

Deep Amongst the Stars Divided 1

“What, no argument from you?” Lord Vader asked, surprised.

“What is there to argue, my lord?” I asked him. “You gave me an order, I obey it.”

“You always argue with me.” He retorted and this was true, “You have reasons for wanting to remain on Coruscant. I am surprised that you do not wish to do so. I was expecting more resistance.” It was not a question but rather a statement. He swung around with full power and I did my best to defend.

“Well, that last little reminder from Jyrki that he’s still about and still on the hunt has me convinced that space is safer than ground. Besides, what do you know about what I want?” I asked as we stepped back from each other and re-established ground. It was a good job we were alone in the quiet of the training room with the door closed because I am certain had anyone else heard me speak this way to Lord Vader they would have died of shock right then and there but after over three years of working together I knew how far I could push and so did he.

“So you are telling me that your fear outweighs your desire.” He asked.

“No, but it was inevitable that sooner or later one of us would be called to duty off this sarlacc forsaken hell-hole so it might as well be me.” I told him. In fact I was grateful it was me being called off world first. I didn’t like being the one left behind.

Lord Vader nodded and moved back into position, swinging his lightsaber at me in a really elegant move. “And have you told him yet?”

The lightsabers thrummed through the air. I shook my head as I spun around to block his blow. “Not yet.” I said, sweat trickling down my back as I counter attacked. It was almost like dancing except far more deadly. “He has been away for the past three days so I haven’t had the chance. I will tell him when I see him but I am certain he won’t be surprised.”

Vader nodded. “No, Thrawn rarely ever is.” He conceded.

Lightsaber blades crashed together making that awful gritty, crackling sound which always set my teeth on edge. We could stand like that for a few moments but Lord Vader was stronger than I was so in the end it was always me who gave way, backing off.

“You admire him.” I said as I caught my breath.

“I admire anyone who does their job so well.” He replied. “He has served the Empire with unwavering loyalty. He puts his job, his duty above all other concerns, even his personal ones.”

That last remark was directed at my relationship with Thrawn but I didn’t mind. It hadn’t taken Lord Vader long to figure that things between Admiral Thrawn and I had become *interesting*. It didn’t appear to bother him but rather

it seemed to amuse him in some strange way. I was well aware of my place in Thrawn’s life so Lord Vader’s barb didn’t bother me.

“He does what he must to get the job done. It is what it is.” I said as we began to circle again. I was learning to like this weapon and I enjoyed spending time with the man teaching me how to use it.

“How is it that you are so pragmatic for one so young?” he asked.

I laughed. “Considering my life in the last three or so years it’s funny you even ask that. I am lucky to be alive so I say again, it is what it is.”

It was Vader’s turn to chuckle. “You do seem to have a talent for avoiding death.”

“Talent, is that what they call it?” I asked, the blades swung around humming, sending off that weird scent of scorched air. I never could place the smell but it was unmistakable. I often thought that in the days of the Old Republic the training rooms at the Jedi Temple must have reeked with the stink of it.

“If you loosen your death grip on the handle just a little you will find it a lot easier to execute that last move.” He said as we stood back from each other.

I nodded, he was right but it was hard not to hold onto the lightsaber as tightly as possible.

“I have told you before, girl, I promise not to sever your limbs so do as you are told, ease up on your hold or you will never get beyond the point where you are now. You are too tense to complete these moves properly. If you do not listen to me then you are wasting my time!”

I sighed and tried to relax but the lightsaber scared me. I had seen the damage it was capable of and I feared it enough that it interfered with my ability to wield it to Lord Vader’s satisfaction. We had been at this for nearly three hours now and I was starting to tire.

“Once more, do as I say and complete that sequence.” He said. Impatience edged into his voice.

So I did as he bid, swinging the blade as he had shown me. His own crashed down and I blocked the blow. It was, as he had said, easier with a loose wrist and grip. Attack defend, blow block step, step, step. It was a dance with tricky, deadly choreography. I knew the lesson was over when he shut off his lightsaber. Some days he would push me until I almost dropped from exhaustion but others, like today were more subtle lessons about technique rather than endurance.

“Have there been any leads on the bomb?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, as usual your friend escaped all notice. He moves like a Mistryl shadow.”

“I’ve told you he’s not my friend so stop calling him that and he uses the force. Plus he has inside help. I just didn’t think he’d ever plant a bomb.” I said crossly.

“It wasn’t a real bomb, it was just a flash-grenade, designed to scare, temporarily disorient and blind.” Vader commented.

“I would rather not take my chances. If you hadn’t been in front of me when it went off...” I shrugged, shuddering a little at the memory of the incredibly loud bang and the blinding light. I had literally been right behind Lord Vader when the bomb had gone off. Even with his protective armour, the mask and cloak he had still been knocked back and very surprised. I had dropped to the floor instantly and it had taken every ounce of training not to panic. Once the smoke had cleared and the ringing in my ears had calmed down I had stepped into the office foyer to survey the damage. To my surprise it had been minimal. Lord Vader had been correct, it was just a flash bomb designed not to do damage or hurt but to stun one’s enemies temporarily in order to distract them. The bomb fragments had littered the expensive carpet, burning holes into it where they had fallen. When I had touched one it had told me all I needed to know. Lord Vader’s anger had been palpable when I had passed the information along to him and I was pretty certain that in the security department, someone’s head rolled. Jyrki was seemingly invincible and invisible. I did not mind at all that I was being sent off planet to work on board the Executor. I was pretty certain that this latest stunt of Jyrki’s had pushed Lord Vader to make that decision. It was bad enough when his stupid tricks were aimed at me but when suddenly Lord Vader found himself in the middle of Jyrki’s little war, well that upped the ante somewhat and changed the rules of the game.

“He still scares you with his tactics?” Lord Vader asked.

“No, I am beyond scared, I am just angry.” I said and it was almost the truth.

“Good, anger is usable, useful, Fear is not.”

“Whatever.” I grumbled. I’d heard *that* speech too many times now.

Vader laughed and set up the powerful droids he used to spar against. This too, was part of my training, watching him practice. I enjoyed it and I learned much from just observing. I would stretch out slowly while he really began to move.

Lord Vader had been trained in the Jedi art of lightsaber combat by some of the best Jedi in the galaxy, at least that is what he told me. He would use his own practice to show me the various techniques that one could use, although he had his preferred what he had told was known as Form V, Shien/Djem So or the *Way of the Krayt Dragon*.

I watched in tired delight as Vader effortlessly blocked the attacks from the powerful droids that were specially designed for exactly this purpose. For a man of his stature and size he moved with an elegance that belied the fact his limbs were artificial. On my second lesson he had begun to explain the five main forms of lightsaber technique as had been taught by the Jedi.

Form V was a very powerful form that had combined the defensive style of form II and the more aggressive tactics and manner of Form III. Form V allowed for the ability to not only deflect laser bolts but taught the practitioner how to redirect them back towards the enemy. Lord Vader enjoyed giving me these history lessons, stating that Form V was often frowned upon by many in the Jedi Order because they felt this form of lightsaber use led to aggressive behaviour. This form emphasised offence over defence, strength over diplomacy. Vader excelled at this. I really enjoyed my lightsaber lessons. They were challenging and they were fun, well fun was perhaps not the best word to use to describe training with Lord Vader but they were.

“So when do I fly out?” I asked.

“In three days, you will be alerted to the proper time.” He said as he took out the second droid. “You will be onboard my shuttle.”

“I’m not taking my ship?” I asked.

“You need practice flying Lambda class shuttles and this will be official Imperial work.” He said as another droid crumbled to the floor. “Your ship is for unofficial work and you will not be needing it this time around. If you are worried about leaving it behind you can store it at my castle or perhaps Admiral Thrawn will allow you to store it at his home as you seem to spend a great deal of time there. Either way I am certain the *Ahnkeli Su’udelma* will be safe from sabotage.” He understood my love for my ship.

“How long will I be off world for?” I asked.

“As long as I need you for.” He retorted.

With a sigh, I rolled my eyes. “Ok, let me rephrase the question, how many weeks should I pack clothing for?”

He paused for a moment, stopping the droids with the force. “Several months, but no doubt there will be times when we will be required to return to Coruscant.” He paused then added, “You will probably be required to sit at the Captain’s table from time to time so pack what ever passes for appropriate dinner dress.”

I nodded. “What about the office stuff?”

“It will be dealt with. There is space onboard Executor for you in a secure area.” He said as he destroyed the last droid.

“Same place I was before?”

He nodded as he kicked at the destroyed droid with his foot. “But it has been re arranged and set up specifically for you to do your job in the most efficient manner.” he said. “Everything you will require to begin your day in a productive way has been arranged.”

I glanced up from stretching to look at him and grinned. I had once argued with him about the need to have the ability to make spice coffee in my office. I had told him that I was unproductive without my coffee.

“So, I don’t need to bring along a camp stove?” I asked with a grin.

“No. You have made your needs quite known.” He said tartly but I knew that he took some perverse pleasure in arranging certain things for me, even surprising me as he had when he had given me this beautiful training room. I had learned from my Bunduki master that Lord Vader had had a hand in designing it. I was reasonably certain that the space made for me on board his floating fortress would be a second home of sorts. I looked forward to it, I liked being in space and perverse as it sounded, even to me, I was happy to be Lord Vader’s presence. How could I ever explain this bond? I did not understand it. He was one of the most reviled men in the entire galaxy but there was more to him than the mask and the menace. I had seen him through other eyes. I had seen him as a young man full of love and passion. I had begun to get to know him through the words of my birth mother, a small boy full of wonder and worry touched by a sorrow no one seemed to really understand. He had been called the chosen one, but he was not treated as such. He was a paradox. Almost everyone thought of him as pure evil but to me he was more tragic than anything else.

“Making my needs known and you actually listening to me and knowing them are two different things.” I told him.

He stood with his hands on his hips. “Do you think girl, that after three years I do not know what you require in order to do your job efficiently?”

“I didn’t realise you were paying attention.” I said, half joking.

“Most people don’t. Most people would like to think that I am stupid as well as bad tempered and brutal.” he said with a touch of annoyance. “And you can be quite difficult to ignore.”

“Well, you are often bad tempered and you can be quite brutal.” I said.

“And you ignore me just fine when it suits your purpose but I don’t understand why anyone would think you are stupid.”

“I have no patience for incompetence.” He corrected, not bothering to respond to my last barb or answer my question.

“You strangle people with the force!” I countered.

“It’s tidy and efficient.” He said.

I just looked up at him and shook my head. “It’s a waste of man power and it creates unnecessary paperwork.”

“It’s weeding out the weak and ineffectual!” he replied.

I wasn’t going to win this argument but then again, I never did. “You’re the boss.” I said with a shrug, always my way of saying ‘you win.’

“Yes, I am.” He said with a laugh that sounded more like a bark. “Get someone to clean this mess up, place an order for a hundred more of these droids and two hundred of the upgraded combat training remotes. I want them delivered by the end of this week. Then you may leave for the day.”

