

The Mirror within the Mask 1

Lord Vader paced. He hated waiting almost as much as he hated any official function at which he was required to appear. This one was especially bad as it would be simulcast across the galaxy via holonet. The Emperor had spared no expense for this event which would display the military might of his Empire to all, the unveiling of the *SSD Executor*.

The Emperor had decided that the main ceremony would be held at the Imperial Palace, reinforcing the statement that this was the center of the galaxy and the seat of power, but holo-net cameras would show the ship's unveiling from the undisclosed space dock where she had been for the past two days for cleaning and last minute repairs.

When it was time for the procession everyone was told to get into their places. I watched with some amusement as the people who were standing behind Lord Vader gave him a fairly wide berth. The only men who did not seem terribly concerned about being near him were Thrawn and Zaarin. Everyone looked amazing in their dress uniforms or finest clothes. The reception, after the speeches and actual unveiling, would be one for the largest and most extravagant in some time.

I, along with the others who had been privileged enough to join the before party but did not need to walk behind the Emperor and stand on the main dais made our way into the great hall and sat in chairs that had our names in very elegant cards on them. Shiv had arranged it so we sat together and I was grateful. Sometimes it really helped to know the person in charge of organising events.

The lights in the hall dimmed as the Emperor walked forward to address the waiting crowd. I could feel the excitement and tension ripple in the air. While for me the *Executor* was not a new toy, for most of the people attending this function and almost the rest of the galaxy watching the holonet, this would be their first glimpse of the Super Star Destroyer. No wonder they were all excited.

"Loyal citizens of the Empire I welcome you all here today, to this auspicious occasion." The Emperor began, his eerie voice echoing through the silence that the crowd below gave him. There was a pause and people clapped and cheered. The Emperor made a slight hand gesture and the hall was once again silenced.

"For over twenty years now, the Empire has over seen peace and prosperity in this great galaxy and today we crown this achievement by unveiling the newest addition to our glorious Imperial fleet. With this new ship we shall be more so than ever have the ability to maintain law and order through out this galaxy, protecting its citizens and providing the military might against outside threats that might wish to harm the peace and harmony we have worked so hard to achieve. For the last six months this latest addition to the fleet has been tried and tested, put through the most rigorous of training exercises with the very best

of men and women the Empire has to offer, so without further ado I give you the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*!"

The crowd went mad as they cheered and clapped all the while watching as a giant holonet projection suddenly displayed the space dock where the *Executor* was cradled. In a slow, languorous movement the dock released its clamps and the *Executor* began to move forward so that meter by meter the ship was revealed. Flanking the great ship were two standard sized ISD's and the scale difference produced a collective gasp of stunned amazement from the audience watching.

When the giant ship was free from the space dock film crews on board smaller more agile ships began to show footage of the *Executor* from every angle possible. Even I was impressed with this show. When they were done showing the ship off from the outside a crew that had stationed inside switched their live feed on and we suddenly were shown the bridge of the ship.

Admiral Ozzel, Captain Piett and the rest of the bridge officers all stood smartly to attention in their dress uniforms while the holo feed panned around to show off the sheer size and scale of the ship's command deck. The last image that was broadcast was the view from the forward windows and the response from the crowd in the hall said that this had done its job and the populace was suitably impressed enough to forget that not only had taxes been raised significantly in the last year to help pay for this but that shortly they would be raised again.

There were more speeches made by various other members of the High Command and Imperial Council and then we were allowed to make our way from the great hall to the room which housed the Grand ball for a very large, no expense spared reception that would turn into a party.

"Well, she's impressive." Shiv whispered in my ear as we meandered out of the hall like a herd of domestic banthas.

I nodded. "Yep. Lord Vader's baby. I hope they don't scratch the paint." That remark made Shiv laugh.

We were joined by Antygra and Ynyth when we entered the Ball room. Shiv snagged champagne glasses from a passing waiter and we all touched glasses together and toasted to the Empire.

"I have to ask," Antygra said. "Why do we need such a huge ship? Surely she can't be agile enough to go chasing down all the threats the Empire faces?"

"She'll be used more as a space oriented command center." I said. "But she's more agile and faster than you might think."

Antygra gave me a look. "Of course you would come to its defence."

I looked at Shiv for an explanation to Antygra's sudden animosity. He shrugged. "Tygs isn't happy about this because the defence budget was given a huge increase but the budget for his department has been cut by thirty percent for the second year in a row."

“I had to fire five of my people last month.” Tygs said. “You work for Vader, Merly, tell me is there really a need for all this fire power?”

I sipped my champagne. “Lord Vader doesn’t actually discuss such matters with me, but with the Rebellion doing all the damage that they have been doing, along with groups like JAN, not to mention the rise of pirates and smuggling I don’t know that I have a problem with it. The Executor makes it easier to coordinate defence from space, the command center can travel to where it is needed most as opposed to being fixed on one planet. This makes it more secure. The Rebels are less likely to be able to find it and blow it up like they would a space station or even a planet.”

Shiv nodded. “That makes sense. I heard that the costs alone from the sabotage done by the Justice Action Network could fuel half the Imperial fleet for a year. If this new ship can help sort that mess out then it’s worth it.”

Ynyth nodded her agreement. “Yeah, I heard what they did to the Corusca Line Yacht and the undersea mono rail in retaliation for Earnst Kamiel’s execution. I think I agree with Merly and Shiv. Increased Imperial defence presence is a good thing.”

Tygs shook his head. “Tell that to my family. They’ve had to sell off half their property on Corellia in order to be able to cope with the tax hikes. It seems to me that if you are really rich you get all the breaks and if you are really poor no one cares but it’s the middle class who ends up paying for everything.” He sighed and then in a whisper added. “Sometimes I wonder if the rebels aren’t right.”

I just looked at him. “You should be very careful about what you say on that topic.” I said quietly.

“Why? Are you going to report me?” he asked a little nastily.

I opened my mouth to reply but Ynyth got there first. “Hey, Tygs, leave her alone she’s in the same boat we are.”

Tygs just gave me a look. “They arrested two people in HR because of you.” He told me. “One of them was a good friend of mine.”

“What!?”

He nodded.

I looked at Shiv and then back at Antygra. “Okay someone needs to explain this because it’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

Shiv sighed. “The word going around is that you complained about the lack of security and blame HR for someone busting into your flat.”

“That’s an outright lie!” I said my loudly enough that the people around us stopped talking and looked our way.

“Keep your voice down, Merly.” Shiv hissed.

I looked at Antygra. “First of all, I did not complain to anyone about a lack of security and secondly why would I blame HR for someone breaking into the flat? That’s a security problem not a human resources issue!”

“Well, rumour is you are still on the outs with Priss.” Shiv said.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh please, I care as much about her and what she thinks as I do about the spice mines of Kessel. The break in had nothing to do with HR and I certainly did not imply otherwise.”

“The HR people are all scared of you; they half expect you to send Vader down on them at a moment’s notice. You get special treatment from the Emperor and they don’t know what to make of that. I heard the Emperor himself commented on the break in.” Tygs said.

“He did, but I didn’t talk to him about it, in fact I was surprised he even knew.” I said. “Who is starting these rumours?”

Antygra shrugged. “I heard it from Bobbyn who said he was told by a guy down in security whose sister works in HR.”

I shook my head at the way the rumour mill worked. “I can’t believe you even listen to this stuff or that you think I would be like that!” he went to say something but I wasn’t finished yet. “I have family out on the Rim, and they suffer because of the tax hikes and the increased patrols as well. My father runs a docking bay and transport service for Sarlacc’s sake; do you think it’s easy for him? He doesn’t get any breaks because I work here, in fact if anything it’s made things worse.”

“So you don’t abuse your position and job to get what you want?” Tygs pressed and I could not believe the weird turn this conversation had taken.

“I don’t know what you mean by that. It’s not like working for Lord Vader is easy you know! Just how would I abuse it?”

“Well... some of us wonder how it is you do stay alive when everyone else who has worked closely with that monster ends up either dead or banished to some garrison in the middle of nowhere!” his argument was losing steam but I was getting annoyed with him.

“So doing my job well in order to stay alive means I am abusing the system?”

“Well, you do seem to get a lot of special attention from some important people.” Tygs said nastily.

“What are you implying?” I was angry now. I had never seen Antygra so hostile before.

“Maybe you want to talk about why a certain Grand Admiral is courting you?” he asked.

“You’re talking about Zaarin right?” I asked. “I don’t ask for his attentions, in fact I go out of my way to avoid them!”

“Why are there more?” he asked. Then added, “Oh that’s right you also like aliens as well... I guess you’d sleep with the damned whole High Command given half a chance!”

I didn’t even think about what I was doing as I shifted into a stance that made me ready to strike out at Antygra, but before I could even think about

raising my hand to slap his face Shiv intervened, standing between me and Tygs. “Hey, this is supposed to be a celebration you two.”

Antygra looked at him and then to me and then said. “Well you know what? Suddenly I don’t feel like celebrating.” And with that he left.

I stared at Shiv and Ynyth for a few seconds unable to digest what had just happened.

“I’ll go talk to him. It’s not you, Merly, he’s just not himself lately.” Ynyth said and she hurried off to follow Tygs as he left the room.

Shiv sighed. “One of the HR people arrested was his girlfriend. He’s really pissed and he’s really worried about her. I tried to tell him you had nothing to do with it but somehow the rumour got started it was your fault and he needs someone to blame. I think his family is having a difficult time at the moment and he’s not handling any of it very well.”

I nodded trying to calm down. I had been a hair’s breadth away from hitting Tygs and I wasn’t happy about it. “Well he should be careful with the Rebellion talk. That kind of chatter could not only just get him arrested but shot for treason.” I sipped my drink and glanced around the room. “How long has he been this angry?”

Shiv shrugged. “Hard to say, been building a while I think. Things got really weird after the destruction of Alderaan but then he seemed to calm down and be okay. We all thought it was because he had family on Alderaan. He’s moody sometimes and he tends to go off when he gets stressed. He often complains about things just usually not like this, never in public and not about you. It’s just recently he’s been spouting a lot of negative stuff about the direction the Empire is going in. Don’t take it personally, Merly. He’s just going through a rough patch right now. I think he’s been listening to his uncle too much. Harkov doesn’t seem to have much love for his job right now either, I guess the two feed off one another’s moods.”

“Admiral Harkov is Antygra’s uncle?” There had been rumblings about Harkov’s allegances and Lord Vader was not pleased with him at all.

Shiv nodded. “Yeah, on his mother’s side but not many people know that. He doesn’t let that fact get around, scared people will think he got his job through nepotism.”

I just shook my head. “Well, I did not complain to anyone about HR or security. I would very much like to know who is starting these lies.”

“Maybe your Admiral friend mentioned something about it?”

I shook my head. “That’s not his style, Shiv. He tackles problems straight on and he would have talked to me about this first, I think.”

“I figured as much, but I wanted to be sure.” He said. “Safe to say someone on the inside doesn’t like you all that much.”

“That’s for sure.” I said quietly, thinking about the person who I had sensed with Jyrki when he was destroying my flat.

“Come on, let’s mingle before we get a reputation for being stuck up as well.” Shiv said.

“Too late for that for me I think.” I grumbled.

We walked through the chattering crowd; the excitement over the *Executor’s* unveiling made the room buzz. There was nothing like a huge party to celebrate a very big and expensive toy to put the Imperial world in the festive mood, but as I mingled and made small talk I could not help but think on Thrawn’s words and Antygra’s outburst. On the outside everything seemed shiny and wonderful but on the inside I began to think that maybe the Empire was starting to rot, just a little.

I came to stand at Lord Vader’s side, Shiv had been pulled into a conversation about palace décor and I escaped before I was asked my opinion about the newest fad which involved Gungans. I sipped at my drink and looked around. It occurred to me that in three years of working here I had not really gotten to know many people all that well but this thought did not make me sad.

“*People seem impressed.*” I told Lord Vader telepathically.

“*As well they should.*” He replied.

“*How is your arm?*” I asked.

Lord Vader looked at me sharply then went back to staring at the crowd. “*One mechanical arm is much like the other. It functions as it is supposed to.*” He told me.

I had been in the med lab when he had returned to have some of the mechanics fine tuned. Once Vader had left the room, the doctor had told me that Lord Vader’s arm had been severed on Mimban.

“*Did it hurt?*” I asked, curious to know if the artificial limbs were as real as they were supposed to be.

“*Pain is irrelevant.*” He told me. “*But if you wish to learn more about it I can slice off your arm and have you fitted with a prosthetic one then amputate that one and that would answer your questions.*”

“*No thank you.*”

“*The artificial limbs are far stronger than flesh and bone.*” He said. He thought he was being funny.

“*I’m sure they are, my lord, but I am kind of attached to mine.*” I said. He chuckled.

“Miss Gabriel, how lovely to see you again, you look well.” said a voice off to my side.

I turned to see Zaarin standing just behind me. “Thank you Grand Admiral Zaarin, as do you.”

“Come now, how many times must I ask you to call me Demetri?” He chided. “Surely you are not this formal with everyone all the time are you?”

“Miss Gabriel is a fountain of good manners, Zaarin, get used to it, it can be quite tedious and I think she does it just to annoy.” Lord Vader said much to

my great surprise. If I didn't know better I would have thought he was sticking up for me.

"She cannot be that annoying, Lord Vader, after all she still lives." Zaarin said. I sucked in my breath.

"*You could sever his arm and maybe that might shut him up.*" I suggested to Lord Vader.

I was certain his response would have been fun but at that moment the Emperor made his way over to us and joined the conversation. I curtsied and Zaarin gave a crisp military bow.

"Merlyn, my dear, how delightful to see you here. You look as lovely as ever." The Emperor said.

"Thank you, Excellency."

"Zaarin, if you would be so kind as to convene the Council of Twelve in the small conference room, I believe we have matters to discuss."

"As you wish, Excellency." Zaarin said. "Miss Gabriel, Lord Vader always a pleasure." And with that Zaarin vanished. He had been dismissed and he had not liked it much but he dared not argue with the Emperor. I was certain I was not the only one who had sensed his anger ripple about us.

The Emperor turned his eerie yellow eyed gaze back to me. "And you, my dear young lady, how are you feeling now?"

"I am well, thank you." I said.

"I see you have recovered nicely from the terrible incident at the Bunduki Trials." He continued. I felt the force ripple and shift about us as suddenly Lord Vader became more attentive.

"Yes, thank you. The medical staff performed miracles. Had it not been for their expertise I am quite sure I would be dead."

"And that would have been most unfortunate." The Emperor nodded. He paused a few seconds then added. "I must admit I was surprised to hear of what had happened and that you had survived. I did not think that such a pretty young thing as yourself had it in you to kill."

The surge of sudden hatred I felt for this man was uncontrollable. Lord Vader looked at me as though I had kicked him and I was certain that I would be punished but instead the Emperor just gave a slow, low chuckle. "There, Vader, you see? There is hope for her yet." He said softly. Vader returned his masked gaze back to his master but said nothing.

I just stared at the Emperor; for once my anger outweighed my fear. "Even the smallest wamp rat will tear its enemy apart when it's cornered." I hissed. I would have said more but Lord Vader's sudden and very painful grip on my arm stopped me, reminding me that while maybe I could get away with a smart mouth with him, this was the Emperor and I was being disrespectful.

The Emperor waved a hand, ignoring my remark. Vader released my arm. "And what about your home, is everything back to order now? All the damage

repaired and your belongings replaced. The break in must have been a dreadful shock for you?" he bantered lightly but there was something underneath his tone that told me nothing here was as it seemed.

Lord Vader's head turned sharply to look at me once more. I hadn't told him about the latest incident with Jyrki, I had just assumed he would learn about it. Obviously that was wrong.

"It was but I am starting to get used to these incidents." I said, he ignored the barb and I continued. "Things are slowly getting back to normal. I appreciate all you have done for me."

