immobilizer lay on the examining table beside me and the doctor was man- handling my arm and shoulder.

I moved it and had to bite down on the squeal of pain.

He nodded and then man-handled it some more. I gritted my teeth.

“Well, it is much better than I thought it would be. Taisto Kjestyll has informed me he will be involved in your physiotherapy.” He said.

“You spoke to my master?”

The doctor nodded. “He came to me. We have discussed the best course of action for the quickest path of healing. Now with bacta injections and the pins holding the bone fragments in place your shoulder socket is healing nicely. I think you will recover fully but it will be painful for a while yet. When you smashed the joint back in place you not only smashed the bone but you damaged the muscle and ligaments, even bacta can’t heal everything quickly.” He told me and after easing the terrible stiffness out of the muscles that had not been used since the Bunduki fight, he then stuck two very long and painful needles of bacta into my shoulder. I just gritted my teeth and shut my eyes. I figured that my session with Master Kjestyll later on would be ever harder. I wasn’t wrong.

The new training room was perfect but I wasn’t. Master Kjestyll spent two hours trying to teach me how to breathe while he was manipulating my arm and my shoulder.

“Breathe out, child.” He said as he move my arm in a way that made me gasp.

“Ow!” I finally complained.

He stopped and looked at me. “This pain will pass when the ligaments and the muscles relearn what they are supposed to do. You need to stop fighting it and breathe as I showed you along with the movements.”

I sighed.

“Now concentrate.” He said and the torture continued for another hour.

My day had been mostly about sifting through paperwork, sorting out my flat and waiting for people to come to do the things they were supposed to do and pain. So when I returned to Thrawn’s flat, I was grateful for his gentleness and good supply of excellent wine. He had cooked and after dinner we sat on the couch, the holonet babbling in the back ground. My arm was now in a small, removable sling. Everything was much easier without that horrible brace, even sitting was more comfortable. He listened as I told him about my day, trying not to exaggerate the agonies and failing miserably. He just smiled.

“So, I can go back to work and I can move back to my own flat tomorrow. Then I’ll be out of your hair.” I told him.

“You are not in my hair.” He said. “You have work at the moment? I thought you were still under rest orders and that Vader was off world?”

I made a face. “I always have work to do, it’s the Empire. We’d drown in bureaucracy given half a chance.” I sighed. “It doesn’t matter if Lord Vader is around or not. In fact it’s often worse when he’s not here.” I explained. “And yes, he’s off-world. He got called away suddenly to Mimban. The governor of the planet contacted him saying that the rebel he’s been looking for was being held in custody. He went off like a shot. I have no idea when he’ll be back. He’s incredibly focused on finding this boy.” I said.

“Well, that doesn’t surprise me.” Thrawn said.

“Oh?”

“Luke Skywalker is his son.”

“You know this?” I asked after a moment's pause.

He nodded.

“How?”

He gave me a slight smile. “This is the Empire, there are few secrets kept here from people like me. So, yes I know. I have done for some time now.”

“So much for secrecy.” I muttered, not arguing the fact that he had not actually answered my question.

Thrawn raised an eyebrow and for some reason I found this hilarious and I started to laugh and I couldn’t stop. My laughing jag turned into a short unexplainable crying jag followed by more laughter completed by spending

the rest of the night in bed with the most amazing man I knew. For the fourth morning in a row I was awake to watch the sun rise. It was a good thing I could go back to my own apartment, there were far too many distractions here and I desperately needed my sleep.

It was strange to be back in my own flat. The furniture that Jyrki had destroyed had been replaced and security in this part of the palace had been increased, although not by much. I had spent the afternoon with Shiv clothes shopping, an hour of which had been spent at Cati’s. She had been both stunned and delighted at my predicament. Shocked at the destruction of her creations and pleased that she got replace my entire formal and semi formal dress wardrobe with her latest designs and creations. She had not wanted to redo the same designs as I had before but there were two dresses I begged her for and after considerable whining on my part and a *‘please for the love of peace do as she asks’* look from Shiv she relented. The order was huge and would take her several weeks to complete. But she had promised not only to have a dress ready for the unveiling of the Executor but also to have my favourite dress redone in time for Winter Fete and for that I had hugged her.

After our visit to Cati we had gone to Bam’s hair salon. Bam was horrified when he saw me but in difference to the first time we had met I did not threaten to break his fingers when he played with my hair, I just let him work his magic on it. When we were done for the day, we polished off the afternoon by having afternoon coffee and desert in our favourite café.

As I had expected, Shiv gave me the third degree.