“Yes, my lord.”

He gave me a curt nod and went to leave then paused. “Will you be meeting with Thrawn tonight?” he asked.

He already knew the answer to this so lying to him was out of the question. “He was due back planet side early today, so chances are good I will see him later on this evening.”

“Then pass along this message.” He said. “Tell him that everything is in place. The equipment he needs has been secured and will be delivered to him at the appropriate time.”

I repeated the message and nodded. With that Lord Vader swept out of the training room leaving me to puzzle over his statement, cryptic messages were his specialty. I looked at the clutter of droid bits that littered the room and then went to find a clean up crew.

I showered and cleaned up in my flat in the palace. I was still using it as a base, and it was convenient. When I was done I took a look around for anything that I would need to take with me when I left for the *Executor* but aside from some clothing and some books almost everything I used on a daily basis was at Thrawn’s. I smiled when I realised this because I wasn’t sure exactly when that had happened, when I had effectively moved out of this flat and into his. Still, it was something very few knew about. I had left enough of the trappings of daily life in this place so that most people visiting would think I still lived here. Sometimes I slept here when I worked really late and then, because Lord Vader *never* kept any sort of regular schedule, had an early meeting. I knew that many people suspected but only a very few knew for sure, not even my family and I was hoping to keep it that way. Secrets, my life was full of them. By the time I got home Thrawn was already there. Reunions, I loved them and all their glorious gifts.

It was late when we settled back from the passion of welcome back to chatter of catching up and the interesting things that made our daily routine worth talking about. In the quiet of the night we moved to the living room. It was quiet, the candles I had lit creating a flickering dancing light. Curled against his chest, his arm curled around my shoulder, we sat with each other on the couch drinking wine. When I told him about my orders to ship out with Vader, Thrawn was not surprised.

“Well, it is easier for me this way; at least I will not have to be worried about you doing something crazy.” He had joked, but underneath his words was a hint of truth. His concern pleased me. His hand caressed my face.

“Lord Vader feels I shall be of more use in closer proximity than stuck down here on Coruscant.” I told him.

Thrawn grinned. “Vader doesn’t want you being blown up or anything else while he is away. These attacks by Mr. Andando are an embarrassment to him, you know. It would reflect very badly on Vader if he cannot even keep one young woman from being harassed by one lone rebel.”

I nodded. "Yes, well I can't be an embarrassment to the Dark Lord of the Sith, now can I?"

"In his own way, surprisingly enough, he seems to care whether or not you live." Thrawn chided.

I gave him a look as he topped up my glass of wine. "You think I don't know that?"

"I was just reminding you that you appear to have a charmed life when it comes to Lord Vader's good graces."

I laughed. "I doubt good or grace have much to do with it. I am pretty sure he just doesn't wish to go through the hassle of breaking in another person to do this job. He is used to me and I amuse him." I said.

Thrawn raised his chin slightly but didn't comment. He didn't have to.

I made a face and then remembering the last task I had been given for the day repeated Lord Vader's cryptic message.

Thrawn smiled and suddenly had the look of a jax that has just been given a saucer of high end blue milk. "Excellent." He said.

I watched him for a moment. "You are not going to tell me what all this secret stuff is about are you?"

He shook his head. "No."

I scowled and that made him laugh.

"My dear, you are entirely too nosey for your own good. It's quite a wonder that your curiosity hasn't killed you yet." And then he relented slightly. "I dare say you'll discover what we are up to in time." And from his tone of voice I knew that was all I'd get out of him on this particular topic.

I changed the subject then. "So what's this I hear about you and Tigellinus having it out in court?"

Thrawn snorted. "I suppose Siavaan told you this?"

"No actually, I heard it from one of the security guards who is stationed near my old flat. Word is you had a shouting match. It was quite the topic of conversation."

"*He* had a shouting match." Thrawn replied archly. "I do not raise my voice especially in situations such as that and this annoyed Tigellinus even more."

"Why?" I asked. "I thought you two were all buddy-buddy since you were inducted into the Order of the Canted Circle."

Thrawn nodded. "It would appear that way from the outside. Tigellinus is trying new tactics. He figured that if I was to be on fairly equal footing with him politically speaking then it would be better to have me as a friend not an enemy. He has tried to show the Imperial world that we get along and can play nice, however underneath this lovely little façade lies a much nastier version of the game we were previously playing." He paused to sip his wine. "We had an interesting discussion about certain policies currently in place. I politely disagreed with him, which I suppose I should not have done, friends it seems do

not disagree on anything. The conversations went from civil to uncivil fairly quickly. I find it very interesting to see how quickly the true self comes out when the right buttons are pushed."

"You should be careful." I told him, poking him gently in the ribs. "The Emperor doesn't always like political bickering and I think that Tigellinus knows about you and me. He'll throw that into the fray if he has to, he's not above using every dirty bit of laundry he can find to get rid of an opponent he feels is in his way. It wouldn't be the first time, you know."

Thrawn smiled. "I am well aware of that my dear, in fact I count on this characteristic behaviour."

"Count on it for what? What game are you really playing, Za'ar?"

"You'll see when and if it happens." He told me lightly. "It is not something you need to concern yourself with right now."

"It does if I get dragged into the forefront of your games because I am sleeping with you." I told him.

He arched his eyebrow at me. "My dear, do not give our affair more importance than it has. While it means something to you and me, it is unimportant to the over all scheme of things, especially in the political arena. You do not have to worry about that." He said thoughtfully. "I am quite certain that if the Emperor had objections to our coupling he would have stepped in by now and done something about it."

I sighed and gave him a look. I wondered if he really knew just how cruel and how devious the Emperor could really be.

"A'myshk'a," he said getting up and regarding me carefully. "You need to place some faith in me. I know what I am doing and I have things well in hand." "So you keep saying." I retorted.

That earned me his trademark eyebrow look.

I stared up at him, meeting his gaze but unable to read anything in his eyes. "I do have faith in you, but I don't like being kept in the dark." I told him.

He smirked. "Yes, you are as nosey as you are talented and beautiful." He held out his hand for me to take. "Come to bed so that I might take advantage of your talent and pleasure in your beauty."

"And my curiosity?" I asked, getting up.

"Will be satisfied." He purred, his fingers playing on my skin as he stroked my face, his caress igniting fire.

I rolled my eyes at his words but took the hand that was offered. Time for us to be together was running short, spending what remained talking about politics was not my idea of fun.

"Trust me, my dear," He murmured in my ear. "I'll make it worth your while." He smiled when I shivered.

It was hard to argue with a proposition like that but in the back of my mind the little voice that nagged me, that whispered warnings and made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end had woken up and was yelling at me.

Three days zipped by faster than I could dream of. My last night on planet was not overly restful. I had gotten no sleep and the thoughts that rattled through my head were bittersweet. Leaving was harder than I thought it would be and Thrawn had not made it any easier by pulling me back when I had wanted to get out of bed and check that I had everything I needed. As was the rule when I had to be some place I was always restless and on edge.

“Come back to bed, sjiu tekari,” he said. “Do not squander our last two hours together.”

“I need to get ready.” I had told him, trying to wriggle away. This wasn’t exactly true but I couldn’t just lie there staring at the ceiling listening to the sound of Thrawn’s breathing. I thought he had finally fallen asleep but I was wrong about that.

He tugged me to his body. “You packed last night; you checked three times that you have everything you might need. I’ll make sure you are there on time, now stop fighting and remind me why I shall miss you when you are gone.” His voice was warm and beguiling in my ear.

It was difficult to argue against his logic especially when he showed me how much better his idea of passing time was than mine. He had become my lover, best friend, and something I didn’t have words for. We had been given almost three months to physically be together and in that time I had gotten used to his fairly constant presence. Now time was no longer on my side. That tiny period of quiet and grace we had been granted to really get to know one another had come to an end and my last two hours on Coruscant were filled with a deep passion that bordered on desperate. I wondered if this was how all lovers, soon to be parted felt. I decided it was not a feeling I liked very much.

It was an awful sensation and it made me terribly aware of why the Jedi were so loath to become attached to anyone. Our time with one another had been incredibly intense and yet, oddly enough, while I was certain of my feelings, we had never spoken of love, never uttered those three little words to each other, the way characters in Bel’s trashy romance books repeatedly did. It was almost as if to say anything along those lines out loud was to doom ourselves so we never spoke of it. I suppose our actions spoke louder than any flowery speeches ever could anyway. His hands, his lips, his body told me what I needed to know and I hoped that it was the same for him. We were fierce and wild, gentle and tender and everything in between. For the first time in my life I was scared to let go.

True to his word he had gotten me to the shuttle on time. That last reckless, lingering kiss which had said so much and yet so little was as public as

it could be but I didn’t care, there was no one around to notice anyway. We drew back and just stared at each other for a moment. I felt the words that wavered between us but silence reigned.

“I need to get to the shuttle.” I had said when I found my voice. I went to leave but he caught me by the arm.

“Stay alive, my dear, this galaxy is far more interesting with you in it.” He said. “I’ll write when I can and we will see each other soon enough, I imagine.”

I nodded, feeling a lump in my throat and the prickle of tears. I wondered why this particular parting was so difficult. It was not the first time work and duty had separated us, so why was it now so hard? I didn’t have any answers for this and shoved my emotions down. I slipped out of the air-speeder with my bags and didn’t look back; it was bad luck to look back.

I had arrived at the landing pad before Lord Vader and the two men on guard at the shuttle’s ramp had stiffened when they had seen me. I found it odd that they looked so young because they were at least the same age or just a little older than me. I guessed working for Vader was starting to have an effect on how I viewed the world. I gave them a curt nod as I went on board. I dumped my baggage in the back, except for my satchel which held my most precious things, and then went up front to the cockpit of the shuttle and began my pre-flight check. Lord Vader arrived just as I was done with the systems check. I went to get out of the pilot’s seat but he waved me back down.

“You may stay there and pilot the shuttle.” He said.

His dark presence filled the cockpit. When he gave the okay to get on the go I slipped on the headset and began to talk to Coruscant Air Control. I began take off procedure with a heavy heart but the sadness of leaving was soon replaced by the sheer joy of flying. Once we were out of the atmosphere and well on our way past the planet’s gravity well, he gave me the co ordinates of the *Executor* and I set the nav computer to calculate the hyperspace jump.

It was not a long trip to where the *Executor* lay in space like a waiting Kratt dragon. I had forgotten how massive a ship she was and the sight of her as we approached took my breath away.

“Watch the dorsal wing on approach.” He admonished.

“You tell me that every time.” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I have seen first hand what happens when a pilot forgets about the height of that wing.”

“Oh?” there was more to this story.

He sighed, well as near as a sigh that Lord Vader could make. “The Lambda Class shuttle’s Dorsal wing is larger than its predecessor. When they were first introduced to the Imperial Fleet it took the pilots some time to get used to the height difference. The cost of repairs was ... annoying.”

“Did you...?” I never got to finish my sentence.