"And you have moved back or are you still *under* Admiral Thrawn's protective custody?" He continued.

There was absolutely no keeping anything from the Emperor. I smiled. "No, I am back on my own now. It was very generous of the Admiral to allow me to use his spare room but I did not want to encroach on his personal space any more than I had to."

The Emperor nodded. "It has been most gratifying to see him find solace and company at my court. I am certain that he enjoyed his time with you; I know he thinks quite highly of your artistic sensibilities. He has remarked you are quite knowledgeable in this area."

I blushed, hated myself for it and nodded. "The Admiral is very kind." I said.

"Not at all, my dear." He said, patting my arm. "Admiral Thrawn knows a good thing when he sees it. He has a remarkable eye for the more unique pieces in my collection. His ability to ascertain knowledge from the art he so carefully studies is most unusual. He is a most intriguing individual."

I wasn't sure what we were really talking about any more so I just nodded and smiled but a shudder ran down my spine.

"There will be a private exhibition of Ermall Bernau's works coming up fairly soon, if I am not mistaken. I'll make certain you receive an invitation; perhaps you might want to ask the Admiral to accompany you, I believe he is quite interested in the art of Bernau."

I nodded, averting my eyes from his gaze. "You are most generous, Excellency. I shall do as you suggest." I got the sense that it wasn't really a suggestion.

"I shall look forward to seeing you both there then." He smiled and then with a nod to Lord Vader he moved away to speak with some of his advisors who had come over to discuss something with him. The moment they had vanished into the crowd Lord Vader rounded on me but before he could say anything I spoke first telepathically. I didn't want anyone over hearing my conversation.

"*Why does he toy with me?*" I asked, getting straight to the point.

"*Because he can, it amuses him. You amuse him.*"

"*Amuse him?*"

“You are not the only one he tests in these ways. Be grateful that he shows such interest in you, it allows you much freedom.”

I had no idea how to reply to that. I wasn't sure what it meant.

“Is that what killed your assistant before me, they didn't interest the Emperor?”

“No, I killed them. They were inept at their job and they did not interest me.” He replied.

I just nodded and sipped at my lukewarm champagne.

“Explain to me what happened to your flat.” Lord Vader said after a moment's pause.

I told him about the break in.

“Why was I not informed of this?”

“You were away and I don't like to pester you with my problems.” I said. *“You don't like to be bothered with trivial details, you've told me that a dozen times.”* Then added. *“I thought you would hear about it from intel or something. It isn't as if it's a secret.”*

“That my personal assistant is being stalked by a rebel sympathiser with force abilities is hardly trivial.” He admonished. *“Next time something of this nature happens, I wish to be told immediately.”* I wasn't sure what had him more annoyed, the fact that Jyrki had managed to break in despite palace security or the fact that he had not been told about it.

“Your Bunduki master informs me that your shoulder is healing well, how is it now?” he asked abruptly changing the subject.

“Better.” I nodded.

“Good. I thought that you might be interested in learning how to use a lightsaber as a weapon. I tire of using combat staves to spar with you.”

I shivered. *“I would need to find a lightsaber to use?”*

“You told me your mother had left hers behind for you. You can use that.” He said.

“Did you tell the Emperor about that?”

“No, I do not bother my master with such trivial details.” he said tersely. *“Just because you interest him does not mean you are important to him. Do not over value yourself.”*

I just nodded and with that our conversation ended because several people required his presence and they did not want to speak in front of me. He flicked his hand at me and dutifully I moved away to mingle and maybe find Shiv.

As I meandered through the crowd and found my way through to the balcony I realised I was excited at the prospect of learning how to use a lightsaber which surprised me. I leaned against the balcony parapet and stared out at the city. The day had given way to evening; the lights from the buildings twinkled and lit up the Coruscant skyline. I listened to the sounds of the party behind me. The mindless chatter and underlying networking that went on at

these functions drove me crazy. After three something years I still hadn't figured it out.

“Are you as bored as you look?” a warm, familiar voice said in my ear. I smiled.

“I thought there was a big meeting going on.” I said answering Thrawn in his own language.

“The Council of Twelve is meeting, yes.” He said coming to stand at my side.

“Without you?”

He gave me a look. *“I am not a Grand Admiral.”* He said.

“Yet.” I said.

He nodded with a slight smile. *“Yet.”* He followed my gaze to look over the city. *“You have not answered my question.”*

I glanced at him. *“Yes. I am absolutely every bit as bored as I look.”* I told him. *“I hate these functions and you know this.”*

He nodded. *“Well, you had a sneak preview of the main attraction so this wasn't exactly a big surprise for you was it?”* he said.

I looked up at him. *“I suppose it would be very politically incorrect for me to ask you take me home with you?”* I asked him.

“I think forward would be a better way of putting it.” He said casually.

I nibbled my pinkie absently.

“Is everything alright?” he asked.

I just shrugged. *“This is the Empire. Nothing is ever alright.”* I told him.

For a moment he just watched me in silence, debating whether or not to press me on why I was in such a pissy mood, and then said. *“I have some things to finalise before I leave, I can come by your flat and pick you up if you wish, unless you want to stay here.”* He paused. *“Of course, the two of us leaving here together would add fuel to an already smouldering fire, if I heard some of the gossip mongering going on today correctly.”*

“Would that bother you?”

He looked at me sharply. *“Gossip is a useless waste of time usually it should simply be ignored but occasionally it has some particularly harmful side effects. I am thinking more of you and your friends. Did you not have a rather heated discussion with one of them, Antygra I think, earlier that was a result of some fairly nasty gossip?”*

“You don't miss much.” I snapped.

“Not when your shouting alerts everyone to a problem, no, then I do not miss much at all.” He chided gently. *“You must learn to be more circumspect, my dear, in a world where every tiny piece of information can and will be used against you when given half a chance.”*

I sighed.

“You could head over to the flat now; you do have your own key.” He reminded me.

I nodded. “Yes I do, I hadn’t forgotten, but…”

“But you do not feel comfortable with that just yet.”

I smiled and shook my head.

He nodded. “Very well, I should not be more than an hour. I’ll come by your place. Do try to stay out of trouble between now and then.” He said and then he left.

I woke up with a start. The dreams that plagued me in my flat followed me here as well. I sat up and concentrated on getting my breathing back to normal. Thrawn looked up at me.

“Nightmares?” He asked sleepily. His hand was warm on my back.

“It’s okay.” I said. “Go back to sleep.” I got out of bed, stole his robe and made my way to the kitchen to make tea before he could really wake up.

In the quiet of the kitchen I sat and sipped tea. I had activated the little holocron and listened to my birth mother’s voice as she talked about her daily life in the Temple. Mostly her entries were of normal, mundane things, sometimes they were a little dull even but the next entry made me sad.

*** *Today I heard some terrible news. Master Qui Gon Jinn is dead. He was killed on Naboo yesterday. I cried when I heard this because he was one of the Jedi Masters who was always kind to me and I don’t know...he was a friend ... he was someone I could go an talk to...* ***

The entry was short because she had started to cry and had turned off the recorder. She had talked often about Qui Gon Jinn. He and her own master were close and she looked at Qui Gon almost the same way I tended to see my uncle Vahlek. I felt for her loss because in my own way I had known him too. I listened to the next entry.

*** *I saw the new boy today, Anakin I think his name is. The whole temple is talking about him. He is supposed to be the chosen one. I asked Master Tane what that meant. He said it had to do with an old prophecy. ... “And in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a saviour, and he shall be known as: The son of the suns.” This was what he told me, but I don’t understand it.*

Anakin is Obi-Wan Kenobi’s Padawan learner, even though the boy is nine or ten, which is old to be taken into the temple and taught. There are some masters who are unhappy about this but they don’t speak it out loud. They say Anakin is too old to start learning the ways of the force. Master Tane says this is because it is difficult to undo any imprinting that has already been done. In Anakin’s case the love for his mother. I asked Master Tane why love was such a bad thing. He told me that love is not the issue but attachment is. I am not certain I understand what he means by this. He asked me how I felt about my own mother. I said I didn’t have any feelings about her, I don’t know her. He

smiled and asked did I love her. I said I supposed in a sort of distant way, she was my mother after all. He smiled and pointed out to me this is what he meant about non attachment.

I asked him then what age was too old because I remember hearing people say that Master Vos was also older than normal when Master Tholme brought him to the temple to be trained. Master Tane just shrugged and said; “Master Tholme had his reasons and the situation was quite different.” He then went on to tell me that Master Vos is from the same planet my father was from and that I am half Kiffar. He asked me if I ever picked up images from objects that I touched and I wondered how he knew this because I don’t talk about it. He told me that psychometry was a gift known to be prevalent amongst Kiffar and that maybe if I wanted to know more about it I could ask master Vos or master Tholme when they were not busy.

I don’t like this gift and I try hard to ignore it. Sometimes I ‘see’ the worst images from things that I have touched. Master Tane just nodded when I told him this and then told me that this was all the more reason to try and learn how to use it properly. I must have made one of my famous faces because he laughed and told me to be careful in case the wind changed.

I haven’t had the chance to speak to Anakin yet, he stays very close to Obi-Wan. Master Tane says that the boy is homesick, missing his mother and his planet. He comes from Tatooine. I had to look that up on the star map and could not believe how far away it was. It has a binary solar system so I imagine that he must find Coruscant really cold. I feel sorry for him, he always looks lonely... ***

“What is that?” Thrawn’s voice in the dark made me jump and the holocron switched off as I lost concentration.

“I thought you were sleeping.” I said turning to look at him. He came to stand beside me and picked up my cup, sipped at the now cold tea and made a face.

“I was but when you did not return to bed after an hour I got worried that you had been spirited away. It seems I am getting used to your warmth at my side. Then I heard voices and wondered if there was a party going on I had not been invited to.” He said caressing my face.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” I said getting up to put the kettle on to make more tea. He sat on one of the kitchen stools and watched me.

“You didn’t wake me, sj’iu tekari but your absence did.” For a moment we just looked at each other. Toused and sleepy he made my heart skip. He ran his hand through his hair and I realised that as jittery as he made me, so I also had an effect on him. The moment between us hung in the air and then broke when he picked up the little glowing cube.

“So, what is this?” he asked a second time. “And whose voice was I hearing?”

“It’s called a holocron.” I said. “The Jedi used them as data storage devices. They hold enough data to fill about a hundred standard data chips.”

“Clever little device.” He studied it carefully in the dim light of the kitchen. “And the woman speaking?” he pressed.

“My birth mother, Akali L’uanna.” I told him, pouring hot water in to the tea pot. “This is her diary.”

He turned it over in his fingers. “How does it work?”

I poured two cups of tea then sat on the stool beside him and took the cube from his hands. “It’s force activated. Watch.” I said. I concentrated and felt my thoughts connect with the little cube.

I fast forwarded a little to pick an entry at random. The cube flickered on and the little holographic image of my mother shimmered into place. I wasn’t sure what date of entry I had picked but she was at least four or five years older than the entry I had been listening to when Thrawn had come into the kitchen.

****My friend Lorana is leaving and she isn’t happy about it either. She came to me last night to tell me the news and today the whole place is a buzz. Six Jedi masters and twelve Jedi knights are leaving the Temple to go with the Outbound Flight Project. Nobody thought it was going to go ahead but Master C’boath managed to work it out.... ****

Thrawn looked up at me so suddenly and so sharply that my concentration slipped and the holocron switched itself off.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Did she say *Outbound Flight*?” he asked, there was an edge to his voice that I had never heard before.

I nodded. “Why?”

“Where did you get this from?” he asked ignoring my question.

I hesitated just long enough that he glanced at me, knowing I had considered lying.

“It is important to me.” He said quietly.

“The Jedi Temple.” I admitted.

He looked at me for a moment. “I thought that place was locked down, the doors all sealed and under tight security. No one can get inside. It is considered condemned and off limits.” He asked.

I looked into his eyes. “There are ways around security.”

He nodded his understanding. “Take me there.” He said getting up.

“Now? Right now?” I asked. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“There are records in the Temple, yes? Archives?” he asked.

I nodded. “There is an enormous library there, why?”

“Can you access the files?” he asked heading to the bedroom to get dressed. I followed him not liking where this was heading at all.

“Some of them, but the system is old and I don’t know how to use it all that well yet.”

“Get dressed.” He said. “I want you to take me there now, tonight.” There was an urgency in his voice I had never heard before and didn’t understand. It never occurred to me to argue with him.

I dressed as he had in black clothes that were easy to move in. I slung the satchel with the lightsaber still in it over my shoulder and watched as he checked his pistol and then holstered it.

“We need to go back to the palace.” I told him. “The entrance I use is there, but this is not a good idea, the Temple is a bad place to be.” I told him.

He nodded. “Your concern is noted. Let’s go.” He said coldly and without further word we left.

In the darkness of the tunnels we walked quietly. I knew the way well enough I didn’t really need the little flashlight I held in my hand and as he had often explained to me before, the Chiss had exceptional night vision. I concentrated on the force, stretching out as far as I could to see for hidden dangers. This wasn’t a skill I was very good at but even the little bit I could do helped to ease my growing sense of unrest. Every now and then I felt the brush of Thrawn’s hand on my arm reassuring me, a reminder that I was not alone.

“How did you find this passage?” he asked when we were about half way to the temple.

I told him about the blueprints in the library but not about my first trip to the temple with my uncle.

“And you have to be force sensitive to enter?” he queried.

“Yes. All the locks are opened by using the force but I don’t know how to explain it. It is a little like the retinal ident scans that you sometimes see. It is as if what is holding to doors shut recognize the touch of the force.”

“Interesting.” Was the only thing he said to that and we were silent for the rest of the trip.

Once inside the temple I led him to the great library. I felt his awe and nodded a little. The soft light from the archives cast eerie shadows around us and I shivered. This was not where I wanted to be at two in the morning even with Thrawn. I went to the terminal I had used before and activated it.

“What do you want to know?” I asked him.

“Look for any information on the Outbound Flight Project.” He said.

I nodded and began a search. It didn’t take as long as I had thought. The project had not been a secret. I had pulled up the available files and began to skim through them. He stood behind me and read the information with me.

“Wow, that thing was huge!” I whistled. Looking at the picture of the actual ship, or rather ships that had been some how bound together around a central core.

He nodded. “It was.”

I looked up at him. “You sound like you saw it.”

“I did.” He replied coolly in a voice that said ‘please stop asking me questions about this right now’.

“What are we doing here?” I asked him, tugging on his sleeve.

He turned to look directly at me. “You are helping find information on something that happened thirty years ago. I need some answers.”

“Does this have to do with your brother?” I asked starting to recall some of our previous conversations.

“Partially.” He said and then he looked at me. “Let’s get this done first. I will tell you everything you want to know when we return home.”

I nodded and stepped aside to let him continue. While he was busy I began to look around. The great library was huge, with two floors of shelves and stacks filled with data-logs and books. There had been busts and statues lining the main hall way but many of these had been toppled over and smashed or destroyed with blaster fire. Many of the holo-books had been destroyed but not all and although the library was peaceful now, it had been the scene of great violence. I shuddered. It was the first time I had taken the time to look around. The past two visits had been hurried and fearful. Looking around at the wilful destruction of what had once been an extraordinary peaceful place to be did not ease my fears any. This was not a good place any more. It was full of bad memories and restless ghosts.

“A’myshk’a, come here.” Thrawn said calmly, his voice echoing about the room.

I went to him and peered over his shoulder.

“I need to find out more about this person.” He said tapping the screen.

I looked at the image of Jedi Master C’boath and nodded. He moved out of the way and let me search through the system.

“There might be some more information in the other record’s room.” I said and went to the room where my uncle had found the holocrons from my mother. He followed me silently, watching with keen interest as I opened the locked door.