“So what was all that about at Cati’s?” he asked. “You tell her your secrets but not me? I’m hurt, Rim Girl!”

I made a face and stifled a yawn. Cati had asked me how my ‘gentleman’ was and I had blushed enough while answering to raise some eyebrows.

She had grinned and simply said. “Glad to know all is well in your love life, at least.”

Shiv had watched this back and forth with great interest but wisely had kept his mouth shut. Now we were alone in the café he wasn’t so circumspect.

“It’s not a secret to you that I am spending time with him.” I told him.

Shiv had given me the hairy eyeball. “I guess I wasn’t aware of just how close you two were becoming. You usually do a much better job of hiding how you feel.” I had just made a face and he had laughed. “Don’t worry, Rim-Girl, your secret is safe with me. Just don’t advertise it to the rest of the court.” He said. “Your Admiral doesn’t make a lot of friends even if he has the Emperor’s ear and favour. I am quite certain that Rufaan Tigellinus would leap at the chance to have Thrawn disgraced somehow, I would hate to see him use you for that.”

I nodded. “That wasn’t my plan.” I said.

Shiv made a face. "You don't plan for anything, Merly, that's your trouble." He said.

I just sighed. "I know that, but Shiv how does one plan for working for Lord Vader and everything that goes along with it?"

That had made him laugh. "I don't know." He said. "It's a miracle you are still alive!"

"More than you will ever know." I said quietly.

He just shook his head and the topic moved on to more mundane things.

Once I was back in my flat, surrounded by new furniture and new clothes I wondered about Shiv's comment on my not planning anything. It was hard enough trying to keep up with Lord Vader and his ever changing schedule let alone trying to sort out my own life. I was grateful to be free of the shoulder torture device. The small sling was a lot easier to deal with and the latest bacta injections had made a huge difference. I used the dermal patches the doctor had given me for the pain and did the exercises Master Kjestyll had given me as home work. My latest check up had shown I was healing well enough which was a good thing because I was certain the doctor was getting tired of seeing me. As I put away my new clothes, I wondered about what was driving Jyrki to do these things to me. Thinking about him led me to think about the Jedi Temple. I had left the box of my treasures at Thrawn's, under the bed in his spare room. It was the only thing I had not taken back with me when I returned to my flat. I didn't want the holocrons or Thrawn's letters to me in a place that wasn't secure. After putting everything away I sat in the living room with a cup of tea. It was true, I didn't plan anything. Shiv was right.

Sitting was not the answer and before I gave myself a chance to consider what I was doing I changed into clothes easy to move in, grabbed my satchel and flashlight and was out of my flat. I thought about Shiv's words as I made my way through the empty hallways to the little library which was quiet. I switched on just the side wall lights and locked the door behind me. The bookshelf that covered the secret passage had not been moved and it took every ounce of my strength and a bit of force push to shift it enough that I could slip behind it through the panel that slid opened when I activated the lock. For the longest time I just stared at the pitch black hole and then taking a deep breath I stepped through it, shutting the panel behind me.

The journey through the tunnel, under the city to the Temple seemed longer this time, probably because I was on my own. There were moments when I could feel panic rise but I fought it. When I reached the other end I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I opened the door and slipped back into the only place my uncle had ever told me to stay away from.

The temple was eerie and silent. I didn't stop to explore as I made my way back to the main library. I was grateful for my perfect sense of direction. It didn't take me long to reach the great archive room. I stood in the great hallway and looked around at the endless rows of data, holo books and files. If there were ghosts around then they were staying out of sight.

In the holocron diary my birth mother had mentioned the archives many times. She spoke of the head librarian, Jocasta Nu with a comical mixture of awe and fear. She had also mentioned the data terminals that stored all the indexes and help files. It didn't take me long to find one and I jumped with fight when it activated under the touch of my hand. For the next hour I spent utterly immersed in learning how to use the antique system. Once I had figured out how the index worked the rest was a lot easier. I wanted to find Jyrki in the system but personal records were under classified files and I had not figured out how to slice through the security. I wasn't even sure I could. I was able to find a full map of the temple, which surprisingly enough gave a listing of who lived where. My heart leaped in my chest when I saw Akali L'uanna's name pop up. I memorised how to find her room and then went back to my search for Jyrki. Eventually, I found him but it hadn't been easy. While he had kept his first name his last name was different. I was glad there had been an image of him as well. There had been no mistaking those blue eyes. He had shared a dorm room with three other boys. I figured out how to get there and without considering anything else, that's where I went.