“I do not wish to talk about it.” He growled, cutting me off but I caught the memory flash of a pair of gloved hands gripping the consol as a shuttle skidded across the landing bay, smacking into several other ships. I don’t think it was he who was actually at the helm but it didn’t really matter. It was almost comic.

I had to stifle a giggle. “Oh!” I said.

“The shuttles are remarkably touchy, He said knowingly, “when you knock the dorsal wing.”

I just nodded. “Then I don’t mind you reminding me of this.” I said.

“That is wise.” He commented dryly.

Like the mouth of a hungry rancor the *Executor’s* landing bay was wide and open. The shuttle glided through the force field and we flew into its maw. I styled her portside as we landed and the touch down was gentle as the side wings folded up and locked into land position. I wondered to myself how much one of these shuttles would cost.

“You have learned to pilot these particular ships better than I had expected.” Lord Vader said as he left the cockpit, then because I just glanced up and stared at him, unsure if I had heard right or not, he snapped. “Hurry up girl; I gave you a compliment not permission to sit here all day.”

“Yes, my lord.” I said grabbing my satchel and hurrying to follow him out of the shuttle. I was surprised by the honour guard that waited. Lord Vader was used to seeing this and breezed down the shuttle’s ramp, his long cloak flowing like black water out behind him. I picked up my baggage and trotted after him.

“Lord Vader, welcome back to the *Executor*, it is so good to see you returned to us safe once again.” said an older man in a stuffy manner that told me he was anything but glad to see Lord Vader back.

“Yes, yes Ozzel. Is everything arranged as I requested?” Vader asked cutting Ozzel off with an impatient flap of his hand.

“Yes, my lord, we have done everything you requested but it was short notice and...”

Lord Vader stopped mid stride and turned on Ozzel. “Admiral, I do not wish excuses and nor should you utter them in my presence.”

The Admiral stuttered. “Yes...my lord.”

“See that you remember this.” Vader said. “Merlyn, keep up!” he barked.

“Yes, my lord.” I said with a cheerful smile aimed more at Admiral Ozzel who had given me a filthy look when he realised that I was standing behind lord Vader. The walking resumed with me in tow watching the ongoing exchange. Admiral Ozzel did not like having me onboard; the few glances at me as I followed behind lord Vader told me all I needed to know.

“Have my assistant’s quarters been made ready?” Lord Vader asked as he swept into the turbo life and me scurrying behind trying not to trip on his cloak.

“As you requested, Lord Vader, and how long will your... ah...uhm...office girl be on board?” Admiral Ozzel asked.

“For as long as I need her.” Vader replied sharply.

Admiral Ozzel gave me another scowl. I just wiggled my fingers at him. I could tell we were going to get along just fine, the way Jabba and dancers got along just fine. The Empire was full of men like him, pompous, self important and puffed up. I had to really fight the urge to stick my tongue out at him. This wasn’t very lady like and certainly not very Imperial like but it was very me like. Instead I just kept my mouth shut and was grateful when we finally arrived at our destination. The *Executor* was huge so getting anywhere at all took time and effort.

I dropped my bags on the floor of my new home. I had enough time to glance around at my quarters before lord Vader turned on his heel, growling at me to follow him to the space set aside for my office.

He handed me a data pad. “You will sort this out quickly with your usual annoying efficiency.”

“Yes, my lord.” I said, glancing at the contents, raising my eyebrows at what I read.

He stared at me for a moment, as though waiting for some comment, then turned and left. I looked around the new office space and was grateful to see that at least I have a view to the outside. My droid was already there sorting out stuff and I was glad for the company. I tossed the data pad onto my desk then sat down.

“Oh Mistress Merlyn, I am so glad to see you have arrived safely. I took the liberty of making you some tea when I heard you had come aboard. I do hope we will be staying in one place for a while, all this moving about is playing havoc with my memory circuits.” P2B4 said bringing a tray of tea things to my desk.

“Thanks, P-two. I am sure we will be here for a while. Lord Vader mentioned the word Months when I asked for a time frame.” I poured myself a cup of tea and held it in both hands.

“Months!?! Oh my heavens! Well, I hope they have a decent droid center on board this ship, I am in desperate need of a tune up.” He grumbled.

I laughed. “I’m sure they do, but I can ask Lord Vader if you like.”

The droid shuddered and walked back over to the task of sorting out the office stuff shaking his head. “Dreadful man!” he muttered. “He keeps threatening to reprogram me!”

I just laughed. My office protocol droid annoyed Lord Vader to no end but I was never sure why exactly. It might have had something to do with the fact that P2B4 kept calling him, ‘Your Darthness.’

I picked up the data pad once again and looked at the tasks Lord Vader had given me. There was enough work to keep me occupied for many hours. I was grateful really; it kept my mind off other things.

I switched on my computer and sighed. Skimming down to the last addition to the list. *Bounty Hunters*, I thought, *what the heck does he want info on them for???*

I thought I would be bored and lonely on board the *Executor*, but that was not the case. Lord Vader kept me very busy and much to my delight Jorae was now stationed on the ship. He had come to find me the second day after I had arrived. He had kept in touch over the past few years via infrequent letters and the occasional hologram but I had not heard of his transfer to the *Executor* so it was a complete surprise to me that he was there. I was glad to see a familiar face. So when I wasn't working or practicing my Bunduki or lightsaber arts or sleeping, and our schedules actually coincided we would get together for food and hang out, often in the main hanger bay watching the ships come and go.

He had been working on a project that had got him noticed enough to be transferred and for the last two months he had been happily learning under the senior comm officer the fine art of listening. It did not take us long before we got caught up on each other's lives.

Lord Vader had insisted that I continue with my lightsaber training and had brought on board a substantial supply of the nastiest little training remotes I had ever come across. He had sent the droid engineers a new design and I was the one suffering because of it. The mean little remotes were built with a module that allowed them to learn. It amused him to no end when I got zapped repeatedly but I learned quickly.

When I wasn't being demoralized by a training remote, I was working on my Bunduki skills. It was harder without my master or sparring partners but it kept me limber to go through the exercises and kata forms. It was during one of my midnight sessions, about a week or so after coming on board, I discovered I wasn't alone. In the entrance, leaning against the door frame with his arms folded across his chest was a man some years older than me. He was dressed ready to work out.

"You must be Merlyn Gabriel?"

I nodded.

"Lord Vader said that you were a Teräs Käsi artist, level seven?"

I nodded. "Yes." Wondering how he knew this.

"You were the one who survived the Right of Tet' recently, weren't you?"

I nodded, making a face. That was a memory I didn't wish to relive.

"I was wondering if you wouldn't mind sparring with me."

I looked at him. Physically he was in perfect shape and there was an aura of power around him that only came from people in touch with the Force. I was going to ask what level he was but then decided it didn't matter. I missed having someone to practice with and I was pretty certain killing me wasn't on his mind.

"Sure. I was just warming up." I said.

He grinned. "Great." And he joined in my warm up, mirroring my actions as though he had spent his whole life practicing with me. It was a little eerie.

"You have me at a disadvantage. You know who I am but I don't know your name." I said as we moved through the kata forms.

He grinned. "Sorry, everyone calls me CJ." He stuck out his hand and I shook it, his grip damned near crushed my fingers.

"You an officer?"

He shook his head. "Nope, a Royal guard on trooper rotation."

I nodded. That explained a lot. The royal guards were a breed apart. They went through incredible training regimes and tests of endurance. They were ruthless, unquestioning in their loyalty and, more often than not, force sensitive though how much so remained a mystery. Only the absolute cream of the crop was ever accepted into this elite group of warriors. Part of their ongoing training was to be reinserted into regular Storm trooper battalions, it kept them fresh apparently. All Royal Guardsmen no matter what had an air of incredible self confidence about them that bordered on arrogance.

Once we had warmed up we started to spar. He was very, very good. After two ours of one of the most gruelling work outs I had had in a while we called it quits.

"You're pretty good." He said as we started a series of cool down stretching. "Lord Vader wasn't kidding when he said I would get a decent work out."

I gave CJ a look. "Lord Vader rarely kids about anything."

He grinned. It was hard not to like him. "Would you mind if we could train together when possible? It is hard to find someone who knows more than basic hand to hand combat and someone trained in TK is rare these days."

"Sure, if you promise to teach me some of those moves you pulled. They aren't Bunduki."

His grin widened. "No, they are Echani."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, nice."

"You've heard of this form?"

I nodded. "My master spoke of it briefly."

CJ gave me a steady look. "I can teach you if you teach me how you do those fancy leg moves. I don't recognise that fight form."

I laughed. "That's probably because they stem from classical dance moves but I can teach you, sure."

CJ smiled. "You are not exactly what you seem, Merlyn Gabriel."

I nodded. "Yeah, I get that a lot. Send me a comm when you are free, if I can get away I'll be here."

He nodded and we called it a night. I was grateful for the fact that my quarters had a bath tub because that had been a tough work out and I would be

sore from it but I wasn't complaining. It was great to have someone to spar with again, especially someone who was well above my own level and was constantly challenging me.

Working on board the *Executor* meant an irregular schedule, because while the ship ran on a watch system based, as all Imperial ships were, on Coruscant standard time, Lord Vader did not. With no day and night it was impossible for me to keep any sort of schedule what so ever, still I tried but Lord Vader seemed to take great delight at waking me up in the middle of my night. It didn't do much for my disposition.

I suppose that working on board the flag ship for the Death Squadron should have been exciting but the truth of the matter is, it wasn't. The *Executor* was like a huge floating city in space. It was approximately 19,000 meters long so it took a while to get around the ship even with turbo lifts. Aside from the naval crew and TIE fighter pilots there were a substantial number of ground assault troops, add to the mix the support staff of doctors, cooks, cleaners and so on it meant a lot of people. I was surprised to learn that there were many civilians amongst the support staff. One could live onboard this ship for months and still not see it all. The first time I had been on board I had not really been in any fit shape to do any serious exploring, but now was quite a different story and I was determined to see as much of this technical wonder as possible.

I wasn't the only female on board but we were rare even on a ship this size. Men dominated the Imperial navy and army. Mostly I didn't mind, I had grown up in a predominantly male environment so I was used to it. It was more noticeable when I would head into the small officer's mess hall, where heads would turn and conversations stopped only to begin again in hushed whispers. At first this was unnerving but as people got used to seeing me this behaviour slowly subsided.

I had been given fairly high clearance and since there had been no actually verbal restrictions placed on me by Lord Vader I could go almost anywhere I liked. I loved the ship from top to bottom but my favourite places to be were the docking bays, the cartography room and very, very occasionally the bridge.