In the small room I needed light. I pulled out the small torch from my satchel and began to search. The ghosts here nagged at me, tugged at me and frightened me. After what seemed too long a time I found what I was looking for. The little storage drawer slid open under my touch. While the door to the room was force locked, the rest wasn’t. I peeked inside and pulled out the data chips that lay there. They sat in my hand but did not give up any secrets. I looked at Thrawn and then handed them to him. Before he could say anything I began to look for a name, Jyrki Andando, it was easy to locate but any information that had been removed. I brushed my fingertips over the drawer and let out the breath I had been holding. The last person to have touched this had been my uncle. I glanced over at Thrawn. He was inserting the chips into the terminal reader.

“You can do that at home.” I said, angry without knowing why.

He shook his head. “It may be the data leads me to more information we can find here. You don’t have to be a force user to access the information inside this room it seems.”

I shook my head. “Guess the Jedi were a trusting bunch.” I said tartly.

“It was a different time.”

I sighed. Then, quite suddenly, I felt a tug from within. Something in the temple called to me, much as it had done the very first time I had been here.

“I have to go find something. Will you be alright here?” I asked.

He nodded, fished in his pocket and tossed me a small comm-link. “There’s a built in tracking signal. So you don’t get lost.”

“I never get lost.” I told him tartly. He just smiled slightly but didn’t say anything and before I had turned around to leave he had gone back to studying the information on the data chips.

Maybe I never got lost but I didn’t know where I was going. Pulled by an invisible hand I made my way through parts of the Temple I had never been before. I didn’t like how I felt. That itchy niggling sensation between my shoulder blades that I associated with very bad things was stronger than ever. I became aware that I was being pulled to the center of the great building, and when I stood in front of the turbo lift I hesitated. Then I stepped in, muttering to myself about what a really terrible idea this was. I didn’t know what to expect when I stepped out of the lift but the council chamber wasn’t it.

It was a huge room with an ornate floor and chairs of assorted sizes that had once been set in a circle. Behind the chairs were large picture windows. From this room you could look out over Coruscant for as far as the eye could see but it was not these things that stopped my breath. It was the remnants of chaos in the room that caused me to tremble. I walked in and stepped over clothes, broken furniture and what looked like dried blood. My heart raced. I had no idea what I was doing here and I was very afraid.

I walked around the room slowly, hugging my arms close to my body and staring out of the windows. There was so much power in this room and it frightened me. I resisted the temptation to touch the seats. They were all different shapes and sizes and I guessed they had been specifically designed for the person sitting in it reminding me that once upon a time aliens had been as welcome as humans in important roles in the Old Republic.

“Why have you brought me here?” I whispered to the dark but the dark had no answers for me.

Twice I circled the room and then because I didn’t know what else to do I slowly and very carefully began to let my fingers brush objects. There were so many memories here that most of what I saw was jumbled and made no sense. I got vague images of the people and beings that had once made major decisions for the Republic’s law and order. It was strange and unsettling but it did not answer the nagging feeling that still had not gone away yet. As I began my third

time walking behind the seats in a circle I noticed a piece of clothing that had been almost brushed under one of the seats. Without thinking about what I was doing I picked it up. The little robe had belonged to a small boy. I was brought to my knees instantly by the images that the robe sent me. I clutched it to my chest as the visions crashed through me.

It was night and they were hiding. She had told them to hide, Jocasta Nu, the librarian. "Go to the council Chambers and hide, wait for help!" The children had all hidden away from the noise, from the chaos and the screaming. They were very young and they were scared.

One of the little girls was crying. Sors Bandeam, the boy with the blond hair, tried to comfort her but she was too frightened.

"Shhh, Caitie, shhhh." He was trying to hush her.

Caitie hiccupped and shook. "Why is this happening? The soldiers were killing them." She cried.

"Sors, what do we do if no one comes?" the owner of the tunic said.

Sors shook his head. "I don't know Kelou, trust in the Force, like master Yoda says."

All the children had clustered together, hiding behind the chairs. They waited in terrified silence until the sound of the turbo lift broke the night's hush, frightening them even more. They held their breath until the doors opened and a figure stepped out into the dimly lit room.

"It's Master Skywalker." Kelou whispered.

Sors timidly moved from behind the chair where he had been hiding. He stepped forward to face Anakin Skywalker and the others peeped from behind the chairs, watching.

Sors looked up at Anakin "Master Skywalker! There are too many troops! What should we do?" he asked.

For a moment there was absolute silence and then Anakin ignited his lightsaber and before anyone could do or say anything he had slaughtered Sors. The others were stunned into silence then Caitie screamed and tried to run. Anakin's saber throw cut her down. Kelou tried to grab the others, to get them to make themselves small, invisible but it was of no use. For a moment there was absolute chaos as the children tried to defend themselves but in the space of seconds Anakin had killed them all. As his lightsaber cut through the body of the boy whose tunic I held in my hands, I felt the blow as though it were real, pain sliced through me and I saw the blackness of death as it sucked Kelou down into its maw. He had been the last of the children to die. He had watched all of his friends being murdered by Anakin's hand and his very last thought had been 'Why, Master Skywalker, why?'

I sat on the floor gripping the tunic in my hands so tightly I could feel my own nails cutting through the fabric into my palms. As the visions and memories faded, letting go of me I vomited violently.

"Why?" I whispered echoing Kelou's words, wiping the spit from my mouth with my sleeve. "Why did you want me to see this?" I was covered in an icy cold sweat and I was shaking. I grasped the back of the nearest chair to try and get to my feet only to be assaulted by a second equally powerful memory.

Anakin sat in the chair and looked around the room. The bodies of the children he had slaughtered lay on the floor. The air was filled with the stench of ozone, blood and charred flesh. As the rage which had flooded through him faded he realised what he had done. He had known these younglings since the day they had been brought to the temple. He knew each of them by name. They had looked up to him, admired him and wanted to be like him. They had come to him with their questions, their smiles and in the worst time ever they had come to him out of fear looking to him for protection instead, without thinking about it, he had killed them in cold blood. There, in the silence of the council chambers, Anakin Skywalker leaned back in the chair and covered his eyes with his gloved hand. He knew what he had done was wrong beyond all belief, he knew it but he felt powerless to stop it. He could feel the dark side of the force, its energy seductive and sweet course through him, twisting him from the inside out but somewhere deep down in his soul he also understood he had lost something very precious and he wept. It was there that the Emperor found him, when their eyes met Anakin knew there was no turning back. The Emperor smiled gleefully, his laughter echoing around the blood tainted room and eternally into my brain...

I might have screamed then but I wasn't certain. I had covered my mouth with my hands, pressing tightly against my lips to stop the terrible sounds that threatened to break out of my chest. I couldn't seem to catch my breath properly. This was how Thrawn found me, kneeling on the council chamber floor, with the stench of vomit on my clothes, trying to remember how to breathe. He didn't try to speak to me; he just pulled me to my feet. A surge of anger so swift and sudden raced through me that I didn't have time to think, I just acted.

I turned on him. "Why did you make me come back here!?" I screamed at him. "Why?!"

"What happened, are you alright?" he asked.

"No!" I yelled at him, on the verge of hysteria. "No!" I slammed my fists against his chest not once but twice. I hurt him but before I could do it a third time he caught my wrists. I fought him, struggling and shouting at him. What came out of my mouth was gibberish, a mixture of languages and thoughts. I was out of my mind, caught some where between my own memories and the memories that did not belong to me at all.

"Merlyn, stop it. Stop it!" He said sharply, holding my arms firmly. I was hyperventilating. He pulled me to him whispering calmly in my ear over and over again. "Breathe sj'iu tekari, breathe, you have to calm down." Under the spell of

his voice I did as he asked and slowly, slowly came back to myself. Only then did I sense how worried he had been.

“What happened?” he asked again when he knew I could speak. “Tell me.”

But I couldn't. How could I verbalize what I had seen? What this room had shown me? What Anakin Skywalker, Darth Vader had done. What the Emperor had asked of him and what it had cost. How could I tell him about the pain of being cut down? How a lightsaber, as it sliced through one's skin, felt? What death looked like or smelled like? I pulled away from him slowly. I felt as though I were moving through soupy, murky water. Somewhere in my brain I knew I was not right, that something was very wrong with me but nothing connected.

“Did you get what you wanted?” I asked, my voice sounding to my ears as though it were coming from some place a billion kilometres away.

He hesitated a second and then nodded. “Yes.” The half truth hung in the air. He was torn between his desire and thirst for knowledge and concern for my well being.

“Can we please go now?” I asked. I was scattered and unfocused, and using every ounce of inner strength not to let the rising swell of emotions the visions had created engulf me once more. The screams of the children clamoured in my head and the Emperor's laughter taunted at me, lingering like a terrible smell.

He nodded. He followed me to the turbo lift and we headed back down into the main hall. By the time we had reached the library I had become devoid of all feeling. I stopped in mid stride and looked around. My uncle had been right, I should not have come back here, not because there were dangers lurking waiting to kill me in the shadows because there were too many memories and some how uncle Vahlek had known my talent was getting stronger. It wasn't the present that would hurt me here, it was the past. Thrawn said nothing as I led the way back to the passage under the city. We slipped out of the Imperial palace and he drove home in silence.

He opened the door to his flat and I pushed past him. I tore at my clothes, stripping them off as I fled to the 'fresher. I desperately needed to wash the stench of fear and the cold, sickly sweat from my body. I stood naked in the bathroom and looked around. I could not recall how I came to be in this room. I felt the kiss of cold touch my soul and the remnants of the Emperor's laughter rippled about me from the inside out. I could still feel the vicious burn as Anakin's lightsaber had sliced into Kelou's flesh, as though his body and my body were one in the same. In many ways it was as though Anakin had murdered me along with the boy. It was just a memory but it was too real for my mind to separate. Nausea welled up as my stomach rebelling against the visions and their reality. The taste of bile was bitter and acrid in my mouth. Unwanted and unexpected rage, pure and white hot, along with a thousand other emotions suddenly exploded inside of me. I sank to the cold tile floor because my legs couldn't hold me up. I began to scream and I couldn't stop. I knelt on the cold

floor, holding my head in my hands trying to block out all images which had branded them selves in my brain, hearing a voice I didn't realise was my own pierce the air. I knew something was really wrong but I was so far removed from myself, it was as though I were watching this person go quite mad from very far away.

I wasn't sure when I became aware of Thrawn at my side. He had wrapped a robe around my body and was rocking me back and forth. His arms held me tightly; one hand pressing my head against his chest as though holding me close to the sound of his heart would somehow make things better. He stroked my hair and whispered to me in his native language, eventually bringing me back to the present. The silence in the room was more frightening than my hysterical screaming had been. I sat ridged in his embrace, staring into a void only I could see, clutching at the invisible wound from a lightsaber that had never touched me. It burned.

“Are you calm now?” he asked after what felt like hours. He lifted my face up to look in my eyes. He didn't like what he saw, his worry was palpable.

I nodded but it was a lie. I wasn't calm, I was numb.

“What happened?”

I shook my head. “Can't tell you.”

“Why not?” He demanded, there was no mistaking the hint of anger underneath the concern.

“I don't have the words.” I told him. “There are no words, none...” I could feel the swell of panic begin to rise again, what I wanted to say tripped on my tongue and came out as babble. He silenced the rush of nonsense with his fingertip.

“Then show me, the way you do with Vader.” He said firmly. He knew me well enough to understand that whatever I had seen, whatever it was I had experienced at the Temple was beyond bad but he didn't know what he was asking me to do, what he was asking me to do to him.

I shook my head. I wasn't even sure I could. I had never intentionally tried to share anything with him telepathically and this was not what I wanted to start with. I knew this method of communication worked with Lord Vader, but he was so powerfully in tune with the force it somehow seemed easy and I knew it wasn't. I had no idea how it would work for someone who was head blind to the force.

“Show me.” He said punctuating each word, a command rather than a request, still holding my face in his hands, making me look at him. He nodded. So I opened myself up, just as Lord Vader had taught me, I could see the living force all around me, all around him. It danced and rippled. I brushed his mind with mine and felt him fight the invasion for a split second then he opened to me, just enough.

I did as he asked and I showed him exactly what I had seen and felt. Everything I had experienced in the council chambers flooded into him the same way it had done with me. I heard him grunt with the shock and gasp at the pain of it but I didn't stop. When I was finished all he did was hold on to me and he didn't let go. In the silence of the 'fresher I realised that what ever he had been imagining, he had not been expecting or prepared for that. Stunned, he wasn't sure what to do next. I pulled away from him and got up slowly. I was chilled and stiff from sitting half naked on the cold floor.

"I need to shower." I told him.

He nodded, letting me go. When he joined me under the very hot running water I didn't complain, instead because his kindness and his gentle touch were far more damaging to my ability to hold it together than harsh words or brute strength could have been, I wept. He caressed me as though he could take away the pain, the anguish with the brush of his fingers but it didn't work that way. I tasted of death and it coated everything thing. These memories which were not mine had been permanently burned in my mind, in my soul. I didn't want them and I didn't know what to do with them. After a while I stopped crying, I had no more tears left and just stood under the running water in Thrawn's arms. There was nothing left to do or say. When the water ran cold, he turned it off, covered me in a towel and lifted me up. He cradled me next to him.

"I am so sorry, A'myshk'a. I did not understand" he whispered in my ear. "This gift of yours, it is a terrible thing and I had no idea, no idea at all." I nodded. "How could you have known?" I asked, suddenly weary beyond belief. I patted his shoulder so he would set me down. I wrapped the towel around me. I didn't know what else to say to him so I just left him to dry off. I dressed for bed and slipped under the crisp, clean covers of his beautiful antique bed. He followed me, holding on to me tightly. Neither of us uttered a sound and for what little was left of the night we stayed that way neither speaking, nor sleeping. For the very first time in my life I wished that I was force blind, or better yet, dead.

TO: Lord DarthVader
FROM: The Imperial Social Division
RE: Fete Week Celebrations

The following is the updated schedule for the planned Fete Week celebrations; please note there have been two minor changes to the event schedule.

Day 1

- Opening ceremonies begin at 17:00 hrs CST in the Grand Ball Room, please note this is a public event and formal dress is not required.
- There will be a private reception for all Imperial Employees at 20:00 hrs CST in

the Tarkin room. This event is being catered by Ta'lucci and Frolla's catering company. Food and drink are complimentary. There will be no admittance without invitation. Semi formal dress is required.

-Fireworks will begin promptly at 23:00 hrs CST and can be viewed from the east wing gate and balconies.

Day 2

- Imperial Children's Day activities begin at 09:00 hrs in the Bail Organa Conference room. These activities are open to all children of Imperial Palace employees and the day includes a lunch served at 12:00 hrs CST. Today's feature: *How to make a paper Stormtrooper's mask*. Please make sure all children are wearing their ident tags securely and visibly. Activities end at 16:00 hrs CST.

- There will be an officer's luncheon in the Green Room, in the West wing at 12:00 hrs CST. Please note this is an invitation only event and no guests are permitted. Dress uniform is required.

- There will be a ladies Luncheon for spouses of Imperial officers held in the Alderaan Garden room at 12:00 hrs, this event is invitation only, no guests or children permitted. Suitable dress is required.

- Professor Katthea Verkysicc will be giving a lecture entitled, *Meaning and Significance of Ithorian music in the Old Republic*, in the small lecture theatre located in the East Wing, first floor. This lecture will begin at 14:00 hrs and is open to all. Security checks will be in place. **note this event has been rescheduled from 15:00 hrs CST.*

- Public palace tours will commence for groups of twenty at 14:00 hrs until 18:00 hrs. These tours will be guided and are free to the public. The Emperor wishes to give the populace the opportunity to see some of the restoration and upgrades that have been done to the Imperial palace. Please note due to increased security during these times all Palace Employees must wear their identification badges openly or risk being arrested for trespassing.