The Temple was huge. Next to the Imperial Palace it was the largest building I had ever been in. I could not imagine it during the light of day, filled with people and I was a little sad that I would never know it in this way. Being careful about what I touched, I made my way through the halls and up the stairs to find the dorm room where Jyrki had slept. Many beings had been killed here but there were no bodies. I wondered what had become of them. It had only been twenty three or so years since the massacre here, if the dead had been left where they had been slain, the remains would still be around. Another mystery that would probably never be answered.

The living quarters in the Temple were sparse but spacious. My birth mother had often talked about the lack of possessions that a Jedi owned and it showed in how they had lived. I found the room easily and walked through the door when it opened. I shone the torch and looked around. There were four beds, four dressers, four small desks and one large closet. I took a deep breath and stepped into the room. My heart pounded in my chest but I refused to let my fear to get the best of me. I found my center as I had been taught so many times to do and began to touch the furniture.

The memories were scattered and fractured. I had trouble sorting them out. Pictures of children I didn't know flashed through my head, laughter and tears echoed in my mind as though they were real.

The third bed was where Jyrki had slept. I don't know if it was my connection to him or that I was in tune with him but the visions that I saw were powerful and vivid. I sighed when the images released me. I began to open drawers and look through them. His clothes were still there, all that he had owned still sat in the drawers. It reminded me that the people who had lived here had not left willingly; they had been killed quickly and violently. The beds had not been made and it there was a strange sense in the room as though the boys might return at any moment. I pulled out some of the clothes and looked at them. They were small tunics, reminding me that he had been a little boy when all hell had broken loose here. Some of the things I touched gave up memories and some did not. In the space of half an hour I had learned more about Jyrki from his past than I had in all the time I had known him in person.

He had been a quiet, wilful boy. He was not the instigator in some of the pranks that were played but he went along with them. He had not laughed much, even as a small boy and that made me sad but I didn't know why.

In the small desk drawer I found a lightsaber. I touched it but it did not give up any particular memories. The weapon was generic; Jyrki had not made it he had only used it for practice. I took it out and looked at it. I had seen Lord Vader use his often enough that I knew how to turn it on. The instant hum of the brilliant blue blade gave me a start and I dropped it. The blade vanished instantly. A safety mechanism turned it off the moment I let it go. I picked it up off the floor and studied it closely then tucked it in my satchel. I had not wanted to touch or keep the one my mother had sent to me, but this one was nothing more than a weapon. I thought it might be of use.

I searched further but found nothing else. I guessed that even as small children the Jedi initiates took the rules seriously and did not keep any personal possessions. I was about to turn away when I thought about this for a moment. Maybe Jedi younglings were brought up to believe in no possessions and no attachments but that was not how children were. I sat on the bed for a moment and tried to think where I would hide my precious things if I were forbidden to have them.

I looked under the bed. I looked under the bed's mattress. I went through the clothes drawers again, emptying them out, looking for false bottoms and hidden compartments. Nothing. I went back to the desk and began to search through it. My fingers found what they were looking for.

The false back on the small bottom drawer had been cleverly designed. The memory showed me Jyrki making it in the quiet hours of the dark. I saw him put it together and the vision showed me how to unlock it. The soft click was rewarding and I pulled the tiny secret box out of its hiding place. It buzzed in my hand and I opened it cautiously.

He had lined this small box with a soft swatch of fabric. Lying in this cloth were two things. One was a simple ring, a man's wedding band and the other was a pendant. The locket opened up to show a tiny holo-image of a young couple holding a baby and a lock of dark black hair. I wrapped these items up in the small cloth and slipped them in my bag. They had secrets they wanted to give up. I had not touched the wedding band and the locket had not been locked shut. Underneath the cloth at the bottom of the tiny box was a very small holo-transmitter. The kind used to send short messages. I didn't activate it. I just slipped in long with the other treasures into my satchel.

I tried to put the things I had disturbed back the way I had found them and when I was satisfied that at least on first glance no one would know anyone had been here I left.

I had no idea how much time had passed or how late it was. I wasn't tired but I was suddenly aware of where I was and what had happened here. The overpowering sense of evil that I had felt the last time was not present but a slow sense of unease began to creep into me. A niggling itch between my shoulder blades that made me feel as though I was being observed.

I made my way back into the great library and went to stand in front of the door to the room where uncle Vahlek had found the holocrons from my mother but something whispered through me not to push my luck. With a sigh I made my way back to the safety of the Imperial Palace and my library.