The docking bays held all the ships, fighters and shuttles and I loved hanging out to watch the combat drills and the mechanics at work. The smell of hyperdrive fuel, burnt metal from the repairs and the scent that permeated docking bay the galaxy over was like home to me. I also loved seeing the new ATATs. I don't think in my life I had ever seen anything, in terms of ground transport, that was so large or so foreboding. The all terrain armoured transports stood ready to be transported to ground in rows like a stable of very fine Rontos. At twenty six meters long and twenty two and half meters height they were very impressive to look at. They had one pilot, one gunner and one commander. They were armed with two heavy laser cannons and two medium blasters and also held forty troopers. Their sheer size made them difficult to attack and a fearsome

thing to see upon the battlefield. I would often come down to the holding area where they all stood, sit on the gantry and just stare at them. I was never alone in that.

Making friends had never come easily for me and being Lord Vader's assistant wasn't helping me along in this area very much. Most of the officers who were even remotely close to my age avoided me like the plague and the older men knew better than to be seen chatting up 'Vader's girl.' The only people who seemed immune to this were the junior officers who would sometimes ask me to deliver unpleasant news and messages to Lord Vader, Jorae, CJ and Captain Piett.

The captain and I had met once some years previously at a small function and we had been pleasantly surprised to discover in each other a sort of quiet connection that I suspected came from us both growing up on fairly rough Outer Rim planets. He had dropped by the office the third day after I had come on board to welcome me and apologise for not doing that sooner and what was, I suspect, supposed to be a short visit after his duty shift turned into an hour long conversation over my very good spiced coffee. I was glad to discover that he had not changed very much and I got the distinct impression he was grateful to have a non military person to talk with. When we were able to we would meet for meals or coffee breaks. If we had privacy he would speak freely and I had been surprised at his concerns.

He had come to me after a particularly frustrating day and after much prompting on my part had told me some of the things that had been going on under Admiral Ozzel's command. Ozzel was not a popular Admiral and he was known amongst the lower officers as the '*badmiral*' because of his refusal to listen to any advice from anyone other than the few yes men that followed him around.

"It can be quite frustrating." Firmus Piett told me one day as we sat in the quiet sitting area of my office, drinking spiced coffee.

"Lord Vader mentioned to me that he was surprised at the lack of communication between the bridge officers and himself." I said. That was putting it mildly. Lord Vader was more than annoyed at the seeming lack of coherent communications going on.

"Ozzel filters the information before it ever gets to Vader. What he deems unimportant is never delivered." Firmus said. "I personally disagree with this but one does not go against the wishes of the Admiral."

"Why not go to Lord Vader directly?" I asked.

Firmus laughed. "That would be a very bad thing to do. One does not go over one's superior officer's head and expect to have a career."

I nodded. Imperial hierarchy was at its best annoying and at its worst, deadly. "Well, you know... if you think there is something important that Lord Vader should know you could always tell me, in passing conversation as it were."

He looked at me quizzically.

“Look, I’m not your superior; I am not even in the navy. I know how to pass along information without betraying the source. Lord Vader knows I hear things, he sort of expects me to keep him up to date on the less formal side of things.” I said.

He grinned at me then and shook his head. “So the rumours are true then...” he said.

“What rumours?”

“That you are very dangerous and far more than just an office girl.”

I shook my head and smiled. “Really, I am just his office girl, but adaptability is what keeps me alive. Lord Vader, for all his armour and trappings is still just a man, and after three years I know how to approach him.” I said then added, “Most of the time.”

“A valuable trait.” He said quietly.

I laughed. “Perhaps.” I said. “But I can tell you this, occasionally he listens to me so if you feel there is something that is vital that he needs to know and the Admiral dismisses, you might want to mention it in passing . I’ll make sure the information gets shared. If there is one thing Lord Vader hates it is when he doesn’t know stuff he thinks he should.”

He looked at me for a moment and then gave me a slow nod that he got the message. We were bordering very close on things that could get us both in a great deal of trouble so I was glad when the subject was dropped and the conversation drifted to other things.

I was not allowed on the bridge. Admiral Ozzel had made that perfectly clear the very first time I had tried to step into this area with a vital message for Lord Vader. His rule was no civilians on the bridge, especially me but as with all things when it came to working for Lord Vader there were exceptions to every rule. I had cited this *no Merlyn on the bridge* rule smugly when he had thrown a complete temper tantrum about not being notified about a shipment of probe droids that would be late. Lord Vader’s comm had been turned off and for reasons I still could not fathom none of the bridge crew were accepting my messages or passing them on. So after that delightful incident I was permitted onto the bridge to deliver messages. I took advantage of this because the bridge of the super star destroyer was an astonishing place to be.

To say it was large was an understatement. It was set up so that most of the bridge crew operated their systems and stations from the pit, and the officers of the watch would walk the deck above taking care that everything was running smoothly.

It was a long room with a central walkway that over looked the pits on either side. It was a wide and open area with view windows forward, port and starboard side. These windows were large giving the sensation of really being out in space and not just on a ship. More often than not Lord Vader could be found

at the very front of the bridge walk, his hands clasped behind his back, staring out in to the inky void of space. When he walked the bridge every officer no matter how low or high in rank tended to give him a wide berth or stare, terrified, until he had passed by. There was always an audible sigh of relief when he left. Everyone was so terrified of him that the air was rank with the scent of their fear. It rippled about the entire bridge like a dancer’s skirts when she moved. When I had pointed this out in a conversation with Lord Vader one time he had merely nodded and replied.

“Yes, fear keeps them in line.”

I wasn’t about to disagree with him but I thought it made for a terrible work environment. Sometimes the younger, junior officers were so scared they couldn’t even think straight. How could that be productive I wondered, but I never voiced these thoughts out loud.

For the most part the day to day workings on board the ship were dull. They consisted of battle drills, TIE drills, the sending out of probe droids and then the assimilation of the information they sent back, the system and surveillance sweeps and of course the information and code slicing that went on. Most of the people on board the *Executor* never saw Lord Vader, never got near the bridge or knew a tenth of what was going on. They had their assigned jobs and that was that. There was a certain air of obliviousness, almost as if they knew that ignorance was a sort of safe bliss. There was a saying about the *Executor*, ‘Quick promotions lead to short lives’. The flagship of the Death Squadron was a fast track to promotion but those promoted generally didn’t live long enough to enjoy the health benefit package. The rumours flew fast and furious around that when ever someone, especially on the bridge crew jumped in rank, they immediately saw the ship’s legal advisor and updated a copy of their will.

Still the advantages of quick advancement seemed to out weight the costs and the dangers and the waiting list of those who wished to sign up on board the *Executor* was extensive! I wasn’t sure I understood the attraction but I also never understood why moths flew into flames either.

All in all I enjoyed being onboard her. She was a floating, mobile, armed to the teeth city and, unlike the Imperial Court and all that went with it, most people on board *Executor* could care less about mindless gossip or who I was. For the most part, I was known as Vader’s girl, which amused me greatly because at court I was snidely known as Lord Vader’s Little Hand Maiden. I didn’t much mind the derogatory insinuations that came with these names, but sometimes it was annoying. I did my job and I did it well. I once told Lord Vader about the unofficial titles. It had been a good mood day and we were having a decent conversation about the Imperial court. He had actually laughed and said he could think of worse things to be called. I supposed he would know about that so I let the subject drop.

For three weeks I knew a sort of peace. There was a rhythm even in the lack of routine. I did my work, I trained and I made some friends. When I had quiet moments I read and answered my mail and explored the ship. It was only when Thrawn's latest letter, accompanied with a small package from Shiv that the nagging tick of things about to change began to wriggle in my gut.

The messenger dropped off the regular mail just as I was almost done for the day and Jarack showed up shortly afterwards. I slipped back to my quarters delighting in a letter from Thrawn, his second since I had left Coruscant and surprised at the small package which had come from Shiv. I opened Thrawn's letter first and my delight quickly turned to concern. It was short and perplexing, unlike his previous letter which had been chatty and almost like having him whisper in my ear. I was grateful we only ever communicated in his native language because I wouldn't have known what to say should anyone else have been able to read it.

A'mia Tekari,

The political climate on Coruscant is changing and not necessarily for the better. I am quite certain that soon disturbing news and gossip will reach you, but do not be alarmed and do not worry. As I have said before, I know exactly what I am doing and I need for you to trust me in this, no matter what.

Politics is a delicate dance, my dear, and sometimes to play it out correctly there must be certain side steps made. You must know that no matter what you hear, I do what is necessary to protect those under my care; this includes you far more than I suspect you believe. My relationship with you has nothing to do with political gain or anything else that might be implied. All you need to know for now is that there is a long term plan in place and the wheels have now been set in motion for me to attain this goal. You are a part of the future. Do not lose your faith.

Ilath'mera'talashti'Ya

Mith'raw'nuruodo

I sat with trembling hands and re read his letter twice. He spoke in riddles and I had no answers. With a sigh I opened Shiv's mail and what I found there didn't improve my mood any.

Hey Rim-Girl!!!

Thanks for the brilliant letter, it really made my day. I had no idea being on board a star destroyer could actually be interesting, but you make it sound like fun. It is just as well you are not here at the moment because all hell is starting to break loose. Tigellinus has finally had enough of playing nice it seems and both he and Thrawn have begun some sort of grand political bickering, the likes of which I have never seen at court before. Some of the worst bits have even made the holonet and other news nets. I am sending you a disk with some of the reports on copy. I don't think you're going to like what

you see. Your boss's timing for hauling you off planet could not have been better.

We miss you but you should stay put. I think things are only going to get worse. Thrawn and Tigellinus have really stirred the ugly pot. And you know how the Emperor doesn't like ugly when it comes to his court...

Love and hugs,

Shiv

I sat and watched the news net clips and when I was finished I commed CJ to see if he felt like sparring because I had this burning need to kill someone and sparring with him was the next best thing. Shiv had been right; all political hell was starting to break loose with Thrawn and Tigellinus at the center of it. What gave me that cold knot in my stomach was watching how well the news casters were able to insinuate things were happening when in fact they were not. When my face showed up on a couple of very brief and very nasty stories I knew anger. While, nothing untrue had been stated the allusion to me along with a couple of other young women, having several affairs with several men in high places, being used to traffic information and accused of taking sides in what amounted to a political war was all too obvious. The tabloid news nets, it seemed, could never get enough stories of palace dalliances, rampant promiscuity and dirty politics. I was astounded at how cut together footage from various big palace functions could appear and things looked very bad. While, I was not the only female to be showcased, I was the one whose face they showed the most. As Vader's office girl, it seemed, I was a prime target. I wasn't certain what was hoped to be gained from the innuendos but my reputation was seemingly shot to hell. It was a good job I was so far away because if I were close at hand not only would I be called out for going against palace regulations concerning relationships with members of the Imperial navy but I would probably also be up on murder charges.

In the long weeks that passed, the rumours and the gossip had begun to circulate on the ship. I knew that by the surreptitious looks I was given when I walked into the mess hall or when I walked the more populated corridors. I heard the whispers and pretended that I hadn't. I had been called worse things than a palace doxy but I bridled at the suggestions which said I slept with every Imperial officer who knocked on my door. I was many things in my life but unfaithful and promiscuous were not among them. I trusted Thrawn implicitly but I hated not knowing what his game was and I really hated that somehow I was wound up in it, without knowing why.