- There will be a private reception for all Imperial Employees at 20:00 hrs CST in the Tarkin room. This event is being catered by Ta'lucci and Frolla's catering company. Food and drink are complimentary. There will be no admittance without invitation. Semi formal dress is required.

- Fireworks will begin promptly at 23:00 hrs CST and may be viewed from the west wing gate and balconies.

Day 3

- Imperial Children's Day activities begin at 09:00 hrs in the Bail Organa Conference room. These activities are open to all children of Imperial Palace employees and the day includes a lunch served at 12:00 hrs CST. Today's feature: *building a model TIE fighter from ice-treat sticks*. Please make sure all children are wearing their ident tags securely and visibly. Activities end at 16:00 hrs CST.

- There will be an Imperial Palace Staff meet and greet luncheon at 12:00 hrs CST, held in the Green Room, in the West wing. This event is invitation only and

suitable dress is required.

- Dr. Koy Rewand will be giving a lecture entitled, *Alien Cultures and their Subversive Natures-How we can learn from their Mistakes*, in the small lecture theatre located in the East Wing, first floor. This lecture will begin at 14:00 hrs and is open to all. Security checks will be in place. **note this event has been rescheduled from 13:00 hrs CST.*

- Public palace tours will commence for groups of twenty at 14:00 hrs until 18:00 hrs. These tours will be guided and are free to the public. The Emperor wishes to give the populace the opportunity to see some of the restoration and upgrades that have been done to the Imperial palace. Please note due to increased security during these times all Palace Employees must wear their identification badges openly or risk being arrested for trespassing.

- There will be a private reception for all Imperial Employees at 20:00 hrs CST in the Tarkin room. This event is being catered by Ta'lucci and Frolla's catering company. Food and drink are complimentary. There will be no admittance without invitation. Semi formal dress is required.

- Fireworks will begin promptly at 23:00 hrs CST and may be viewed from the South wing gate and balconies.

Day 4

- Imperial Children's Day activities begin at 09:00 hrs in the Bail Organa Conference room. These activities are open to all children of Imperial Palace employees and the day includes a lunch served at 12:00 hrs CST. Today's feature: *Imperial Colouring book and appropriate colour usage*: Coloured pencils included. Please make sure all children are wearing their ident tags securely and visibly. Activities end at 16:00 hrs CST.

- There will be a guided tour of the Imperial Palace Botanical Gardens. This event starts at 10:00 hrs CST and will take approximately 1 hour. This is an open to the public event and security checks will be in place.

- There will be an Officers and Wives luncheon held in the Green Room of the West Wing, at 12:00 hrs CST. This is an invitation only event and Dress uniforms and semi formal ladies wear is required. The Emperor is scheduled to be in attendance – subject to change at his discretion.

- Grand Admiral Danetta Pitta will be giving a lecture entitled; *The Importance of Purity in Human Culture*, in the small lecture theatre located in the East Wing, first floor. This lecture will begin at 14:00 hrs and is open to all. Security checks will be in place.

- Public palace tours will commence for groups of twenty at 14:00 hrs until 18:00 hrs. These tours will be guided and are free to the public. The Emperor wishes to give the populace the opportunity to see some of the restoration and upgrades that have been done to the Imperial palace. Please note due to increased security during these times all Palace Employees must wear their identification badges openly or risk being arrested for trespassing.

- There will be a private reception for all Imperial Employees at 20:00 hrs CST in the Tarkin room. This event is being catered by Ta'lucci and Frolla's catering company. Food and drink are complimentary. There will be no admittance without invitation. Semi formal dress is required.

- Fireworks will begin promptly at 23:00 hrs CST and may be viewed from the North wing gate and balconies.

Day 5

- Imperial Children's Day activities begin at 09:00 hrs in the Bail Organa Conference room. These activities are open to all children of Imperial Palace employees and the day includes a lunch served at 12:00 hrs CST. Today's feature: *Making a Darth Vader or Grand Moff hand puppet from a sock*, socks will be provided. Please make sure all children are wearing their ident tags securely and visibly. Activities end at 16:00 hrs CST.

- A guided tour of the Imperial Palace art and artefacts will commence at 10:00 hrs CST. This tour is limited to five groups of twenty and is not open to the public. If you wish to attend please sign the attached attendance sheet with your name and Ident tag number. This event will be a first come first served event.

- Dance Master Draskoy Sandorfia will be giving a lecture entitled; *The Intricacies of Intimate Court Dances; Pavane, Waltz and Rondelle, how to Understand and Use Them*, in the small lecture theatre located in the East Wing, first floor. This lecture will begin at 14:00 hrs and is open to all. Security checks will be in place.

- Public palace tours will commence for groups of twenty at 14:00 hrs until 18:00 hrs. These tours will be guided and are free to the public. The Emperor wishes to give the populace the opportunity to see some of the restoration and upgrades that have been done to the Imperial palace. Please note due to increased security during these times all Palace Employees must wear their identification badges openly or risk being arrested for trespassing.

- Closing Ceremonies will take place in the main audience chamber at 19:00 hrs, this event is open to the public, security checks will be in place.

- End of Fete Week Celebration Gala will be held in the Grand Ball room, starting at 20:00 hrs CST. Live music provided by the Coruscant Big bang Orchestra, Master Odrum 'Ressem conducting, Melora Andarej-Lead singer. Catering will be provided by Ta'lucci and Frolla and beverages will be complimentary. This event is invitation only. Formal dress and dress uniforms are required. Due to several unpleasant incidents from last year there will be a weapon's check at the door and an increased security presence. Disruptions will not be tolerated and those who cannot behave themselves accordingly will be forcibly removed and charges will be laid. The Emperor is scheduled to be in attendance – *subject to change at his discretion*.

- Fireworks will begin promptly at 23:00 hrs CST and may be viewed from all sides of the Imperial palace.

Further updates will be posted as they happen.

Marlann Taralae

Imperial Social Event Director.

“I see you have the new Fete Week schedule.” Shiv said as he poked his head around my door.

“Darth Vader and Grand Moff sock puppets?” I asked waving the data pad at him.

He shrugged. “Wasn’t my idea, so don’t blame me.”

I shook my head and sighed.

“So are you planning on attending any of the big events?” He asked sitting on my desk.

“Maybe, depends on how busy I am.” I smiled.

“Or how busy a certain Admiral is?” He countered.

I gave him a wan smile. “Ha ha funny.” I said. “He’s always busy, which you know, so I’ll probably be either going it alone or hanging out with you lot.”

“Don’t sound so thrilled!” he said pretending to be hurt.

“How’s Tygs doing? Has he calmed down any?” I asked switching the subject.

“Yeah, oh that reminds me, he said to say he was sorry for the outburst.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay, the job gets to us all after a while.

Shiv looked at me for a bit. “How are you doing? You look like you’ve lost weight and you need to do something about the black circles under your eyes, Rim-Girl. Maybe I am going to have to have a little chat with your Admiral friend about your health. Falling for someone is supposed to be good for you, make you all glowy and smiley, not wreck you.” He grinned.

“Oh? Well, according to my Holloway books falling for someone is exactly what kills you. How does he put it, *to those on the outside an affair of the heart is a glorious thing but to those in the know it is a destructive demon that will burn your soul to ashes.*” I told him. I didn’t dare mention that my two weeks of sleepless nights had very little to do with Thrawn and far more to do with Lord Vader’s past.

He gave me a grin. “Okay I get the point, but you know that Holloway was a jaded spice addict who never had any luck with women.” He said and he hopped off the desk. “Just came by to tell you that we’re heading out to that new bar tonight if you want to come?”

“Thanks, but I have too much to do here. It’s a mad house and Lord Vader has been particularly pissy lately and,” I added. “I really need to sleep.”

Shiv made a face. “Yeah, yeah. If I had a credit for every time I heard those words I’d be wealthier than the Emperor.” He waved at me as he left. “And for

goodness sakes, eat something; you are starting to look like one of those models Xizor has been dating recently.”

I rolled my eyes at him as he left my office. The truth of the matter was I had a lesson with Lord Vader and if I was late or I missed it he would not be impressed. Twice he had arranged a time to start teaching me how to use a lightsaber, my lightsaber and twice now he had cancelled because something had come up. Hopefully the third time would be a charm and work out.

With master Kjestyll’s help and guidance my shoulder was slowly getting stronger. It was a tedious, painful process and while I didn’t complain much but he knew how I felt so when I had told him about Lord Vader’s offer to instruct me in the ways of lightsaber use he was pleased.

“It will do you good to learn something new.” He had told me while pushing me to stretch and use my shoulder. “I will come and watch. I have not seen lightsaber taught in a long time.”

“Won’t Lord Vader mind?” I asked. Sometimes he was tetchy about things like that.

Master Kjestyll had shaken his head and smiled. “No.” but he had not explained further and had instead chided me for not concentrating on what I was doing. It had been a long lesson.

In Lord Vader’s personal training room I waited with my Master who patiently guided me through a series of warm up stretches and exercises. I was in the middle of a very deep leg stretch when Lord Vader strode in.

“Master Kjestyll, a pleasure to see you as always.” He said with a nod of his head.

“Like wise, Lord Vader. My young student here tells me you will instruct her in that most honourable of weapons. She is most fortunate. I hope that you will allow me to observe?”

“Of course.” Vader replied.

I had dressed in my Bunduki clothes and had brought the lightsaber I had taken from Jyrki’s desk. I didn’t think that Lord Vader would know where it had come from or much less care. It was a lightsaber. He held out his hand and I gave it to him. He turned it on and swung it. The blade hummed in the air as it arced about with his motion. He moved it so fast all I saw was a blur of light.

“The blade had good balance.” He commented. He was going to say something more but changed his mind at the last minute. He handed it back to me.

“Before we start I have something I want to say.” I said.

Lord Vader nodded.

“I wish to keep all my limbs so no cutting off of arms, fingers, hands, legs or anything else. Are we clear?” I said.

Lord Vader laughed. I wished he wouldn’t do that, it was very disturbing. “Very well.” He said. “I shall refrain from severing anything important.”

I shook my head. "Nope, you must refrain from severing anything at all."

This time it was my master who laughed.

"If you insist, now if you are ready...we'll begin." Lord Vader said tartly.

"Turn the sabre on and stand with it."

I did as he asked. He watched me and after a few seconds my lesson began.

A soft knocking on the door woke me up. Thrawn walked in before I could say 'don't'.

"Were you asleep in the bath?" he asked, giving me a look. "I called your name twice and knocked. You didn't answer..."

I sank under the bubbles into the now lukewarm water and re-emerged washing the sleep from my face.

"No, I was just resting my eyes." I told him tartly.

"Drowning is very bad form, drowning in my bath-tub would be a terrible breach of decorum." He said handing me a towel. "Lord Vader would be most unimpressed. Lots of paperwork"

"Ha very ha." I said. "Do I smell food?"

He nodded. "Corellian take-out. I ordered you the noodles you like so much, maybe you'll eat them?"

I shot him a look from under towel I was using to dry my hair. But he was right. Ever since the night at the Jedi Temple I had neither eaten nor slept well. He just smiled and left me to dry and dress. I ached and falling asleep in the bath until the water was cool had not helped any. Lord Vader had worked me hard. I was hoping I would sleep the whole night through instead of waking screaming with nightmares built on memories that were not mine. I had suggested going to sleep in the spare room so as not to disturb Thrawn but he had just shaken his head saying; "If you do that I'll just have to get up to see if you are okay or are being murdered in your sleep."

While he changed from his uniform, I set the table. He opened a bottle of wine and we sat down to eat.

"I received the invitations to the Bernau art exhibit today." I told him.

He smiled. "When is it?"

"Next week." I chewed absently on the noodles and stir fried vegetables.

"Will you be able to accompany me?" I asked with a grin.

"I'd be delighted to but it depends on my schedule." He said. "I cannot make you any promises."

I nodded. "Well, the Emperor mentioned that I ask you."

He stared at me for a moment. "He did, did he?"

I nodded. "I believe his exact words were '*I'll look forward to seeing you both there*'."

"He does not miss much." He said after a long pregnant pause.

"No, he doesn't." I added. "It drives me crazy. He makes all these innuendos but he never comes out and says anything straight. Speaking with him is like watching a holo with dual language soundtracks. One you hear and can understand and the other one is incomprehensible but you are still aware of its presence." I shook my head.

Thrawn nodded. "He enjoys these games."

"That's what Lord Vader says. But I don't understand it."

"There is a point, my dear, when power is not enough. He has all the power in the galaxy so now he plays with it. People become pawns and he manipulates them to see who is stronger, who can adapt and survive. He weeds out those he deems unsuitable by playing them against each other, the fittest survive." He sipped his wine and continued. "He has made a life time out of studying the fallibility of the beings around him, using their weaknesses, their desires and their fears to gain what he wants from them. It is almost poetry to watch sometimes. Most creatures in his court are completely unaware of it; you are among the few who at least see something is going on, to a certain extent."

"I hate it!" I said vehemently.

Thrawn smiled. "Of course you do. I know that as does he." He said. "He counts on this fact."

As I sat staring at the food on my plate a terrible thought suddenly came to me. "Do you suppose he knows that I can get into the Jedi Temple?"

"Hard to say." He replied. "But who gave you access to the Library where you found the blue prints to both the Imperial Palace and the Temple? You have to ask yourself, what were such valuable plans doing left lying in an unused library to begin with?"

Suddenly I wasn't so hungry any more. "What is it he wants from me?" I asked.

Thrawn shrugged. "Nothing and then again, perhaps, everything? You interest him. I suspect he throws these bread crumbs in your path to see which way you will go. How much use you could be? How far you can be pushed." He said pouring more wine in my glass, nodding at me to continue to eat. "The Emperor has at his disposal an exclusive group of people known as his Hands. They act as agents to his will. Most of them believe they are the only one, unique in a position created just for them, which could not be further from the truth. I have often wondered if he is not grooming you for such a place in his court. As I have said before, you are far too talented and clever to have your skills wasted as a mere personal assistant, no matter what you believe. Your language skills alone are remarkable enough to warrant a better job." He sat back and studied the wine in his glass. "It is your strange devotion to Lord Vader and perhaps Vader's own odd relationship with you that has allowed you to keep the job you love so much. Of all the things you are it is this one point that the Emperor does not quite understand and so he watches."

“Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Understand?”

He smiled. “Perhaps a little more than Palpatine does.”

I just made a face and then nodded. “What does he expect me to get out of the Temple then?”

“That I don’t know, but then again maybe he does not expect anything, perhaps he is just looking to see what happens and what you do with the information you obtain.” He said. “Does he know about your ability to read memories from objects? I remember you mentioning that it was a surprise to Vader when he learned of your talent.”

I thought about it for a moment, my fork playing absently with the now cold noodles. “I don’t know. Lord Vader has said often enough he doesn’t bother the Emperor with trivial information about me. He hasn’t told the Emperor about my birth mother, I am sure of that. I am not that important in his eyes and my psychometric gift isn’t something the Emperor would just feel from me, it’s not a force gift, it is merely enhanced by the force.”

Thrawn nodded. “Perhaps then, he was just giving you access to a larger library, to see what you would do with it.” He said. “Sometimes it is easy to ascribe too much meaning behind an action, over estimating one’s opponent’s intelligence or knowledge.”

“Are you saying I am giving him too much credit?”

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. “It is just a thought. The Emperor is very powerful, make no mistake, but he is also very single minded sometimes. He believes he knows his servant, Lord Vader through and through yet you prove that this is not the case. Vader keeps information back from his master, perhaps for the simplest of reasons but still...” He paused. “Palpatine is a very clever man but he lets his desire for power and his desire to maintain that power cloud his sight sometimes.”

“How do you know all of this?” I asked pushing the last of the food on my plate around with my fork.

Thrawn gave me one of those smiles. “I make it my business to know, my dear.” He said, giving me his standard answer. He did not fear the Emperor the way so many others did but rather seemed to study Palpatine, the way he studied works of art, looking for patterns and weaknesses. I often wondered why but I never asked. There was a moment’s pause and then he asked. “Would you like something for desert?”