I didn't bother to move the bookshelf back into place instead I shifted it as much as I could to the right of the passage and then back against the wall. At least this way it looked as though it belonged. When I closed the panel that hid the entrance to the tunnel I was relieved to see it was invisible. I left the library quietly and made my way back to my flat ignoring the sensation of being watched.

I sat down on the couch and emptied the contents of the satchel. It was the holo transmitter I wanted to see. It sat in the palm of my hand and I activated it. The image of an older man appeared.

**** You don't know me son, but I am your grandfather. I don't know if this message will reach you or not but I have to hope it does. I have terrible news for you. Your parents are dead. They were killed two days ago when their ship was mistaken for a separatist's vessel and was shot down by the Republican army. They missed you so very much, Jyrki. Not a day went by where your mother did not think of you, hope for you and pray for you.*

You were just a baby when the Jedi came to take you to the Temple. They said you were strong in the force, that one of their people had sensed your powers. Your family did not want to give you up but the Jedi said it was for the best. I will never believe that. I have tried a few times to come and find you but I have not been able to and so I am sending you these things, your parents would have wanted you to have them. The locket was

your mothers, it has a hologram of you all together a day after you were born. I took the image and gave her the necklace, a gift to commemorate my daughter's child. The ring was your father's wedding band, he had taken it off before the flight because his fingers always got swollen in space and it was in the jewellery box with the locket. I know that you will have no memories of these people but they created you and brought you into the galaxy. They loved you and they were your family.

*I have found a man who says he can locate you and get these items to you without raising suspicion. His name is Akosh and you will know him by his white hair. He will know how to get in touch with me should you ever need my help. I am the only living family you have left now and you are mine, I would very much like to hear from you, son. ****

My hand shook. My uncle Vahlek had delivered this message to Jyrki. I tried to think back about all the conversations I had ever had with my uncle about Jyrki. I was certain that I had never asked him if they had met before.

I picked up the locket and clasped it in my hand. There were sharp memories of Jyrki's grandfather giving to his mother. She wept tears of joy when he had placed it around her neck, but it was the second set of images that really jolted me. It was of my uncle, looking much younger, talking to a very small boy with ice blue eyes, handing him a small package and telling him to keep it very secret. Then my uncle had handed Jyrki something else and had told the small boy that should he ever need help he was to use the tiny transmitter.

"Why are you doing this, sir?" Jyrki had asked.

"I owe your grandfather a favour." Uncle Vahlek had told him, laying his hand gently upon the boy's head and then he had vanished leaving Jyrki to ponder the carefully wrapped items he held in his small hand.

I dropped the locket down as though it had stung me. My uncle had known Jyrki and he had said nothing to me about it. Why? I was surprised at how angry I was and with a very deep breath swallowed it down. I picked up the wedding ring and was overwhelmed by memories of a happy marriage. There was nothing special in the information the ring had to share, just that Jyrki looked a lot like his mother but he had his father's eyes. I knew, as I sat in my living room alone and wound up that I would have to go back into the Temple and find Jyrki's records, find out where he had come from and who his parents had been. I wondered if his grandfather still lived, though I doubted it. Most of all I wanted to know what uncle Vahlek's connection to all of this was.

I picked up the lightsaber again and studied it closely. It was an elegant weapon. Not clumsy or awkward like pistols and blasters. It had the feel of a combat stave or sword but with a far more deadly blade. I had watched Lord Vader often enough to know just how deadly a lightsaber was. I sighed and picked up everything I had found, tucked them all away in the small satchel and hid it in

my hidey hole in the bedroom. It was very late and I was tired. I got myself ready for bed and was grateful to crawl under the covers. However, instead of falling asleep like I really wanted to, I lay there awake feeling very alone and troubled. Every noise, every creak, every strange sound made me aware that I was sleeping in a flat which had recently been broken into and vandalized by a man intent on hunting me. Pride had made me insist to Thrawn that I would be fine. He had given me a look that I had not been able to decipher but had said nothing. I wanted to live my life in my own place but I was regretting this now. I missed his presence and his warmth next to me and puzzled over how I could have gotten used to that so quickly. I also missed the security that his being there gave me. For the first time in as long as I could remember I was truly scared to sleep in my own bed. I would not make this mistake again.

In the end, after an hour of tossing and turning I got up and fetched the lightsaber out of the satchel from the secret place. Only then, holding it in my hand, under the extra pillow did I fall into a restless, listless sleep. It never occurred to me that this was probably not the smartest move in the universe and that I could have accidentally turned it on while I was sleeping and sliced my head off.