Oddly enough the rumours about me didn't bother Lord Vader and his only comment when I brought it all up one day was; '*Since when have you ever cared what others think about you?*' I guessed that when you were as reviled as Lord Vader was there was a point when malicious gossip became meaningless in your life. So I did what I thought he would do and I ignored it all, or at least tried

to. Only CJ brought the subject up during one of our sparring sessions. We had become good friends, at least as good a friend to each other as our respective jobs allowed. Perhaps it would be better to describe our relationship as combative companions. We talked a lot while we sparred.

“I hear you are the hot topic for gossip at the moment on board this ship.” He grinned as we warmed up.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t tell me you believe all the trash you hear.”

“Not at all, I just find it amusing that one little girl is the subject of so much conversation.”

“I’m hardly a little girl and it isn’t my fault people have nothing better to do than talk about things based on malicious rumours spread by credit hungry tabloid HoloNet journalists with no scruples what so ever!” I snapped.

“Is it true then? Are you having a mad affair with the Emperor’s pet alien and half a dozen of his other high ranking officers?”

I stopped what I was doing and looked him in the eye. “If I was do you think I would tell you, or anyone else for that matter? Besides when in the name of the Almighty Sarlacc would I ever have time to do everything and everyone they say I am doing and still get all the work I need to do for Lord Vader done in time?”

“A point to you... so it’s just the one in particular then?” he asked with a teasing grin.

“Good grief, you don’t give up do you? You really think I’d talk that openly about my private life?” I shot back. CJ liked to tease and in the time we had spent together sparring he had figured out pretty quickly how to get to me. Most of the time I didn’t mind, it was friendly and even with the hint of something more underneath he kept himself decently distanced.

He smirked. “No. I don’t suppose you would kiss and tell, you’re not the type.”

“What about you? No romance in your life?” I asked.

“Sweetheart, romance and Imperial Service are two things that never go well together. I don’t have time for that nonsense. A leg over is about all I ever get around to.”

I just shook my head. “You Imperial men are all the same. Crude, quick and dirty!”

He laughed. “I do find it interesting all the women now claiming to be Thrawn’s lover, like it’s a fashion accessory to have slept with the Emperor’s pet alien. One even claims to have had his baby. It is as if going to bed with the man is akin to winning a prize!”

“Really.” I said flatly, and then added sarcastically. “That should please the Emperor to no end.” Not to mention Thrawn, I thought.

He laughed and tossed me a combat staff, today we had decided on hand to hand weapons training. “I doubt it, though it turns out her baby was actually a

normal human child dyed blue with red contacts inserted on his eyes. Admiral Thrawn, it seems plays his romance cards very close to his chest. That the thing that attracts the nut jobs. He’s a complete mystery.”

I shook my head. “I am quite sure, like the rest of us; he doesn’t have time for that sort of crap. I don’t understand this fascination with sex and the Imperial court that everyone has. If it were me, I’d be far more concerned about the political pot that’s set to over boil. Now that is a mess worthy of the news net”

CJ swung at me and I ducked down into a crouching panthac stance to block and then attack. “The HoloNet gossip shows aren’t interested in that, sex scandals sell, politics puts people to sleep.” He said.

“People are a bunch of dopey Eopies then.” I said as I swung my staff around, he very nearly didn’t block in time and that made me smirk.

“Why do you think this is happening now? If I understand the news nets right it is almost as if there is some sort of coup going on in the higher ranks with Tigellinus and his cronies on one side and Thrawn and his supporters on the other.” He spun away and landed in riding bantha stance.

I shook my head. “I have no idea. The whole mess makes no sense. Both of these men are supposed to be on the same side, fighting for the same ideals, I don’t know why either of them would pursue this course of action. What is even stranger is that I get the impression that it is Admiral Thrawn doing the instigating. He’s too smart for that. Surely, he of all people would know this can only lead to a messy end. The Emperor does not tolerate this sort of dissent between his men.”

CJ shrugged. He motioned for me to stop and we paused for a moment. “If you hold the staff like this,” he said showing me what he meant, “you’ll find you get even more power in the swing.”

I tested it out and he was right. “Funny, Lord Vader never showed me that move.”

CJ grinned. “Vader has physical strength and height on his side; you are smaller, lighter. You need to use physics to get the same power behind the blows. He probably doesn’t think about that. He’s too busy trying to kill you or something!”

I grinned and we went back to sparring.

CJ got back on topic. “I don’t have an answer for that question, Merlyn. I was always under the Impression that Thrawn was brilliant as a tactician. That for reasons unbeknownst to us mere mortal humans he can almost predict the future in his planning of events. I’ve been privy to some of his conversations with the Emperor while on duty and I can tell you, the man astounds me. From a military, tactical and strategic stand point he is the sort of man most of us desire to be so why he would risk it all on a stunt like this, I don’t know.” He stepped back as I swung and blocked easily. “If I didn’t know better I would almost

venture to say he wants to be expelled, because that's what will happen if he's not careful, or worse he'll be executed."

Even though I knew this was not a possibility the words made my blood freeze and I lost concentration so that the blow CJ made caught me on the thigh with a painfully resounding smack.

"You let your feelings get in the way of your concentration, they betray you, you know." He said. He had figured out I was force sensitive but not what my exact talents were. We had spoken of it the third time we had met to spar and agreed to try and not use the force while we fought but sometimes stronger emotions and feelings leaked out around us anyway.

I gave him a slight smile and ignored his comment. "I can't see the Emperor wanting to execute Admiral Thrawn." I said. "There's something else going on here, something they don't want the rest of the court or navy or galaxy for that matter to know about."

"And Thrawn doesn't whisper his secrets to you?" CJ teased.

I blocked his next swing and caught the tip of his staff in a way that sent him on his ass. "I accompany him to official events, I am not privy to his inner most secrets." I said and to some sort of extent this was true.

CJ got up and grinned. He swung at me in a faked roundhouse move that caught me completely by surprise and sent me backwards to the floor. What surprised me even more was he followed me down to lie on top of me, pinning my arms down so I could not move. His face only inches from mine he grinned. "So if I were to kiss you now, he would have no reason to mind and you would enjoy it?"

"Try me." I said in a beguiling whisper and just as he brought his face close enough I cracked my forehead against his as hard as I could and pushed him away, to get to my feet.

He sat back and rubbed his forehead. "Ow! Nice move, where did you learn that?"

"Jabba's palace. Boba Fett taught it to me."

CJ just grinned. "You are so besotted you don't even see it. When I use the force to look at you it's so obvious."

"Besotted?" I rolled my eyes; I was not going to go down that road of conversation. Especially not with a man, that had Thrawn not been in the picture, I might actually have considered letting him kiss me. I was beginning to think I was attracted to the wrong sort of men and CJ was most definitely the wrong sort of man. "I thought we'd agreed not to use the force?"

He winked. "You leak power all over the place whenever *his* name is mentioned, sweetheart. Maybe the head blind can't tell what you think or feel but I sure can. Why is it that people having an affair always think no one notices?"

I gave him a speculative look and shrugged. "Now that is a good question." I said wearily. "Sarlacc's teeth, am I really that obvious?"

He frowned and looked at me. "Honestly, all kidding aside, I don't think so, but you forget I am trained to observe and use every means in my power to get answers; it's so inbred I can't help it." Then he grinned at me. "So, there is something more serious going on between you two then?"

I just smiled and I suppose that was answer enough.

He shook his head. "So what's he like?"

"What is who like?" I asked being evasive.

His answer surprised me. "Fett? I hear he's the best bounty hunter in the galaxy, how does an Imperial office girl know such a man?" he picked up his staff and circled me.

"That's a long story." I said avoiding his swing.

"Shorten it for me." He said, "I'll promise I'll behave."

"I've heard that before." I told him ducking his blow and twisting around to bring my staff between his legs and flip him backwards so he landed on the mat again. It had never occurred to me until that moment that CJ's teasing was really flirting and I egged him on. I suddenly felt a little guilty.

"Seriously, what's he like?" he pressed.

I stopped and leaned on the combat staff. CJ just sat on the floor looking up at me, waiting.

"He's very quiet, very smart and very deadly." I said.

CJ patted the mat beside him and I sat down.

"How do you know him then?"

I sighed. "When I was in my late teens I danced at Jabba's Palace. Call it my rebellious phase. Fett was often there, he does a lot of work for Jabba."

"You really worked for a Hutt?" he asked in surprise.

"You even know what a Hutt is?" I asked with a grin.

CJ nodded. "Part of the Royal Guard training is to be familiar with just about every crime syndicate in the galaxy. Knowing who runs the underworlds is good for knowing who to lean on for information. It's not something the Royal Guard does but we are trained in the arts of interrogation and espionage anyway. The Emperor's theory is that it takes a spy to know a spy. So yeah, I know who Jabba the Hutt is and I am surprised that you would work for him, you don't seem the type."

I laughed. "On Tatooine there isn't much choice available to a would be dancer."

He nodded. "So go on with the story, how did you learn that move from Fett?"

"Well, I'd only been at the Palace a week or so and I was still considered fresh meat, as they say. I had just finished dancing a set and was on my way back to the dressing room when I got cornered. I don't know who he was, just some guy who wanted much more than a dance. I knew some self defence but he had caught me by surprise and I couldn't get out of his grip." I shuddered at the

memory. “Anyway he had one hand over my mouth and the other all over me. I couldn’t get out away from his hold which seems strange to me now because now I could kill him without thinking about it...” I paused.

CJ said nothing and did not move so I drew a deep breath and continued. “He was about to remove my dance costume when suddenly he was just sort of yanked back and then sort of lying dead on the ground. When I looked up I found myself staring into Fett’s face mask. He said nothing but he dragged me by the arm into a small room off the hallway somewhere and not only closed the door but locked it. I was pretty sure he wanted the same thing the other guy wanted but instead he took off his helmet and folded his arms. What surprised me was the look on his face. He was furious. He was absolutely furious with me.” I smiled at this memory. “He looked me over in that making sure you are in one piece way and then he said. ‘*You’re Kit Gabriel’s little girl, Merlyn aren’t you?*’ It hadn’t occurred to me he would recognise me from my father’s docking bay or even that I had worked from time to time on his ship when he had brought it in for repairs. Of course it’s always hard to tell what a person sees when their face is hidden behind a mask. I had nodded and he had asked me not so politely what I was doing in the scum hole of Jabba’s palace.”

“‘*Working.*’ had been my answer to him. ‘*This is no place for a sweet kid like you, go home.*’ He had said. I told him that my home life wasn’t so good and I had needed to get away. I guess maybe he understood that because he had just nodded. He’d asked if I was serious about dancing in the palace and when I told him yes he said; ‘*Then you need to learn a few tricks.*’ And with that he showed me how to defend myself.” I said.

“Head butting your opponent?” CJ asked rubbing his forehead.