“What did you have in mind?”

And there was that smile again.

Fete Week began with its usual bang. Galaxy News Service broad waved the opening ceremonies from Coruscant and I watched it from the comfort of my

couch. I wasn’t feeling very celebratory and the last place I wanted to be was in the middle of happy, cheering crowds that had been plied with too much liquor, egged on by fireworks and news nets.

It had been a particularly stressful week. Lord Vader had been alerted to the fact that the Rebels he was searching for may very well have been on Coruscant and had then escaped to a base thought to have been established on Cheeyoom Matee. Needless to say this news didn’t make him happy. I had been surprised that any of these people who were wanted criminals would actually dare to even venture onto Coruscant but Lord Vader had merely shrugged when I had mentioned this during one of our lessons.

“Sometimes,” he had said, “The best place to hide was in plain sight.”

“Will you go after them yourself?” I had asked.

“Only if incompetence dictates I must.” He said tartly. “Now, if you have finished wasting time with your idle chatter, perhaps we can continue?”

And we did. He had been using small combat training remotes and I had been forced to wear a blind fold. The little remotes had a nasty little charge which they shot out at me and if I wasn’t quick enough with the lightsaber to block it I was stung painfully enough to remind me I didn’t want to get stung again. The lessons learned were slow and frustrating. But even I had to admit I saw improvement when, as a reward, at the end of my lessons I was allowed to remove the blindfold and spar with Lord Vader. I some times thought, watching him, that using a lightsaber was a little akin to dancing with light.

For all his temper and tantrums, he was a surprisingly good teacher when it came to this weapon and I enjoyed the time I got to spend with him. Using a lightsaber was not like a combat staff, for one it was a lot shorter and secondly, I only had to worry about one end, not two. He talked about the various styles of lightsaber techniques there were and explained to me in great detail about the styles he was teaching me. I think he almost enjoyed these lessons, although he would never admit it. Usually by the time we were done I was exhausted and he was just getting started. I would often sit and watch him practice against specially designed droids and far more advanced combat remotes. Sometimes my master would join us. I was surprised that he too was able to use a lightsaber and delighted when he asked to borrow mine. It was an amazing sight to watch them practice against each other.

Fete Week meant that many of the non essential departments were closed for the duration of the holiday. I was not so lucky. Stuck in my office wading through the lists of things that Lord Vader needed done and the never ending sea of internal memos was not my idea of fun, it was made even more unpleasant when unexpected visitors barged their way in.

“Grand Admiral Tigellinus, what can I do for you?” I asked as he stormed into the office looking, for all the galaxy, like an enraged Rancor in a glass shop.

“Where is he?” he asked leaning with both hands on my desk so that his face was just centimetres away from mine.

I looked up into his eyes and smiled sweetly. “Could you be a tad more specific?” I asked.

“Vader! Where the devil is he? I have been trying to reach him all morning!” he snapped.

“I’m sorry Lord Vader is not in his office at the moment, perhaps if you’d care to leave a message with his secretary droid and make an appointment?”

“Pah!” he spat and spun away from the desk to start pacing about the room. “I know he’s here! I demand to speak with him now!”

I folded my hands on my desk and stared at him evenly. “Lord Vader is not in his office.” I repeated. “Perhaps if you would care to elaborate on the nature of your ...problem, I could pass the message along?”

“Elaborate!!! You of all people should know what the issue is!” He shouted.

I sighed. “Grand Admiral Tigellinus, I may be many things but a mind reader isn’t one of them. Unless you let me know what the problem is I cannot help you. Lord Vader gave strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed.” Which was the truth and usually meant he was in serious meetings with the Emperor. There was no way in the galaxy I was going to even consider bothering him of that was truly the case.

“That alien, Thrawn, is the problem!” Tigellinus finally spat. “Have you really not heard?”

I raised an eyebrow in response and waited.

“He is to be inducted into the Order of the Canted Circle and this is unacceptable! He is not nearly suitable and he is not even human! I want to speak with Lord Vader and ask him to talk to the Emperor about this!”

I nodded. I was quite certain I could tell Tigellinus Lord Vader’s reply pretty much word for word, but I rather liked my job and didn’t want to push it by being needlessly rude although it would have been fun. So instead I said. “I shall inform his Lordship of your problem and try to arrange a meeting for you with him as soon as is possible, but I have to warn you Lord Vader is extremely busy at the moment.”

Tigellinus grimaced. “You had better tell him, young lady.”

“Are you accusing me of not doing my job?” I asked.

He sneered. “Everyone knows that you have an *interest* in Thrawn, if he becomes a member of the Canted Circle then he becomes even more powerful. That would be most beneficial for you would it not?”

I smiled at him and he didn’t like what he saw in my smile. “Grand Admiral Tigellinus, my personal life is just that personal and my interests wherever they lie are also my own. If you have an issue with how I do my job then I suggest you take it up with Lord Vader himself. I will do the best I can to arrange a meeting for you with him at his earliest convenience but make no

mistake; he will not appreciate you wasting his time with trivial matters such as these. If I am to understand how the system for induction into the circle works, it is the Emperor who has the last say and makes the choices. If this is the case then I doubt very much Lord Vader would wish to interfere with this process.” The little tilt of my head said ‘*Do I make myself clear?*’

He regarded me for a moment then in a swift motion he rounded on my desk and once again leaned into my face. “Zaarin was right about you, you are nothing more than alien loving Outer-Rim trash. It is people like you who will cause the downfall of the Empire!” he hissed.

I blinked at him, my own anger boiling away in my gut. Then I just smiled again. “What century did you say you wished to see Lord Vader?”

Tigellinus made a noise of disgust and stormed out of the office. I counted to ten and when nothing else happened I got up to make spiced coffee. Just as I was pouring a cup for myself Thrawn walked in.

“I don’t suppose there is enough in there for two?” he asked. He sat down in the chair near my desk and accepted the cup I offered gratefully. He looked tired.

“Welcome back.” I said with a smile. “You just missed Tigellinus.” I added rolling my eyes.

“Thank the stars for small mercies. I suppose he gave you an earful?” Thrawn said, stretching his long legs out, crossing one ankle over the other.

I smiled. “Well, he wasn’t happy.” And I repeated the Grand Admiral’s last words to me.

Thrawn just shook his head. “He’s furious about this development. He sees it as an affront to his own induction. He hates me with a passion which would be funny if it weren’t for the problems it creates. I only found out about the news last night when I returned. I would have told you but you were not home when I got there.” He said. I searched for recrimination in his voice but found none.

I nodded. “I had a very long work day and then a very long training session and then Shiv dragged me out to a late supper because he’s convinced I am going to starve to death. I stayed at the flat here, less distance to get into work this morning. Lord Vader scheduled a five am meeting.” I said. “I guess congratulations are in order?”

Thrawn shrugged. “We shall see. The Emperor has pushed my name through and many people are very unhappy about it. It will be interesting to see how this all plays out, to say the least.” He ran a hand through his hair. “The ceremony is in six days. Will you be there?”

“Probably.” I grinned. “How long are you planet-side for?”

“At least the next couple of weeks.” He said. “I can accompany you to the art exhibit if that’s what you are asking.” He smiled as he looked up at me.

“The Emperor spoke of it again yesterday, you know, in passing.” I said repressing the desire to shudder at the memory of that meeting. “Asked if I had mentioned it to you.”

Thrawn shook his head. “Of course he did.” He muttered.

“More fuel for the rumour mill, people will start to assume something is going on between us.” I said with a little smile.

“And they would be right.” He replied tartly. “The social-political dance of this place never ends.”

“Tigellinus is going to fight your appointment tooth and nail you know.” I said.

Thrawn nodded as he stood up. “Yes,” he said, “I am counting on this.”

I just looked at him. “Okay.” I wasn’t going to ask; asking why would lead to a lecture and a lesson which would mean me spending the rest of the morning trying to figure out Thrawn’s motives for this statement. I couldn’t be bothered to play this game so early on in the day. I changed the subject. “So to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“I wanted to know if I should arrange food for two or just one tonight.” He said.

“Gosh I don’t know...eating my terrible attempts at cooking in my unsecured flat all alone with only the holonet for company or a decent dinner I did not have to cook with you in your lovely home, followed by some interesting indoor activities.... tough choice.” I said giving him a look.

“And you have no lessons this evening?” he asked dryly, ignoring my bad attempt at humour.

“No. Lord Vader is busy and Master Kjestyll is away for the next two days. I think my lightsaber techniques scare them.” I said miming a swishy poke motion with a pen.

Thrawn laughed. “I can only imagine. I should be done by six, if all goes well. I will pick you up then.” He said. “We can talk more tonight.”

“Talk? Is that what they call what we do nowadays?” I asked cheekily. I was glad to see him back. I’d missed him.

He just cocked an eyebrow at me and shook his head. “Be careful, Miss Gabriel, one day that tongue of yours is going to get you into trouble.”

“Ooh, something to look forward to.” I said.

He shook his head. “Hopeless.” He sighed, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. “I shall see you later, my dear.”

“Not unless I see you first.”

He gave me the ‘okay okay you win’ gesture and escaped my office before I could say anything else, smart assed or silly.

I sighed and went back to work, hoping that was it for visitors for the day, looking forward to the evening.

We arrived at the Nona Shyr Art Gallery shortly after eight and were in plenty time to hear the Emperor’s opening words and the organiser’s thank you speech as the exhibition was opened.

Thrawn, dressed in his uniform, gracefully retrieved two glasses of some pale pink drink in oversized champagne glasses. He handed one to me and I sipped it quietly while listening to the speech being given by the artist’s daughter. I glanced around and was amazed at how full the large gallery room was. Many of the faces I recognized and some I did not. I was glad I had chosen to wear one of Cati’s more exotic dresses because everyone was dressed up in their finest, or like Thrawn, they wore a uniform. Even gallery openings doubled as a Coruscant fashion show. Every clapped politely as the speeches ended and the exhibition was opened up for all to view. Smartly dressed wait staff manoeuvred deftly through the crowds serving strangely coloured drinks and gorgeous canapés.

Ermall Bernau had been a brilliant sculptor and painter who had been born on Bakura, where he had lived until the age of forty seven. He had moved to Alderaan when he had met his wife and spent the rest of his life there. He, along with all of his family except his daughter, had been killed when the planet had been destroyed. His works were strange yet elegant abstract representations of humans and aliens. He elongated the figure and exaggerated the limbs as well as the more prominent features physical features. He had primarily used Galanium as his favourite medium, a beautiful mix of neutronium and gold favoured by many artists.

His paintings were more about colour and motion than any particular concrete form. In a book about his work that my mother had owned he had said that he couldn’t be bothered with the finicky art of using a brush so he used his fingers and his paint buckets and slopped paint on the canvas, using his hands to play with the colours. I had often discussed with Bel about whether or not this could be considered art, after all, I often said playing devil’s advocate, *a small child could do the same thing*. These discussions had often gone on all night.

Now in the very beautiful setting of the Nona Shyr Gallery I looked at his paintings in a new light. I left Thrawn’s side to explore on my own, looking at each work, each painting and sculpture carefully, taking in the details of each piece. I was astonished at the vibrancy of his colours in the paintings and the tiny details of his sculptures that one never saw in books. I came to one painting called *The Fractured Force* and I was stopped in my tracks by it. I wasn’t sure if it was the colours he had used or the way in which they had been blended and shaped but what ever it was, the painting took my breath away. I stared at it, mentally tracing the paths his fingers had taken through the paint that had been dripped and poured onto the canvas. I had never seen a painting before that literally cried out to me. A painting that physically made me ache with a sorrow

that I never even knew possible. I had to swallow down the sudden desire I had to cry.

“This was my father’s favourite, of all his paintings.” Said a soft, heavily accented voice to my side. I turned to look into the face of Bernau’s daughter.

“Why?” I asked, curious.

She sighed for a moment and thought about her answer carefully. “He said that when he painted it, it was as if the whole galaxy was a storm which poured into his being. He painted it close to the end of the Clone wars, just as the Jedi were declared outlaws to the state. *When the madness really began*, he used to say. I think it was that which broke his heart. He said he knew at that moment, when the Jedi were being slaughtered, that the soul of the universe was fractured in two.” She stared at the painting for along time and then looked back at me. “I’m sorry. You must think me very rude. I am Anallya Bernau.” She said offering me her hand. I shook it and introduced myself.

“Ahhh yes,” she nodded slowly. “The Emperor has mentioned your name to me, he said you were very interested in art. It was he who suggested that I speak with you.” She smiled.

“The Emperor is most kind with his words.” I said glancing around to see him talking with Thrawn and Grand Admiral Zaarin. Lord Vader was not present. I had mentioned the show to him and his reply had been rude. I turned back to look at Anallya. “Why would your father think that way about the Jedi Purge?”

She shrugged slightly. “I do not know, he would never say exactly. He once told me that the Jedi had overseen peace in the galaxy for thousands of years and their destruction was a terrible blow for everyone.” She told me softly. “When the Empire was created he stopped painting. After that he concentrated only on his sculptures. I was only five at the time. This painting was his gift to me when I left Alderaan to go to school here. He said it was to remind me of what could happen when chaos and greed clouded good judgement. I never understood what he meant and he died before I could think to ask.” She said, looking at me with an expression I didn’t understand. “You are the first person I have ever seen look at it exactly the same way he used to.”

I nodded. “It’s very powerful.” I said softly. “I had no idea your father’s paintings were so vivid. This is the first time I have ever seen any for real. Was it you who organized this showing?” I asked wanting to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Actually it was the Emperor who requested a collection of his works. I am here as a token, I think. I must be very honest with you Miss Gabriel; I do not like art all that much. I am far more interested in mathematics and physics.” She smiled. “But as the only surviving member of the family I felt it was my duty to come and see my father’s work so honoured. It is a shame the show is private and just for this one evening, but it is for a good cause.”

I nodded. Unlike me most of the patrons had purchased their ‘invitations’ at a huge price. All proceeds were to go to the preservation of Alderaanian flora and fauna. The exhibition was a veritable who’s who of the Coruscant rich and famous.

I nodded. When Thrawn appeared, I introduced him to Anallya and the rest of the evening passed in a haze of interesting art discussion, polite, banal banter and subtly underhanded political back stabbing. I suppressed the desire to run when the Emperor came over to join us. Once the polite formalities of bowing and curtsying were done he began to converse with us.

“I see you two young ladies have met.” He said casually to both Anallya and me. We nodded. She was in awe of him, me, I was just terrified.

“Well, Miss Gabriel how are you enjoying the show?” he enquired politely, with that slight smile that reminded me of dead things.

“It’s very impressive, your Excellency.” I said, trying to avoid eye contact.

“And you, Admiral, what do you think? Do you share young Miss Gabriel’s sweepingly general opinion?”

I frowned at his barb and his smile widened just a hair’s breadth.

Thrawn cocked that single eyebrow and looked around the room. “I find the juxtaposition of the three dimensional works with his earlier paintings quite jarring.” He said coolly.

“Why?” demanded Palpatine, leaning a little closer towards his only Chiss officer as he asked.

Thrawn drew a slow deep breath. “His earlier works stem from a time when he was more content and happy. His art is more free in its expressive nature; he explores the universe through his rather unconventional use of paint. One can see the sudden shift from this freedom of spirit and artistry when one looks carefully at the piece he called *The Fractured Force*, the last piece he ever painted, if I am not mistaken?” he looked at Anallya who nodded. “After he stopped painting he began to explore the world through three dimensional medium but this medium lacked the freedom his earlier works show. His sculptures are exaggerated images of beings that, when one understand how the Empire works, are the forgotten races, the alien races who now find themselves on the fringe of society. These sculptures are tight and constricted, bound by some law he did not feel when he painted. He found a way to enslave his talent and prison it in his sculptures, the same way the Empire enslaves alien races and binds them to work in the ship yards. This tells me he felt constrained to produce more conventional looking works, but instead he produced art which spoke of sadness and bitterness. To place the two styles together in one room is jarring. They are so diametrically opposed to each other. Freedom verses restriction. Light verses dark. He was not pleased with the fall of the Old Republic and it shows in his art. Were he alive today I cannot help but think he would be siding with the Rebel Alliance and not with the Empire.”

Palpatine stared at Thrawn for what seemed an eternity. The air was suddenly thick and oppressive with the power of the force which Palpatine wielded. It was almost as if Thrawn had laid down some invisible challenge and the Emperor was deciding what to do about it. I stared at the Emperor for a second, waiting for his response. Then without warning the world around me seemed to shimmer and fall away. I found myself staring at Thrawn seated in a command chair dressed completely in white clutching his hands to his chest. It was not this strange scene that caused my heart to skip a beat but the look of surprise on his face and the red of the blood that ran from underneath his fingers. As swiftly as it had come so the vision vanished, leaving me shaking in its wake. It had been so quick, so brief and yet so real that for the barest of moments I had no idea where I was. I knew a sort of fear then, not for myself but for the man whose bed I shared, whose affections I held onto and did not want to lose. It was a sudden sharp ache and the sheer power of it made me clutch my pendant and gasp.

Palpatine turned to look at me. "My dear young lady, you are as white as an Alderaan lily, are you feeling quite well?"

I glanced at Thrawn who showed no emotion at all and nodded. "Yes, I am fine. Just a little tired." I said, trying not to show my trembling fingers.

Palpatine took my hand in his and patted it in the most avuncular manner. His skin was cool and dry. "Perhaps it is time the good Admiral here took you back home. You look as though you have seen some terrible spectre. I am quite sure Lord Vader would be most displeased should his favourite employee take ill."

I had to fight the urge to pull my hand away from his and nodded slightly, lowering my eyes so he would not see the emotion that boiled there. "I'm fine, really it's nothing. Too long a day and I didn't eat enough."

"Of course." Palpatine said in that caress of a voice which slithered down my back making me shudder. This time Thrawn glanced at me in a '*do you wish to leave?*' sort of look and I shook my head slightly all the while being observed by Anallya and the Emperor. With a deep steadying breath I found my center and put a lid on the fear that never seemed to go away when ever the Emperor was near.

"Well then, I must attend to my paying guests, I shall let you young ladies enjoy the evening." He said to Anallya and me. He turned then to Thrawn, "Perhaps you should look to Miss Gabriel's well being, Admiral. She does seem to blossom under your care." His words had a strange touch of threat to them which I didn't understand. "Perhaps at another time we shall discuss further your ideas about Bernau's works." He added and as we bowed and curtsied he moved off, his shadowy entourage moving with him. I stared at his back until Thrawn handed me another drink and Anallya began to ask Thrawn more about his own feelings on the show and art in general. Slowly I found myself able to

think straight again and after a few sips of the incredibly cold drink I felt almost normal. The strange vision receded but the irrational fear it had instilled remained. As much as I enjoyed the event, I was grateful when it was time to leave. My face ached from having to smile so much.

A few days after the exhibition I was curled up on the couch with Thrawn watching a report from the Colonial News Nets about the recent activity by the Imperial forces. They had just taken the planet Lirra away from the Hutts in a dramatic show of force. The footage shown was quite astonishing. The reporter who had been embedded with the battalion detached to deal with this situation was currently shouting into his recorder about the bloody battle currently going on to free the Human slaves. He was elated about the freeing of the humans and I wondered as I watched this if the rest of the galaxy's non human population felt the same way. The Empire used slaves without apology, especially from planets such as Kashyyyk. Thrawn just shook his head at the report and was about to change the feed when the doorbell sounded. It was late enough that someone coming to call raised eyebrows. He made a *stay here* hand gesture and went to answer it. When he came back he had a large, flat rectangular box in his arms.

"It's for you." He said.

With his help I opened it. Inside the box, under the protective wrapping was the Bernau painting; *The Fractured Force*.

"I wasn't aware this piece was for sale." Thrawn said as he cleared away the paper and the packaging, setting the painting against the table so that when we both sat on the couch we could look at it.

"It isn't, wasn't." I told him. "It belongs to his daughter." I stared at the painting, feeling that strange emptiness in my gut and the sudden prickle of tears. I didn't stop them as they trickled down my cheek. I didn't understand my reaction to this piece of art at all.

"This was tucked in the back of the canvas." He said handing me an envelope. I took it from his hand and slipped the letter out but my hand shook as I went to read it. I was grateful when he took it from my hand and gave me a puzzled glance. I ignored it, wiping the tears off my face angrily.

He looked at me for a moment but didn't comment on my visibly visceral reaction to the painting. Instead he read the letter to me, his voice soothing the bizarre storm of emotions that made me ache.

Dear Miss Gabriel,

I know this is quite forward of me and I hope that you will forgive any breach of etiquette. I told you that my father had given me this painting when I had left home to go and study here at the Coruscant Institute for technology to remind me of what could happen when chaos and greed clouded good judgement. What I did not tell you is that I really disliked this painting and he

knew that as well. It frightened me although I never knew or understood why. I suspect that on some level he was aware of this and was hoping I would learn some lesson from it. My father and I never communicated all that well.

I had not wanted to keep the painting, I often discussed it with him because I was well aware of its market value and felt it was wasted hanging on the wall of a room I rarely used because I couldn't stand to look at it. He made me promise to keep it safe until I found a person who felt about it the same way he did. I asked him how I would ever know that and he said 'you will see it in their eyes, their body language and their face'. I never believed him until I saw your reaction to it at the showing and then I understood.

The conversation I had with my father about this painting, the one where he extracted this promise from me was the last one I had with him. Two days later he, along with everyone else who was on the planet at the time, was killed with the destruction of Alderaan. Every time I look at the painting I remember this conversation and it makes me sad.

As it was his wish and because I can no longer bear to have this painting in my possession I would very much like you to have it. I hope that you will enjoy and treasure it. I think you will, I saw your expression and I believe that this piece speaks to you in a way I am unable to comprehend.

I hope you do not mind that I was able to obtain the address of where you currently reside from the Emperor himself. The Human Resources office was a bit vague about how to reach you and I did not want to leave the painting just anywhere.

If you have any questions or would perhaps like to meet for non art conversation I would be delighted.

*Sincerely yours,
Anallya Bernau*

I sat back on the couch hard, watching as he folded the letter up and slipped it back in its envelope. His touch was incredibly gentle as he stroked my face.

"You seem to have made quite an impression; this painting is worth a small fortune." He said softly.

I shook my head. "It's priceless and she hated it." I told him. "And since when did this place become my mailing address? As far as HR and everyone else are concerned, my place of residence is still the flat at the palace." Anger leeches into my voice taking the place of the inexplicable sorrow I had just felt.

Thrawn shrugged. "I have not advertised the fact that you often spend more nights here than there, but the Emperor does seem to keep a close eye on your whereabouts. I would not worry about it too much. He was probably concerned that such a valuable piece of art made it to where it was supposed to

without incident. The loss of such a work of art would not look too good on the palace couriers."

I nodded but was unconvinced. In little, insignificant ways the Emperor made it known that he was a part of my life, a gentle guiding hand, a subtle suggestion whispered. I loathed his interference almost as much as I feared it. That he knew I tended to spend more time here than at the flat in the palace bothered me. It made me wonder, if he knew then who else also knew and if that was the case just how safe was I really? I sighed and stared at the painting. It made me sad, touching something deep in my being that made me ache without knowing why.

"Can I hang this in the spare room?" I asked after a long silence. The spare room had become my room by default. It was where I kept my things that I didn't want at the flat in the palace, my study and place to go when I wanted to be by myself but to actually call it mine seemed to cross a line I wasn't quite ready for yet.

Thrawn nodded. "Of course. I have told you, that room is yours to do with as you wish." He said as if he could read my thoughts. He had stopped being subtle about his feelings towards me sharing his home. I was a part of his world and he did not regret his choices in this matter, but I was still uncertain. I made a face and got up, taking the painting and the letter into the room. I didn't want to look at it any more and I certainly didn't want to think about all the implications that came along with it.

When I came back Thrawn had poured two brandies and was watching me intently.

"You have that look on your face again." He said as I sat back down beside him.

"What look is that?"

"The haunted one." He said.

I shook my head. "Well that would be because there are too many damn ghosts in my life, Za'ar." I said.

He stared at me steadily for a moment and then said. "There are no such things as ghosts, my dear."

I didn't answer him; I just sipped the brandy and settled back against his warmth. I knew he was wrong but there were just some things one could not argue with Thrawn about no matter what.

We also never spoke of what I had seen and experienced in the Jedi Temple. Thrawn did not bring the subject up and neither did I but I thought about it a great deal. Many nights I woke up crying from a nightmare where I watched the slaughter of those younglings over and over again. Each time the dream ended the same way, with the Emperor laughing, his hand upon Anakin's shoulder whispering the words, "*Well done, my young apprentice, well done.*"

But Anakin had not felt that way. I remembered how he had felt, and he had not been proud, he had been scared and confused as well as angry.

On these nights where I would wake, unable to return to sleep, I would get up, wrap a blanket around my shoulders and sit out on the balcony, watching the city move around me, oblivious to the dark currents that ran underneath everything. I found it odd that I did not hate Lord Vader for what he had done, what he had become but rather a part of me pitied him. He had admired the Emperor; I knew this from my birth mother's journal. Anakin Skywalker had been a lonely often sad young boy and it was then Chancellor Palpatine who had befriended him in many ways becoming the surrogate father Anakin had never had.

But Palpatine had used and manipulated Anakin so subtly that Anakin had not seen it coming until it was too late, until there was no turning back. Now, no longer Anakin Skywalker, Lord Vader hated the Emperor and it was something the Emperor counted on but I didn't understand this. Everything about their relationship was wrapped up in lies and deceit and I knew that somewhere deep in what ever was left of his soul, Lord Vader was biding his time. I also knew that at the very heart of the matter was his love for the woman called Padmé and his mother but these were topics I could never talk with him about. He either got violently angry or silent and moody to the point of shutting himself away for days. I had learned very quickly which topics were off limits. That had been a matter of pure survival.

Not for the first time, during these episodes, did I wonder if Jyrki had not been right about everything all along and I was the one in the wrong. Working for men who murdered younglings, oppressed rights and freedoms of non humans, whose only real goal seemed to be the accumulation of power, but somehow I could not justify what Jyrki had done to me either. Two wrongs did not make a right, as my father used to tell me, and I felt as though I were trapped in the middle. It seemed to me, sitting alone in the cool of the dark that the galaxy was slowly going mad, spiralling inward on itself and the only thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want to get caught in the implosion.

Thrawn left me alone on nights such as these. He would watch me, the questions on his lips, in his eyes and mind never spoken aloud, as I left the warmth of the bed we shared. He had tried, at first, to draw out my thoughts and discuss the situation but I would close up and, much like Lord Vader, become moody and peevish. He had learned that there were some things in my life that required space and time not discussion and classification. What was there to discuss? These memories were never mine but now they were a part of me and only I could deal with them. The one person who could have helped and given me clarity was the one person I could never talk with about them and so it was either sink or swim. My experience with the aftermath of a trauma had taught me that pure denial was useless and often ended in me doing something

dramatic and stupid. So I would sit on the balcony of Thrawn's beautiful Coruscant apartment and allow the thoughts to work themselves through.

More often than not it was there Thrawn would find me, curled up under the thickly woven Dantassi blanket which had become my favourite, staring out at the slowly lightening, pre dawn sky. He wouldn't say much but usually brought me a cup of sweet tea and together we would sit in silence as night gave way to day. Somewhere along the line he had come to understand that his silence was as much a gift as his ability to analyse and unravel a situation through strategy and tactical thought.

It was times such as these where I knew that my downfall, as far as he was concerned, was complete. He had become such an integral, important part of my life that were he to suddenly vanish I would be utterly devastated. This was something I never told him, never spoke of and kept well hidden. I knew in my heart that while, for the time being, he was content to stay on Coruscant and play the political games, dance that elegant dance of court intrigue, it would not last. I would catch him sometimes staring up at the sky and the sensation of longing I felt from him was so intense it made me catch my breath. So I treasured what time we had together, knowing it would change. Everything changed, it was inevitable. Even the stars in the sky did not last forever.

Lord Vader's cloak rippled out behind him as he walked down the long corridor to the beautiful botanical gardens. I trotted behind him trying to keep up and not trip on the cloak at the same time.

"Keep up, girl!" he barked.

"You try running in heels!" I hissed under my breath. I had my long dress gathered in my hands and I did my best to keep up. When we entered the Skydome Botanical Gardens the lively buzz of conversation that had filled the air stopped dead and everyone shut right up and stared at Lord Vader, then they glanced at me and then went back to their conversation. This was standard behaviour wherever and whenever there was a crowd. Lord Vader entering a room had a tendency be a conversation killer, fortunately the effect wasn't lasting.

As we walked through the crowd I was amazed by the numbers of people attending Thrawn's ceremonial acceptance into the Order of the Canted Circle. I guessed that the induction of the Emperor's favoured alien was a great attraction for the curious. I looked around to see who I recognised. I saw Prince Xizor with his latest girlfriend; the council of Twelve Grand Admirals were also present, easy to spot by their brilliant white uniforms. There were many members of the Imperial navy present from many ranks and at least two thirds of the Imperial Court and palace staff were also present. Everyone dressed in their designer finest and I was no exception.

I had asked Cati for something special for this event and she had just given me a grin.

"I hear this event is quite a big thing for your gentleman." She had said as she wielded pins.

"Shiv has a big mouth!" I'd replied.

She had laughed. "I think the entire planet has heard about this event." She'd said. "They just don't know about the two of you." She had added. "Yet...."

The dress she had designed for me was stunning. Made from a crepe silk and dyed in colours that echoed the ripples of colour in the milky Ma'arilite pendant I was wearing, it was deeply backless and delicate. Tiny sparkly gems lined the neck line and the slender straps that held it in place. I felt as though I were dressed in sky fire. As always, I wore shoes to match, with high enough heels that I needed to watch how I walked. I wore my hair up, pinned in place with the beautiful Zenji sticks that Thrawn had given. I felt about as elegant as I was able to so when Lianna came up to stand beside me I didn't feel as I usually did, like an Outer Rim desert rat.

"Quite the turn out." she said.

I nodded and glanced at her. As always, she was dressed beautifully wearing a pale lavender, off the shoulder dress. Her red-gold hair was elaborately coifed and curled and the necklace she wore was a very expensive Miastique design.

"I see Lord Vader is in fine form. I didn't think he would be here." She smiled but it never reached her eyes. She didn't like Vader very much. He was competition for the Emperor's attention and affections, such as they were, but somewhere along the line she had decided that I was no longer a big threat and the tension between us had eased a little.

"A case of *see to be seen*." I told her but in truth Lord Vader had actually wanted to attend this event and had insisted I accompany him. I wasn't complaining.

"No one in their right minds would miss this event. No one expected the Emperor to personally push for a non human to be inducted." She said. "Look, even Tigellinus showed up."

I stifled a laugh. The whole palace was abuzz about how vocal Ruffan Tigellinus had been against Thrawn's induction. "He's not shy, that's for sure."

Lianna shook her head. "He angered the Emperor though."

"Really, I thought that The Emperor encouraged that sort of rivalry between his 'sons of the Empire.'" I said using the most recent catch phrase that had been flying around, describing the lucky men who found favour in the eye of the most powerful man in the Empire.

"He does but Tigellinus pushed the limit. Palpatine doesn't exactly like having his decisions questioned especially not openly." She said. "I heard that he

punished Tigellinus by stripping him of his recently acquired lands on Corellia, giving him just one more reason to hate Thrawn."