“Yeah, among other things. He came at me the same way the guy in the hallway had and when he had backed me against the wall holding my hands above my head he had asked how I thought I could get out of this situation. I was pretty clueless and had no idea really. When he had gotten within a hair’s breadth of my lips he whispered. ‘*Now hit my forehead with yours as hard as you can.*’ So I did. He went on to show me a few other interesting manoeuvres such as a knee in the groin, all of them effective. I suppose we were in that small changing room for about an hour. Before he left he said to me, ‘*Merlyn get out of here while you still can. They eat little girls like you for breakfast in this place. You’re a damned good mechanic go back and be a damned good mechanic. I don’t trust my ship to just anyone, you know.*’ And with that he slipped his helmet back on and left the room with me following. After that, most of the time, I was left alone. I am pretty certain that the rumour got around I was either his girl or under his protection. When he was at the palace he was almost always around where I could see him, I never knew if it was deliberate or not but I felt a lot safer with him there than when he was off on a hunt.” I sighed. All of this seemed so very long ago.

“Sometimes he would request my presence in a private room. I know what people thought but it was never ever like that. He would order food and drink and then he would share the meal with me and we would talk, well mostly I would talk, telling him stuff about daily Tatooine life, the docking bay and stuff and he would listen. Fett isn’t much of a conversationalist, although when he does talk, he’s really interesting. I always got the impression he did this to reinforce the message that I was off limits, but now I wonder if maybe he also just liked the company. I mean, it’s not like the galaxy’s most revered and feared bounty hunter has any real friends is it? I didn’t care one way or the other to be honest. I suppose a part of me kinda looked up to him, you know maybe even idolized him a bit, after all I’d known him most of my life. He scared me a little but he fascinated me as well. Every chance he could he would tell me to get out of the palace and find a new job. I guess his message sunk in because when I got the chance to get out, I did. I haven’t seen him since I left the palace but I always wanted to thank him for his help.”

“Jeeze kid, you lead a charmed life.” He said in admiration.

I shrugged. “I don’t know about that.”

He grinned at me. “Hardly anyone knows what Fett looks like for real. He keeps his face hidden from the world and the rumour is that if he does show you his face you don’t live long to remember what he looks like.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Well the story is that Fett wasn’t born he was made. That the original clone from the clone wars was a man named Jango Fett and he requested a clone of himself to raise as a son in payment. Boba Fett is that son.”

My face must have turned a ghastly white. “Boba Fett is a clone?” I asked.

“That’s that story.” He said. “Hey, are you feeling okay?”

I nodded. “So, if you see his face that’s what the clones, all of them, looked like?”

“Yeah, I guess, why?”

“I just always wondered what a clone soldier looked like, is all.” I told him, lying.

CJ nodded. “They were amazing soldiers. We often speculate about what it would have been like to fight with them, especially the ARC commanders, the independent thinkers that Jango had a personal hand in designing.”

I was about to comment on this when the door opened and Lord Vader strode in. CJ was faster in getting to his feet than I was. Lord Vader dismissed him with a wave of his hand. CJ nodded and left the room. Once he was gone Lord Vader spoke.

“Get yourself ready to leave. We have been recalled to Coruscant immediately.” Lord Vader said to me. “You will dress in an appropriate manner for a public assembly before the Emperor.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I do not know but the Emperor specifically commanded I bring you along.” He said. “Get moving, girl, we have no time to waste! In half an hour I shall be in the shuttle, do not be late!” and he swept out of the room. Before I had a chance to take in the situation CJ slipped back through the door.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I told him, that wriggle of fear began to knot my stomach.

“Is everything alright?”

I looked at him and shook my head. “I don’t think so.” I said. “I think all nine Corellian hells are about to break loose.”

The shuttle gave a little shudder as it slipped out of hyperspace. The stars elongated and then spun as we made the transition into to normal space. The trip had taken nearly five hours and since I wasn’t piloting it had been a very long and tedious flight. Lord Vader had not been very conversational and the stormtroopers who were accompanying us were mute. I was beginning to wonder if the act of perfect silence was not a huge part of stormtrooper training. I envied the pilot and the co pilot; at least they had a good view and something to do, and they were shut up alone in the cockpit. When Coruscant loomed, all twinkly and pretty, on the port wing I was filled with a sense of relief mixed with a hint of worry.

I was knocked out of my reverie by the brush of Lord Vader’s thoughts in my head. “*You will have some time to refresh yourself and dress appropriately. I will come for you at oh-nineteen hundred hours at your palace residence. Be ready.*” He said.

“*Yes, my lord.*” I said. It worried at me even more than he was actually picking me up. Usually he sent some young officer to escort me to where ever he was waiting. He had not lied to me when he had said he didn’t know what this was all about, at least I couldn’t tell if he was or not. Lord Vader was powerful enough in his ability to manipulate the force that I was almost certain now; even if he did lie to me I would not always be able to tell, unless he allowed it.

“*How formal is the dress code?*” I asked. “*Is this a happy occasion or something that needs more sedate attire?*”

He thought about it for a moment and then answered. “*Dress for a state funeral.*”

My heart skipped a beat. “*What? Did someone die?*”

“*No, but someone might.*” He said and I realised he was being funny, well he though he was being funny. “*For Sarlacc’s sakes, girl, what do I know about palace fashion? Dress appropriately for a state function, you’ve done it a thousand times before, why should this be any different?*”

“*Because I have no idea what sort of a function it is?*”

He seemed to pause and then said. “*It is a serious assembly, but I do not know more than that. My Master was not specific. He requested my presence and told me to bring you. Wear something pleasant to look at, not your usual Tusken attire! People will think you are not paid enough!*”

I nodded and watched as the shuttle landed on the North side landing pad. It was not the gentlest of touchdowns. The air huffed as the door opened and the ramp distended. The stormtroopers filed out and lined up so dutifully I almost laughed. Lord Vader yanked me from my seat and I exited the ship in front of him.

“Do not be late.” He told me, waving his forefinger at me and then he swirled dramatically around and with the troopers in tow he headed off in the opposite direction from where I had to go to reach my flat.

My old apartment smelled dusty and seemed smaller than I remembered it. I hadn’t brought much with me and despite the conversation with Lord Vader about clothes I already knew what I would be wearing. I raided the kitchen cupboards and found the half full bottle of brandy; I poured a small glass and then ran a bath. I had enough time to try and relax.

I wore a demure dress that Cati had made me for a small function that I had ended up not going to. The dress was tailored and elegant, made from an indigo coloured linen fabric. It had a square neck and wide shoulder straps. It would have been almost prudish had it not been for the open kick pleat at the back that ran up to just past my knees. I had matching high heels that, like the dress’s neck line, were decorated with tiny dark beads that twinkled. I swept my hair up and held the high twist in place with my favourite Zenji sticks, Thrawn’s first gift to me. The makeup was just enough to let people know I was wearing some. I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I never recognised myself when I was all done up for a palace event. Toying with the pendant at my throat, I fought the urge to nibble my pinkie nail. When Lord Vader arrived I was ready. As we walked through the corridors to the Grand Hall where this assembly was being held I sensed that he now knew more about what was going to occur. I hesitated whether or not to ask but before I could he beat me to it. I guessed he was concerned about palace security because our conversation was telepathic.

“*You will behave yourself at this assembly.*” He said.

“*I always behave myself.*” I retorted.

“*Just do as you are told.*” He tried again.

I stopped and looked up at him, hating the fact that his face was hidden behind that unreadable mask. I reached out a little with the force to try and dig beyond the wall of his words but he mentally slapped me away.

“*Do not try that again tonight!*” he hissed.

Now he was just confusing me. “*I’m not going to like this event much, am I?*” I asked.

“What you will or will not like is immaterial. Remember your training and remember who you represent.” He admonished.

“Yes, my lord.” I said as we reached the entrance to the Grand hall. We walked up the carpeted stairs and the doors opened. I fought the urge to gasp. The hall was full but instead of it being a primarily civilian affair most of the people were internal palace employees, military and navy. The Emperor was not yet present but his coven of grim faced advisors were, as were the Council of Twelve. All eyes looked upward at the two of us as we descended down into the main hall. My heart began to pound and as surreptitiously as I could I began to scan the crowd for Thrawn but I couldn't find him.

“Keep your eyes front, girl!” he hissed.

“Yes, my lord.” I replied demurely but I failed to keep the annoyance out of my thoughts.

Vader led the way up to the front of the room, to the edge of the Dais. His long black cape swept out behind him and I had to work not to step on it. I had seen what had happened to the person who had once done that and had absolutely no desire to follow, so to say, in his unfortunate footsteps. Lord Vader positioned himself to stand a little behind me to my right so that I was closer to the crowd. I knew When the Emperor entered because the atmosphere in the hall sparked intensely with his power and everyone in the room dropped to genuflect before him as he walked to his throne.

“You may rise.” Palpatine's voice cut through the expectant silence like a jagged blade.

En masse we did his bidding and stood waiting for what ever it was he had to announce.

The Emperor sat, slouched back in his throne, his arms draped on the arms of the chair in a languid almost lazy manner, reminding me of dead animals. Despite his relaxed posture power radiated about him like the corona of a sun. With the cowl of his cloak draped low over his face, it was difficult to see his expression or gauge his mood but the air of anger that had begun to creep through the hall was unmistakable. The crowd shuffled nervously. This assembly was not going to be a pleasant lauding of military heroes. There was a moment of absolute silence and it was then that the Emperor began to speak.

“For over twenty years this Empire has stood for order out of chaos.” Palpatine said. He did not raise his voice to be heard, he did not have to. *“During this time we have worked hard to maintain this order and peace. Rules have been set in place to hold this Empire together, rules that have stood the test of time and are in place for a good reason.”* He paused to let the words sink in. *“I am a fair and just leader and while I feel that competition between my loyal citizens should be encouraged when it gets out of hand and the lines of decorum are crossed, then steps must be taken to ensure discipline is maintained.”* He

stopped speaking for a moment and the only sound to break the heavy silence in the hall was the sound of someone trying not to cough.

Palpatine slowly sat forward and drew a deep breath while he scanned the crowd before him. *“Everyone here in this hall and all those who are working hard to keep this Empire a smooth running machine shall now witness what happens when these rules are broken. You shall now see what happens when the play for power and political self gain threatens to cause unrest in my Empire.”* He spoke each word slowly, precisely and with a deep viciousness that sent a shudder down my spine, emphasising his exact meaning. He stood up slowly, leaning heavily on his gnarled wooden staff. *“Guards, bring them in.”* He said.

All eyes, including mine turned to the far wall, where the ornate doors opened up. There, flanked by Royal Guards, stood Thrawn. My gut twisted and I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest. I would have made a sound had Lord Vader not placed his hand upon my left shoulder and subtly squeezed enough that I knew pain.

“Be still!” He commanded in my head.

I drew a deep steadying breath and calmed myself but the hand stayed where it was and the grip did not lessen. Behind Thrawn and the guards who flanked him came several lower ranking Imperial officers, most of whom I did not know. They walked down through the center of the room and stopped, with Thrawn at the front, to stand before the Emperor.