I nodded. "Well there are not many who seem to think much of Thrawn, though to be honest I don't really understand it. From what I've heard he's done a lot of good for the Empire."

Lianna looked at me as we idled our way through the crowds, following in Lord Vader's wake, to take our places and watch the ceremony. "Jealousy." She said simply. "The Emperor is curious about Thrawn and Thrawn is unafraid of the Emperor. Most of the people in Palpatine's inner circle and high command don't know what to think of Thrawn and they never get close enough to him to even begin to know him. He's aloof, more intelligent than most of them put together and he's not human. They hate him. And now he's being awarded the highest non military honour that can be given at the Emperor's insistence and no one can touch him."

"Things are going to get interesting, then." I said.

She made a face. "As if they weren't already."

Any further conversation on the subject was stopped when the ceremony began.

I watched with a mixture of pride and detachment as the members of the Order of the Canted Circle gathered with Thrawn kneeling on one knee before them. They were all dressed the same in floor length black velvet robes but the man who officiated the ceremony wore a robe that was more ornate and was finished with a large ornate collar and hood.

The speeches were long and spoke about the history of the Order, the goals and work that the Order was known for and lastly about Thrawn and his work. When the speeches were over the ceremony began and it was ornate and elaborate ending with a pendant that had the symbol of the Order, a canted circle, being placed over Thrawn's head. He was then told to rise and presented to the watching crowd as the newest member of the Order. The applause was polite and a little guarded.

For the next hour there was an elaborate reception, time allowed for the populace to congratulate the newest inductee. I mingled making mindless chit chat with the various people who stopped to talk to me. I made sure to avoid the Emperor and stay as far away from him as was possible and when I got my chance, I gave my congratulations to Thrawn.

"You should wear long black dresses more often, they suit you." I said.

"You look quite fetching."

He gave me a small smirk. "I suppose I should thank you for the gift, Miss Gabriel and also apologise for not wearing it. The slippers you sent, while they certainly match the outfit, they were not approved dress code."

I just smiled. "So now you are a part of Coruscant's elite."

“Yes.” He replied, casually looking around the gardens at the people milling around.

“When is the real ceremony?”

“In about an hour from now we will retire from this delightful party and slip away to the secret underground facility in the Imperial Palace and there I will be inducted in a more, how would you say, brutal manner.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Brutal?”

“I’ll show you the result later when I am able to escape this nonsense.” He said.

I just smiled, raised an eyebrow and resisted the temptation to flirt. We were being observed. I sipped at my drink and watched as an Admiral I didn’t know made his way over to Thrawn. I was about to wander away but Thrawn touched my arm lightly.

“Stay,” He said softly, “you should meet him.”

“Admiral Thrawn, congratulations!”

“Admiral Larsen, thank you.” Thrawn said, shaking the offered hand.

“Have you met Miss Merlyn Gabriel?”

“No, I have not yet had the pleasure.” He said turning to face me. I extended my hand for him to shake it and instead he took it in that strange gentlemanly fashion and kissed the back of it.

Thrawn’s lip twitched in a slight smile as he introduced me to Ged Larsen, one of the hottest young minds to come out of the Academy in a while. As he began to explain who I was and who I worked for Ged cut him off with a grin.

“I am well aware of who Miss Gabriel works for.” He said. “Your reputation for staying alive is almost legend amongst us.”

“Really, I suppose you also have a life expectancy pool going on like the internal palace departments?” I asked.

Thrawn raised an eyebrow but Ged just smiled. “You have long since surpassed anyone’s bets.” He said.

I laughed. “Yes, that’s what Siavaan Rimanata told me as well. Glad I could beat the odds. I’m surprised we haven’t met before.”

Ged nodded. “I spend as much time as possible in space, primarily in the Fondor system.” He smiled. “I don’t get to the Core worlds that often. Fortunately for me I happened to be called back for some debriefings and it coincided with this event.”

“The Fondor system, in the Tapani sector, yes? The great shipyards are out there as well as the Academy of Engineering if I remember correctly.”

Ged smiled. “You do indeed, I had no idea that Lord Vader had such exquisite tastes in choosing his personal assistants, you are as smart as you are lovely.”

He was very charming with twinkling hazel eyes and sandy coloured hair which he wore slightly longer than regulation. He was very good looking so I

didn’t mind the mild flirtation; it was distraction from the serious temptation standing at my side.

I returned his smile. “You are quite generous with your flattery Admiral. I hope that you do not expect it to win you any credit with Lord Vader I assure you he is quite immune.”

Ged laughed. “Not at all although I was hoping it might allow me to ask you out for a drink after this shindig, if you are free.”

It took every ounce of self control I had not to look at Thrawn.

“That’s very kind of you Admiral but I have a prior engagement this evening.” I said with a smile and sipped at my drink as demurely as I possibly could. I was flattered and a little surprised. He was very charming in a cocky, self assured sort of way.

“Perhaps another time then?” he asked.

I smiled and nodded. “Perhaps.” I said vaguely. “If you’ll both excuse me... Lord Vader insists I mingle. It’s good PR for his office.” Both men chuckled politely and I slipped away into the crowds. As I made my way over to the buffet table I spotted Shiv.

“Hey Rim-Girl, you look stunning. I see Cati did another amazing job!” he said giving me a kiss on each cheek and a twirl around motion with his finger.

I obliged and he grinned.

“Where’s your crew?” I asked.

“Ynyth and Tygs are on Corellia at the moment. Bobby couldn’t be bothered to drag his sorry self out of his flat. I was going to call you and see if you needed a date but then I remembered who was being inducted...”

“Shiv hush! I am here with my boss; apparently I make him less menacing and more approachable.” I said.

Shiv laughed. “Now I know why you were hired... the softer side of Vader! Does it really work?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea. But I did just get invited out for drinks by some Admiral I have never met before.”

“Oh? Who?”

“A Ged Larsen. You know him?”

Shiv nodded and stuffed a canapé in his mouth. “The Emperor’s boy wonder.” He mumbled with a mouth full of food.

“Boy wonder?”

“Yep, he’s youngest person to ever make Admiral in the Imperial Navy. It’s in his blood though, his father was a big shot in the navy till he was killed. Admiral Degan Larsen, was one of the Emperor’s favourites on that fast track then his ship was destroyed by rebels and the son watched the whole thing. Apparently Ged went a little nuts and somehow managed to finish off the enemy with next to no ships or help. He’s got that magic touch, if you know what I mean.”

“He’s force sensitive?” I asked.

Shiv nodded. “That’s the rumour.” He said reaching for another canapé. “Anyway word got around that he was quite good when he was backed up against the wall and eventually the Emperor heard about it and fast tracked the kid. He was like late twenties, early thirties when he was made admiral. It caused a big stir I can tell you. Then Larsen vanished and the rumour mill said he’d ticked the Emperor off and was sent away in disgrace but I think he was actually sent out on some top secret mission. He shows up periodically, stirs the waters up a bit, flirts with the girls then vanishes again. He’s got quite the reputation amongst the courtesans.”

“Glad I turned him down then.” I said.

Shiv grinned. “Your loss kiddo, I hear he’s really good...”

“La la la la...! Not listening!” I cut him off.

He laughed. “You’re no fun.”

“I prefer it that way.” I told him airily. Then watched as the members of the Canted Circle left the great Botanical Gardens to go off to their secret underground space and do their secret rituals. The event would now wind down and when the free champagne and catered food ran out everyone would leave for other things.

“So now what?” Shiv asked.

I pulled his arm over and looked at his chrono. “I go home.”

“I’d offer to escort you to your door but you’re not talking about the flat in the palace are you?” he said sipping at his drink.

I just gave him a look.

“I’ve stopped by a couple of evenings wondering if I could drag you out to come and party with us but no one was home.” He said quietly. “You get a secret place off palace or are you staying where I think you’re staying?”

I shrugged. “I’m safe.” I told him, giving him a look that said *do not push it*.

Shiv regarded me carefully. “Safe and happy?” he asked.

My smile told him everything he needed to know. “Keep this to yourself, okay?”

He made an ‘I’m innocent gesture’. “I know nothing.”

“I’m tired. It’s been a long day. Lord Vader was in a fine fettle today. Xizor is driving him, and consequently me, mad. It would be funny if I wasn’t the one having to deal with all the flying bantha poodoo.”

“The prince has become a fairly permanent part of the décor, lately.” Shiv agreed. We both looked over to where the Prince stood, his arm wrapped around the waist of his latest conquest.

“Who’s the redhead?” I asked.

“Tandy Seline, some hotshot reporter for holonet news. We give this one about two weeks.” Shiv told me.

“I’m in for two and a half, then. He goes through women the way Vader goes through droids.” I shook my head.

“Well I am just glad I don’t have to deal with him.”

“He’s an arrogant ...”

“Don’t say it!” Shiv hissed in my ear. “The walls have ears you know...”

I drowned the words that wanted to trip off my lips with the last of my drink. “Why don’t you walk me out to my air-speeder?” I said.

We left the reception and I was glad of the quiet in the large elegant hallways. When we were well out of earshot and alone Shiv stopped and looked at me.

“What?” I asked giving him a look.

“How long have you been sleeping with him, Merly?” He asked out of the blue.

“Shiv!” I hissed. “You don’t ask that sort of question!”

“Yeah I do actually, all the time.” He said with a touch of resignation in his voice. “You forget what I do and who I have to take care of on a daily basis.” He said.

“I am not one of your courtesans.” I told him.

“Just answer the question.”

I sighed. I knew that tone of voice and he wouldn’t let up till he had an answer. “It started the night of the break in.” I said, starting to head towards the entrance. “But it is something that has been brewing a long time.” Hoping he understood.

He nodded. I had just confirmed what he already knew. “You taking precautions?”

“Precautions?” I asked looking at him blankly.

“Against getting pregnant.” He said.

“Uhm...” I made a face. That had not even occurred to me.

“Merly! The last thing you need is this...” and he mimed a large belly. “I am certain that would not go over well with Vader or anyone else.”

“I don’t think it’s possible, to be honest. In case you hadn’t noticed, he’s not human. Our chances of producing viable offspring are biologically not very good.”

Shiv looked at me. “True but I want you to talk to one of the Doc’s about it. Just as a precaution.” He said. “And you should talk to Thr... your gentleman about this or have you already talked about it and I am just being paranoid?”

I shook my head. “This particular topic has never come up.” There had been so many other things to think about that pregnancy was the very last thing on my mind.

We reached my little air-speeder. Shiv turned to face me and put both hands on my shoulders. “You need to deal with this. I can tell you right now that while an affair will be tolerated as long as you keep it quiet, a pregnancy will not,

especially with a non human even if it is Thrawn. Not even Lord Vader will be able to protect you if that happens. So for my sake think about this, will you?"

I nodded. "Okay."

"Promise me?" he pressed.

"I promise. I'll bring the topic up tonight." I said. "Buggery sandrats, you're worse than my father!"

Shiv shook his head and gave me a hug. "Someone's got to keep an eye on you; you land yourself in the craziest situations."

"No kidding." I said and got in the speeder to go home. I waved to Shiv as I left the landing pad and entered crazy Coruscant traffic. Babies and how not to make them... this was going to be an interesting topic to bring up with Thrawn.

I came back home and was glad to shed the trappings of glamour. For over an hour I soaked in a bath filled with hot bubbly water, drinking a glass of Thrawn's very good wine. Candles and the lights from the city illuminated the gorgeous bathroom, dancing on the pale peach marble walls. When the water cooled I got out and dried off with a big fluffy towel. I dressed for bed, and wrapped myself in one of Thrawn's robes, the warm one. Then I made my way to the living room to curl up in the big chair that had effectively become mine, with a second glass of wine and a book. After realising that I had read the same lines over for the tenth or so time I gave up on the book. I turned off the main lights, lit candles and stared out of the floor to ceiling window that also doubled as a door to the balcony and watched the city at night. It danced and sparkled like a courtesan at the Grand ball. I had been working for the Empire for just over three years and only now was I beginning to see some of the beauty in this place.

I wondered if it should worry me that I was starting to think of this flat as home. That I was getting used to being here, having a place to belong here, and sharing a bed here. Thrawn made it easy for me to live in his place, made no demands on me and allowed me my freedom to come and go as I pleased. Yet we shared meals together when ever possible and when time allowed we shared each other. He was a man of many talents and many passions most of which he kept well hidden. We would talk for hours about any and everything. I loved the sound of his voice, deep and velvety, it was a caress as he described the things he was interested in but the wistfulness that crept into it when he spoke about the work he had been doing in the Unknown Regions, or when he spoke about his home world was ever present. I had asked him one night as we lay side by side in the quite dark why he had bought a Coruscant flat if his heart was truly in space.

"I needed a permanent mailing address." He'd said simply.

"Seriously?" I had turned to look at him, leaning on my elbow, resting my head on my hand.

He'd nodded. "The bureaucracy in the Empire knows no bounds. HR does not consider living on board an ISD a permanent residence." He had said. "I

refused to live in the Palace accommodations, too close to work and prying eyes. I did not want to rent, you have no control ultimately when you rent so I bought this place. I looked at many apartments and several penthouses but this one had the best view. It is far enough away from the palace that I do not feel as though I am constantly under the Emperor's radar. It has two secure entrances that can only be reached by vehicle and a view of the city on all sides. I suppose my line of thinking was, if I had to have a permanent address it might as well be a good one."

"But this is not really your home." I had placed the flat of my hand on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

He had smiled, covered my hand with his. "My home is thousands of light years away, sj'iu tekari. This is a port in the storm, a place where I can be myself, where I can think and where the rest of Palpatine's court has no say in what I do when I am not on board a ship. This place is, in a word, sanctuary."

"Yet you gave me a key."

He had just looked at me then, brushed away the lock hair that always fell in my face. "Yes," he'd said. "I did."

It wasn't just a key and a safe refuge, he had also given me my own room to do with as I wanted and free reign of his home, making it in effect also mine. The only room I rarely went into was the library mostly because it was his room, his space. When he wanted to think, or meditate he retired to the library. I left him alone.

I smiled when I heard the back entrance door open and then close but I didn't get up. I heard him vanish into the bedroom and fifteen minutes later he re-emerged, showered and dressed, like me, ready for bed. I glanced at the chrono, it was later than I had realised but earlier than I thought he would return. I got up and went to the kitchen, brought the open bottle of wine and an extra glass and joined him on the couch. I thought we would talk about his day but he had other plans.

Without words he pulled me to him and nuzzled my neck. I shivered. With fingers splayed he ran his hand under my still damp hair, warm upon the back of my neck, guiding my face upwards. His kiss was demanding and not open to negotiation. I didn't debate him. His desire raced through him and showered over us both. I felt his need as keenly as I felt his touch on my skin. He had come home physically aching for me. His want was infectious and I was caught up in his scent, his touch, his voice before I could even think. Like a glitterstim addict, he was a drug I could never quite get enough of and when laid before me I could never refuse.

"You smell like wild berries and tabjio flowers." He whispered in my ear, causing goose bumps to ripple up and down my arms.

"New bubble bath." I gasped as his hands began to explore under the robe, under the pyjama top I was wearing as a night shirt. Sense and sensibility were

rapidly being replaced by an intensely powerful desire and a longing which only he could answer. I welcomed the flush of heat that shot through me. His ability to send me reeling never ceased to astound me but suddenly Shiv's cautionary speech about unwanted pregnancy reared its ugly face intruding in the middle of a spine shivering kiss. I opened my eyes, glanced up at him and pulled back.

He studied me carefully for a moment then sat back, catching his breath, then after a few moments said. "You have that look on your face."

"Which one?" I asked.

"The one that says some particularly unpleasant thought just utterly interrupted my nefarious plans for the evening." He said.

"Nefarious?"

He smiled. "What is on your mind?"

"Babies." I said before I could censure myself.