Thrawn did not kneel as the others did but instead clasped his hands behind his back and stood with his legs apart, military at ease. He did not look to one side or the other but I was certain he was aware that I was there. I longed to stretch out with the force and brush his spirit, his presence with mine but Lord Vader made certain I did not. It was difficult to concentrate, difficult to resist the urge to look around and scan the crowd. I fought the desire I had to touch Lord Vader's hand with my own, to tell him he could release his death grip on my shoulder. Some small part of me was certain I would be glad of the reminder he was painfully delivering to remain calm. I understood now that he had placed us where we could see everything, and where we would also be very hard to miss. Whatever was coming next would not be good at all. The air in the grand hall crackled with tension and the hand upon my shoulder gripped into my flesh.

“Will he be executed?” I asked turning to look at Lord Vader trying to quell my panic. I had never seen an Imperial execution but I had heard of them. I fought the swell of fear and horror that churned in my gut.

His grip on my shoulder increased slightly. *“I do not know the will of my Master. You must watch and see, but no matter what happens you must maintain calm, is this understood?”*

I didn't understand but I told him that I did and like the rest of the populace, I held my breath waiting for the hammer to fall.

The stillness and the tension in the great hall were so thick I found it difficult to breathe. As far as I knew, at least in the time I had been working for the Empire there had never been such a large assembly gathered to watch the fall from grace of a favoured Imperial officer. As I scanned through the gamut of emotions that rippled about the room I sensed a great division amongst the people there. Some, like me were shocked and deeply on the side of Thrawn no matter what it was he had supposedly done, but most were against him and their snide delight that he was finally getting what he, in their eyes, deserved was strong enough to make me feel ill.

I looked at the men behind Thrawn; they had risen from their knees and echoed his at ease stance although they were anything but at ease. Some of their faces I recognized from previous functions but their names, with one exception, escaped me.

I watched the man called Voss Parck carefully; unlike the others he was far more calm and serene. He kept his eyes forward, firmly planted on Thrawn's back and waited in much the same quiet manner as his superior officer did. I knew that Captain Parck and Thrawn were close, closer than most people realised or suspected. It had been Parck who had found Thrawn on some sarlacc forsaken planet some seventeen or so years prior. Thrawn had run circles around the Imperial troops sent down to the planet to find a couple of smugglers in order that he might obtain a ship and get off the planet upon which he had been exiled.

Thrawn rarely spoke of that episode in his life. All he had ever told me was that his people had chosen to use the gravest form of punishment for crimes he had committed against the Chiss rules of engagement.

I remembered the conversation clearly. It had taken place very late in the evening and we had been sitting on the balcony. Even for Coruscant the night had been exceptionally muggy, too sticky and humid to stay in bed.

How we had actually come to the subject of his exile escaped me but I remember that it had started about the humid weather. I was unused to it but he had just smiled and said there were worst places, more humid places than Coruscant. I suppose I had asked him how he knew that and he had told me about the planet he had been marooned on.

"Why would your own people do that to you?" I had asked.

"Because they are short sighted and stuck in their ways." He had replied. "The Chiss, and I have told you this before, do not believe in pre-emptive strikes against a would-be enemy, even if it has been proven they will be a threat to the Ascendancy. They are a defensive rather than an offensive people. I over stepped my bounds and they decided I should be punished."

I had swirled the drink in my glass around trying to add up the facts that didn't want to add up. "I don't buy that." I had said at last. "You are far too smart to allow that to happen."

He had merely smirked and arched an eyebrow. Our eyes locked and after a few moments I got the message.

"You wanted to be exiled."

He had smiled then. "Clever girl."

"Why? What would being abandoned on an uninhabited world give you?"

He had drawn a very deep breath and for a long time said nothing. "When I first met humans I was curious about them, so full of contradictions and deceit and yet so full of courage and curiosity. It was Corellian smugglers that first crossed my path and I used them, one in particular, to familiarise myself with human culture and the language, Basic. In doing so, it so happened that we became entangled in some sort of political mess which the Emperor, who at that point was still only Chancellor and going by a disguise as a Sith Lord named Sidious was engineering."

"The Outbound Flight thing." I said softly.

He had nodded. "Getting rid of troublesome Jedi I think, but I will never know for sure. I came into contact with this Darth Sidious and realised that he was not only manipulating everyone and everything around him for power but also for protection. We all have a common enemy; one that I fear will be the destruction of the galaxy if we are not careful. I saw in him a chance to better protect my people. I could not, however, simply walk away without a certain amount of disgrace or questions being raised as to my leaving my home world and pledge allegiance to another race of beings. My people are unfortunately xenophobic enough this would have been unacceptable behaviour, so... I did what was necessary."

"You arranged the whole thing?" I had asked, astounded at the planning and the forethought.

He had shrugged. "Let us just say, certain wheels were put into motion and a certain amount of luck prevailed."

"Luck." I had snorted. "I wasn't aware you believed in luck."

He had just smiled then and caressed my face in that oh so beguiling manner that always made me shiver. "There is so very much we still do not know about each other, sj'iu tekari."

I had made a face and had ignored the comment along with the underlying innuendo. "So the man who found you, did he know he was supposed to find you?"

"No. Sometimes it is better to allow others to think the ideas which were really someone else's are theirs alone. In the end it was a good thing for us both and Parck, you remember him I pointed him out to you at the reception last week, has benefited greatly from his association with me. He is a good man,

intelligent as well as innovative. I enjoy his company and perhaps he is one of the closest people I have to an actually friend, present company excluded.” He had paused. “Most people think him a dull man, riding the wave of success of another but I can tell you that this is not the case and if push ever came to shove I would have him at my back any day of the week.”

I had nodded and the conversation, as it so often did, had moved on to other things.

Now, in the great hall I realised that CJ had been right in his summation that something else was going on, other than a simple dog fight between power hungry rivals and what ever it was Parck was in on the game. I was certain I would not like where this assembly would go but suddenly I felt a whole lot better about it than I had a few moments before. Lord Vader must have sensed my lessening tension because the grip he had on my shoulder eased up a little, but the hand stayed put.

A shiver snaked through the crowd as the Emperor, after staring hard at the men standing before him, shifted slightly to sit back down on his throne. When he spoke, his voice was cold and hard.

“Admiral Thrawn, you have been brought before me in this manner because it has come to my attention that you are the instigator in what amounts to a political coup. You have been given much grace and liberty in my court yet you have chosen to flaunt it and abuse it to gather supporters for your own agenda in favour of serving the Empire. You have been elevated to a rank of high stature in my navy and given privileges well beyond that which you deserve. It is not the first time I have felt the need to bring disciplinary measures against your insubordination but I assure you, it will be the last.”

This brought a collective gasp and the flutter of whispers from the audience but a subtle motion of the Emperor’s fingers shut it up almost before it began.

“I will not have dissent amongst members of my fleet, my court or any where else in my Empire. That you, who have been given so much liberty, have chosen to undermine the political stability is a blatant disregard for the rules I have set in place. I am personally grieved by your behaviour not only in the political arena but also in a most personal one as well.”

Again there was a small ripple of shock that ran through the crowd and again the Emperor silenced it with the barest of movements. Even Thrawn was caught a little off guard as he raised his chin a fraction in question.

The Emperor leaned forward in his chair, the cowl of his cloak pulling back just enough so that all who dared to look upon his disfigured face could see the sparkle of vicious delight he took from being able to surprise his most prized and brilliant tactician.

“Yes, I see you thought you could hide your indiscretions from me. I assure you Admiral Thrawn nothing escapes my notice. It has come to my attention that

not only have you stirred up a political mess within the High Command, dividing the attentions of my men who should be focusing on protection of the Empire but that you have also been, against the strict rules of this court, engaged in a carnal relationship with one of my female employees! This I will not have! You as a high ranking officer are supposed to be setting a good example yet instead I find you blatantly disregarding regulations set into place for the protection of the gullible young women who work for me and my Empire. You have not only shamed yourself but you have shamed this young woman as well and she will forever carry the stigma of your tainted touch. ”

This time the Emperor did not stop the crowd from expressing their feelings and whispers filled the air as people digested this bit of news. Slowly it dawned on most of them who the Emperor might have been referring to and all eyes turned to stare at me. Now I understood Lord Vader’s insistence I remain calm. To give even the slightest hint of emotion was to confirm the suspicions set in place and that would not reflect well on him. Palace affairs, while not allowed were mostly ignored, so to have one laid out in the open for all to see meant that the Emperor was well and truly angry and that was never a good thing. I kept my expression neutral and focused on the Emperor’s face. My hatred of him was something I could not control and I did not miss the small smug smile that played slightly on his lips as he looked my way and caught my stare for a split second. Lord Vader’s grip increased as my body tensed and I knew by the end of this I would bear bruises from his fingertips. I didn’t mind, the pain he was inflicting helped me to try and control not only the blind anger and also the strange sense of shame I suddenly felt.

“*How dare he...!*” I began but Lord Vader did not let me finish, pain flared in my shoulder.

“*Be silent you stupid child!*”

So I gritted my teeth and concentrated on remembering to breathe. I could see Thrawn clench his jaw and knew that while perhaps being called out over this political power play had been expected, the Emperor’s use of the affair between us was not and it had angered him.

“Admiral Thrawn, you and those who have sided with your political wrangling will be punished to the fullest extent of the law, but to prove that I am a merciful ruler I shall spare you all from execution. From here on in you and those who have followed your leadership in this particular political struggle are banished from this court. You are henceforth to be sent to the Unknown Regions of space where you will spend your time mapping out the area until I see fit to allow you to return to my grace. I will not tolerate such behaviour as I have witnessed from you. Let this be a lesson to any who feel they can try this sort of nonsense for themselves. Next time I shall not be so lenient and the consequences will be dire!”

There was a moment's pause and with a flick of his hand the Emperor said. "In twenty four hours you will be gone from Coruscant or your lives will be forfeit. Now leave."

Thrawn gave the Emperor a curt military nod and turned on his heel with a practiced elegance. The men who were standing behind him parted to let him pass and then with their heads held high despite the shame they too felt, they marched out in perfect military step. The Royal Guardsmen who had accompanied them in now shadowed them out and only after they had all vanished through the great doors did the tension in the room ease, just a little.

The Emperor stood and everyone dropped to one knee while he walked slowly out of the Great hall, chuckling slightly as he did so. His advisors and the Council of Twelve followed him like ghosts. Then and only then, when the great doors silently closed did everyone still in the great hall allow themselves to express their shock at what had just happened. The room exploded in a sudden flurry of motion and babble. It felt to me as though a sandstorm had just erupted and was furiously circling around the entire room. The noise level was almost deafening. I just felt ill. Lord Vader brought me out of my inner turmoil as he brushed my thoughts with his.