This earned me a raised eyebrow. "Is this a new method of defence against my advances or is there something else going on that perhaps I should know about?" he asked.

I shook my head. He cocked his own slightly to one side, waiting for me to explain so I did. When I finished he reached for his wine glass and sipped at it to stop himself from smiling.

"I see I shall have to have words with Siavaan." He said lightly.

"Well, he's seen first hand the results when it happens to a courtesan." I said. "He worries, is all."

"Yes, and you do give us all reason to worry but not this time." He said. "You won't get pregnant, at least not from me."

"How do you know that?"

"My dear, do you think I would enter into this delightful dance with you and not do some homework first? The chances of you and I creating a child are very slim. There are enough differences to our species' physiology to make that particular biological wonder very difficult to achieve." He said, caressing my face. "And I have taken precautions to ensure that even with that slender chance it does not have the opportunity to happen."

"You have?" he kept surprising me at every turn.

"Females are not the only ones with such options available to them, you know. It would have been irresponsible to place both you as well as myself in a situation that could be compromising." He said. "You seem surprised."

"The whole baby talk thing surprises me, to be honest. It truly never occurred to me." I shook my head at my own stupidity. "Tell me something, are you prepared for every and any eventuality that life has to throw at you?" I asked.

He was quiet for a moment. "I'd like to think so." He said, and then added. "If I think of all the possible situations and outcomes through to their obvious and not so obvious conclusions then I am better able to solve the problems at hand. I enjoy the challenge of mentally walking through all the possibilities, even

the very worst case scenarios. So, yes, I am fairly certain that I am ready for almost everything, within reason of course. There are always surprises which one has not or cannot account for, that one percent of chaos or chance." He smiled. "Even I cannot foresee everything, but I try to be as prepared as possible. Unlike you, who are the most chaotic, least predictable person I know.

I stared at him trying to decipher that and he laughed.

"Do you *ever* want children?" I asked after a moment.

He smiled slightly, ran his fingers through his hair and sipped his wine thoughtfully. "Do you?"

I shrugged. "Maybe, I don't know, I never actually thought about it before." I looked at him. "You haven't answered my question."

"Perhaps one day I would like to father a child, when circumstances are a little different, but not at the moment." He said thoughtfully, carefully.

I nodded. "So I can tell Shiv not to worry on this particular subject then."

"You can." He leaned over and kissed me gently on the forehead.

I smiled "So now that I have effectively foiled your grand and, how did you put it, *nefarious* plans for the night perhaps you can reveal all the secrets of your new club? I believe the word brutal was brought up earlier...?"

"Sj'iu tekari, the night is not over yet." He purred in my ear.

I gave him a stern look. "Secrets first, seduction later."

"You drive a hard bargain." He said, mocking me ever so slightly.

"I'm noseey, I grew on Tatooine and I work for Lord Vader. Hard bargains and aggressive negotiations are my specialty, so spill!" I poked him not so lightly on the chest.

"As you wish." He said with a slight smile, catching my hand in his before I could poke at him again. "But you need to promise you won't overreact."

"Overreact to what?"

"To this..."

He topped off the wine glasses and motioned for me to settle back against his body. I watched as he pulled up the sleeve of his robe and there, on the wrist of his left hand was something that made me look up at him, horrified. Now I understood what he had meant by overreact. I had to fight to calm down.

"Is that a brand?" I asked, looking at the raw looking symbol which had been burned into his flesh. I resisted the temptation to trace the serpentine line that bisected the circle.

"Yes. One of the various trials to go through is being branded with the mark of the order."

"Are you in pain? Did it hurt? Does it hurt now?" I was sitting up now, facing him.

"No, yes and no. The bacta salve does good work; it will heal well soon enough." He said casually, pulling the sleeve back down over the brand.

“That seems like an awful lot to go through just to be in a silly club.” I scowled.

“It’s more than just the silly socialite club many think it is. The Canted Circle is a very powerful organization and as a member I have access to much more information, more useful connections than before with which to work and I now have a certain status which makes me difficult to ignore.” He explained a little tersely.

“You weren’t exactly a shy-flower in the corner before, you know!” I snorted.

He tilted his head. He didn’t understand my reaction even though he had anticipated it.

I looked into his eyes. “They branded you.” I said flatly. I was angry but I didn’t know why.

“You disapprove?”

“It just seems strange to me that you have to have your membership burned into your skin. That sounds less like an elite club and more like part of an exclusive nerf herd!”

He frowned. “You worry too much about the oddest things.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged, and then said. “I think it’s barbaric.”

He looked at me. “I wouldn’t have thought that something like this would bother you so much.”

“Liar.” I retorted. “If you had thought that you would not have warned me about over reacting.” I snapped. “Why would you even say something like that anyway? Because I worked at Jabba’s, because I work for Vader, you think I am immune to brutality?” I asked, anger creeping into my voice. I had hit the nail on the head though and I saw it in his face and in the fact that he didn’t answer right away.

“S’iu tekari, I apologise.” He said after a moment of silence. “It does surprise me that it upsets you as much as it appears to, though. Every member bears this mark. It is a source of great pride for most of the members of the Order. It is just a small thing, a small price to pay.”

“For most members? Are you not proud to be in this club?” I asked, consciously calming down, reminding myself it wasn’t him I was angry at.

He gave me a grim smile. “Pride is a foolish waste of time. This is a means to an end, nothing more and nothing less.”

“What is the end?” I asked with a scowl.

“Order out of chaos.” He said. He didn’t elaborate.

“That’s not much of an answer.” I told him, pulling the sleeve back from his wrist to look once again at the canted circle branded into his flesh.

“It is the only answer. I am doing what is necessary to protect those that depend on me.” He chided. “It is a long road, be patient.” He withdrew his wrist from my hand and stroked my face. “Don’t be petulant, it doesn’t become you.”

Those were fighting words and sometimes I wondered if he wanted to dig at me, just a little, to see how far he could push. But he was right this time. I was being petulant and I had overreacted. It was not the first time I marvelled at how well he knew me and just how easily he was able to sometimes read me. I sighed and settled back against him, taking the wine glass he handed me with a mumbled thanks.

“So do you wish to hear more about my evening or shall I resume my wicked and iniquitous ways with you?” He asked. I could hear the smile in his voice.

I gave him a look. “And you say I have been reading too many Holloway books?”

He laughed. “It is entirely your own fault that you brought your set over here and conveniently left them where I could find them to read. You are changing the subject and not answering the question.”

“Tell me more about your evening.” I said.

He smiled. “Understand that much of what goes on in the underground chamber is a sworn secret and I will not betray that. This society is filled with many odd traditions and what I would call superstitions but that is to be expected from an organization that has been around for longer than most can recall.” He said and then he proceeded to tell me as much as he was allowed to about his induction into the most elite circle of beings in the Imperial world. It was fascinating to hear but not all of it made sense.

“So the robes you wear at the public ceremony are different from the ones they make you wear at the private one?” I asked interrupting him for the umpteenth time while he described, at my request, what everyone was wearing.

He nodded. “There are symbols embroidered around the hem and the cuffs of the sleeves. They all have meanings and they mirror the symbols that are inlaid onto the floor. While much of the symbolism tells the history of the Canted Circle, some of the symbols are steeped in old beliefs based on a time before the Republic and some have meanings that have been long lost. This is an old organization, some of its ceremony has no meanings but tradition dictates that the old ways continue.”

I nodded. “So, why do the other members hide their faces with hoods? You saw them all at the public ceremony.” I asked.

“There are a set of trials one must go through as inductee, given at the hand of an elder member. Some of these trials are, shall we say unpleasant, meant to test the candidate’s faith, courage and physical endurance. The members prefer not to be seen when they inflict their particular tests.”

“Faith in what?” I interrupted.

He shrugged with one shoulder. “Faith in the Order itself. The Canted Circle has been around for a very, very long time, much longer than the Emperor and this empire. It has adapted and changed over the centuries to what ever

faiths and governing bodies were in power at the time. While the ceremony reflects many of these changes and eras, it is a ritual nothing more. The Canted Circle has survived and that is what its members cling to. Working behind the scenes, this society has more power than most people would ever believe.” He sighed. “All societies have them and the most successful of them learn to adapt.”

“Like the Dantassi?”

He nodded. “Yes, every species, all groups or organizations have their rituals; some are more barbaric than others. Some are eloquently masked behind silk robes and pretty words. Some are physical in nature demanding feats of strength or endurance. The Dantassi rituals are, to my mind, very elegant. Not the brutal hazing that serves little real purpose. They have rites of passage for many other things, the first hunt, coming of age, bonding of mates or adopting new clan members and so on. Just as every single other culture has. But within these societies there are smaller, more elite groups that also have their own rituals, such as the Canted Circle. One inside the other and so on, much like a Mandalorian kyshe doll puzzle.”

“So once you pass these trials, they what, pin you down and burn their mark into you like a prized eopie?”

“It is a little more subtle than your analogy but you are more or less right. Once the trials are done, the candidate is asked three questions, to which the answers are *faith, hidden in the dark and above all, loyalty*. You may *not* know the questions, so don’t ask. Once the correct answers are given the High elder of the Circle asks one final question to which there is only one answer and then the initiate holds out his arm and is branded.” He said. “At this point the rest of the circle remove their hoods and welcome the inductee into the brotherhood. After this, there is some manly bonding over fine brandy and conversation then everyone goes home until the next meeting is called. Much of the work the Circle does is not accomplished in it’s meetings but quietly, day to day and very few ever know or see what is being done.”

“Sounds utterly delightful.” I told him snarkily.

“Why does it bother you so much?” he asked, genuinely puzzled.

I drew a deep breath. “They brand you if you work at Jabba’s Palace, if you are a slave.”

“You bear no such mark, at least none that I have seen... have I missed a spot?” He made to lift up my robe but I smacked his hand away.

I shook my head. “No, I wasn’t there long enough for one thing and secondly I am not now, nor was I ever, a slave but I had to watch a few times as a new girl was dragged screaming to be branded. It wasn’t pleasant. Being branded is a sign to everyone that one is not free.”

He sighed, stroking my face with the backs of his fingers. “I am not a slave and I was not dragged against my will. This is not Jabba’s palace and those memories are old, leave them behind you.”

“Easier said than done.” I muttered.

He just nodded. I sipped my wine and the silence between us was weighty until I broke it.

“Is the Emperor a member?”

He arched an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“You won’t tell me the answer will you?”

“No, and do not ask me this again. It is forbidden to specify who is a member and who is not, but the members are marked, you might want to bear that in mind.” he said. “So, sj’iu tekari, now that I have satisfied your curiosity are you ready to satisfy mine?”

“What do you have to be curious about? I thought you knew the answers to everything!” I asked.

He smiled turned predatory. “Well... I am quite curious as to how what I started earlier will end.” He took my wine glass and set it on the table.

“Oh.” I said and was saved from making any further comments as he pulled me to him, lifting me with a practiced ease to bestride his lap. Any complaint or comment I might have wanted to make was silenced by his mouth on mine and as he kissed me, making up for time lost. His passion and arousal were both evident and infectious. It was easy to give in to his touch as he mapped my body with his fingertips the way he had mapped the uncharted region of space, with delicate care and infinite patience. I reciprocated, learning from his examples, deriving a sense of deep satisfaction as he shuddered and gasped under my touch. This, too, was a sort of ritual and every time he drew me into the circle of his arms, joined his body with mine; I discovered new answers to new questions. This exclusive club of two was riddled with its own secrets and rites. Each time we engaged in this dance I fell a little deeper into a pit I wasn’t certain I could or even wanted to ever climb back out of. My heart and my body had long since surrendered but my mind kept whispering of all the tragic endings this little game of ours could have. I was quite adept at ignoring that little whisper.

What usually began in the living room more often than not ended in the bedroom. Sweet and sensual, he took his time, teaching me the rewards of patience despite my attempts to thwart him. Sometimes when we coupled I wondered, *why me?* There were so many women to choose from at the palace who were, perhaps, far more suitable than I felt I was but I never asked this question out loud. I did not really want to know the answer. This affair was as dangerous as it was delightful but that didn’t seem to matter to either of us. I wondered, sometimes, why he, who had so much to lose, would risk so much to be with me. It never occurred to me that perhaps I should be asking myself the same question. I, too, had a lot to lose.

Occasionally, drowsy in the aftermath of the fiery tempest we had stirred up in each other, I caught a fleeting sense from him, despite my silent worries

and secret fears, that I was more than just a torrid palace affair or planet side fling. Somewhere deep within himself he also needed something from me that he received from no one else. Utter acceptance of not only who he was but also of what he was as well. These tiny glimpses past the mask he wore daily were rare and precious. Thrawn was not a man to bear his soul or share his deepest needs and vulnerabilities easily. More often than not as quickly as I had sensed these thoughts and emotions so they vanished as he closed back up, shutting me and the world around him back out. Perhaps another woman would have complained or brought this up in conversation but not me. I understood his need to protect himself. I did the same thing.

When my thoughts turned to such melancholy topics I would cuddle into his body, seeking warmth and comfort. I would ask him to talk to me, to tell me stories of his home, his youth, and his travels. The sound of his voice was soothing as well as grounding and I tried to burn it into my memory to keep for those times when he would no longer be there to ward off my own demons and inexplicable night terrors. Time was my enemy and I knew it. The deeper I fell into what ever it was we were creating between us the more I sensed a wormy cold wriggle of fear. My thoughts would sometimes turn to something I had once been told.

“Tell me what you regard as your greatest strength, so I will know how best to undermine you; tell me of your greatest fear, so I will know which I must force you to face; tell me what you cherish most, so I will know what to take from you; and tell me what you crave, so that I might deny you.”

Late one night before I had been sent to Tatooine by Lord Vader, the Emperor had found me as he sometimes did, in the library reading about the Great Sith Wars. He had smiled to himself as he had taken the book from my hands. When he had handed it back to me he had spoken these words. I had asked him about them and he had told me a legend about Darth Plagueis the Wise. The story had made me shiver and left me feeling cold and alone. I had spoken with Lord Vader about it the next day and he had nodded.

“I have heard this tale before.” He had said. The bitterness in his voice was a physical thing.

“What does it mean?” I had asked him.

“Trust no one.” He had replied angrily and the conversation had ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Now, as I lay in the dark next to the only man who had seen me stripped bare in every way possible, I wondered about the meaning behind the words of Darth Plagueis. It seemed to me that these words the Emperor had spoken to me, the way a father will sometimes speak to a child to whom he is trying to teach a subtle lesson, were a warning of some sort, a veiled threat hidden behind the mask of avuncular concern. I had remembered then, the terrible sense of sorrow, fear and betrayal I had felt from Lord Vader as I had repeated the Emperor’s tale

and I realised why it had hit so close to the bone. His emotions echoed mine. I had stared into Lord Vader’s face only to have the reflection of my own mirrored back to me. Sometimes I wondered if we were really so different. Lord Vader had become a tool for the Emperor, taken in by the soft spoken advice and kindly manner. The Emperor had beguiled him with kindness and trust when the people he had admired the most had let him down, viewed him with suspicion. Lord Vader had not always been this way, he had not always been angry and dark. I had stared at him for a long time. I did not want to end up the same way.

Attachments... the word was beginning to take on new significance and with that came some small measure of understanding why the Jedi had tried to avoid it. But in this place and at this time I was willing to take what comfort I could. I would never be sure on nights such as these if it was just the fact that I was restless, tossing and turning by his side awake or if he just sensed my own inner turmoil but more often than not, Thrawn would entwine himself around me, protective and fierce. He would nuzzle his face in my hair and the warmth of my neck and whisper in my ear.

“Stop thinking so loud, sj’iu tekari and go to sleep. What ever it is you are conjuring up has not happened yet so stop tempting fate.”

Most of the time this worked but every now and then his words failed to lull me to sleep, of course then he had other contingency plans in place for such moments as these and usually they worked just fine.