"You have until oh-nine hundred hours tomorrow to sort out your affairs, girl. I suggest you make the most of this time. You will meet me at the shuttle then and not a moment later, do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

He let go of my shoulder then.

"Did you know? Did you know he was going to do this?" I asked, turning to look up into the reflective blackness of his face mask.

"I was debriefed just before I came to collect you but even I am not privy to all my Master's thoughts." He replied. His way of saying no, even he had not known everything that was going to be done or said, and that he was annoyed at being left out of the loop.

I sighed but before I had time to consider my next move he grabbed my arm and pulled at me.

"Come along, wretched girl!" he snarled out loud and the pitying looks that were shot my way suggested that people figured my comeuppance was about to hit me hard and furious. He all but dragged me from the Great hall and only when we were a suitable enough distance away did he let go of my arm.

"You are wasting time." He told me pointedly and then before I could answer he spun around and stalked back down the corridor leaving me alone. I made my way through the lesser used hallways, afraid of what might happen should I run into a holo net news team or worse. By the time I reached my palace flat I was boiling with a fury I could hardly control. I wanted to smash everything in my sight but in the end I didn't, because it would not change a thing and it would not make me feel any better. The only thing succumbing to my anger

would do, would be to please the Emperor, I was certain of that, so I used everything I had ever been taught and I calmed down. The Emperor had gotten enough pleasure at my expense today; I would not give him any more.

I changed out of the finery and dressed, as Lord Vader had so aptly put it, in my Tusken attire, grateful that the long coat had a deep hood. I grabbed my bag and slipped out of my flat to where the little air speeder was parked. There was only one place I could go now where I would find some answers as well as some peace and the Imperial palace was not it.

Thrawn's flat was silent. He had not returned, yet. I was strangely grateful for this and did not turn on any lights as I made my way to the bedroom and changed into a pretty but casual dress that was easy to move in. As I wandered about the flat I realised that he had packed some things away, some of his art work and books. He had known what was coming and he had prepared himself accordingly. I didn't know whether to be angry or relieved. I grabbed a shawl from the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers that had become mine by default and made my way to the kitchen.

On the counter was a very expensive bottle of red wine and two glasses. Propped up against the bottle was a note. I picked it up, his handwriting, as always was flawless and elegant.

"Do not forget to let it breathe, Tekari."

He had known I would come here. He was always ready for everything, it wouldn't surprise me, I thought tartly, that he had even planned how to avoid his own death. I opened the bottle and let the wine breathe as per his instructions. I gave it five minutes then poured myself a glass, I would have waited for him but I had no idea how long he would be and I needed a drink now.

I took my wine and went to sit out on the balcony. I sipped at it slowly and let the rich flavour invade my tongue. This was a very good wine, but then Thrawn had exquisite taste in damned near everything so it wasn't such a big surprise that the last bottle of wine we would share on this planet for goodness knew how long would be the best credits could buy.

The city twinkled and danced as it always did. Some things never changed. It seemed to me, as I sat in the unquiet dark, that this planet would forever churn it's light jewelled self around the unremarkable sun regardless of what politics ruled the day. I was glad I would be leaving in the morning to return to the Executor. I had the distinct impression that after the assembly I had just attended my life on Coruscant would not be particularly pleasant. I really had to wonder what the Emperor hoped to gain by doing what he did. I just did not understand his games at all but I was beginning to understand just why Lord Vader both revered and feared the man so much. One had to admire the

Emperor's ability to play people. If manipulation were a sport, Palpatine would be the galactic champion.

I heard Thrawn come home but I didn't get up. I listened to him move about the flat; go into the bedroom and then the 'fresher to shower. It was his normal routine, almost as if the act of showering directly upon coming home washed the taint of the Imperial political scene from his body. He joined me on the balcony; the bottle and the other wine glass in hand, his hair still wet and the scent of soap in the air. He filled his glass, topped up mine and then leaning back against the balcony wall, we drank a silent toast. The quiet between us was heavy and I didn't know how to break it so I was grateful when he took that job on.

"Do you like the wine?" He asked, his eyes never leaving my face.

I nodded. "It has enough kick to take the sting out of the evening." I tried but I couldn't keep the anger out of my voice.

He regarded me for a moment. "Yes, that was unexpected." He admitted.

I glanced up at him in disbelief. "You mean to tell me you really did not know he was going to use our affair against you and consequently me as well?" I shook my head. "You can't really expect me to believe that you, who plan for everything, did not see this coming. In fact on the way here I had to ask myself if that was why you got involved with me in the first place. If all I am is just another part of your grand scheme of things!"

He gave me an icy stare. "Is that what you really think?"

I had to fight the urge to throw something at him. "I don't know what to think! I just got dragged light-years across the damn galaxy to witness your disgrace and banishment from the court and much to my surprise, my complete mortification as well!" I snapped. "What am I supposed to think? You keep telling me you have it all well in hand and that you are prepared for every eventuality and you honestly expect me to believe you did not know this was coming, that you did not plan for this?"

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "No, sj'iu tekari, I did not. It may surprise you to learn that even I cannot predict every single occurrence in the galaxy." He was cross and it leaked into his words. "The arrangement that Palpatine and I had for my supposed downfall was over a political issue, a power struggle, unwittingly helped along by Tigellinus and his supporters, driven along by his overwhelming need for power." He shrugged slightly, "Perhaps, considering the amount of attention Palpatine paid to our relationship I should have seen this coming, but I did not consider it an option because I saw no benefit in it as a tool against me." He looked at me and added. "It did not occur to me that he would wish to publicly humiliate you in such a manner. In fact, until I got word from Vader that you were on planet, I did not think you would even be here." He was telling me the truth.

"The Emperor insisted Lord Vader bring me along and now we know why." I retorted.

"If I apologised would that lessen your humiliation or your anger?"

I glanced up at him. "You are not the one who needs to apologise! We did nothing wrong. The Emperor and his games are the issue, not us sleeping together." I snapped. "And I was not only humiliated but also furious, which is exactly what the Emperor wanted from me."

"He has his reasons for doing this, I am sure." He said in a voice telling me that even he could not quite figure out exactly what those reasons were.

I nodded. "Yes," I said softly, bitterly. "I'm quite sure he does."

He went to say something further but I waved my hand to shut him up. "What's done is done." I said but the anger that I had been keeping at bay slowly crept forward.

"This was messier than I had thought it would be, but it was necessary." He told me as if that explained everything. "Now, while the rest of the Imperial navy and court think I am off in disgrace mapping uncharted territory I can actually get to work without worrying about the likes of Tigellinus trying to destroy it all because of petty jealousies and power struggles."

"So, now your grand plan starts in earnest." I said. "I hope it was worth it." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my words. He ignored this which stirred my anger further.

He nodded. "We will continue to establish a serious Imperial presence beyond the Outer Rim regions, well into the Unknown Regions and hopefully strengthen the galactic defences. As you know we have already started but I can concentrate solely on the task at hand."

I played with my wine glass, swirling the drink around. "Most of the men, except for Parck, who were punished along with you have no idea that this was all planned do they?"

His slow smile reminded me of a teacher I had once had and loathed. "Clever girl, there isn't much that can be hidden from you when you open your eyes." He said smugly.

"I wouldn't be too sure. I didn't exactly see any of this coming!" I told him crossly. "You could have warned me!"

"I did."

"You call that cryptic letter of yours a warning?" I asked. "You need lessons on clarity!"

His eyebrow arched. "And you feel you have something about that to teach me? You have more secrets than the Jedi temple and are twice as difficult to decode, my dear, so be very careful about the stones you care to throw."

He spoke more tartly than I suspect he had meant to. My nerves were not the only ones to be frayed by the events of the evening. I respected that it could not have been an easy thing for him to go through but it did not lessen my anger any. I got up, suddenly furious and unable to contain it any longer. I hurled my glass at him. He side stepped it and it smashed against the balcony wall with a

satisfying crash, spraying red wine like a blood splatter against the wall. I swore at him viciously, loving the way his language sounded to my ears even in anger, and left to go back inside, but I had no idea where I would actually go or even why. I just knew I was angrier than a provoked rancor and there was no outlet for the emotions that boiled away in my belly. I wanted to scream or destroy something or both.

He moved with a swift, easy grace that completely belied his strength which he used as he caught me by the arm and spun me around to face him. "I can think of a much better use for your excess energy than breaking my expensive wine glasses." He said coolly as he pulled me tightly to his body and wrapped his other arm around my waist. I pushed back from him but I could not break free. His eyes glowed fiercely and I knew by the set of his jaw he was just as angry as I was. The flash of heat that flared between us made me gasp.

"How can you think of *that* at a time like this?" I asked, not wanting to admit he might actually have a valid point.

His expression turned from hard to feral, he brought his mouth to my ear and whispered. "It is the only thing to consider at a time such as this and don't tell me you are unwilling. Your body language says everything but." His breath was warm upon my skin. "Have a care my dear, I too, can tell when someone is lying."

I shuddered involuntarily at the threat behind his words and he seized the moment, bringing his mouth down on mine hard. His kiss was brutal, dominant. He pulled away and hissed in my ear, "A'mal'yn."

Mine, he had said in its most possessive and absolute form. I looked up at him for an explanation but he didn't offer me words and he shut me up before I could speak with his mouth once again, just in case I hadn't gotten the message the first time around. I returned his kiss, matching his mood and discovered that he was right; passion was exactly what was needed at this particular moment, because killing someone, anyone was out of the question and very impractical. I did not protest when he picked me up without breaking stride or kiss to carry me into the bedroom and toss me on the bed. We were not exactly gentle about getting undressed and even less cautious about the way in which our furious needs and moods unleashed themselves. There was nothing careful or kind in anything we did to each other. We crashed together like a bad speeder accident and by the time we reached that ultimate crescendo, the fury had passed into something completely different.

He whispered my name as his body shuddered and I gave into him utterly. I did not want to let go, ever. '*...tell me what you cherish most, so I will know what to take from you...*' I squeezed my eyes shut as tightly as I could to block out these words that simply would not go away. I refused to let the Emperor intrude in my thoughts; intrude in my most intimate moments. I fought the tears that suddenly filled my eyes and threatened to creep their way down my cheeks. I

did not want to cry, I did not want to show that weakness. I hid these emotions behind the remnants of the powerful ardour that had gripped us both. It was only when he complained that I realised I was biting his shoulder far too hard.

"I am already bound to you; you do not *need* to mark me as yours." He spoke gently.

I just looked at him. There were no words. He brushed the stray tear from my face with his thumb. He kissed my forehead and pulled me with him as he lay back down. We were silent for a long time, cuddled together, a tangle of limbs. The anger and adrenaline rush now replaced by a weary calm. He brushed damp hair from my face and smiled when I moved closer into his body.

"You never cease to amaze me, you know." He said after what seemed an age. His fingertips traced the four bruises that decorated my left shoulder. Lord Vader's grip during the assembly had left marks. Thrawn frowned at them but said nothing. We had had the argument about Lord Vader's brutality many times and it always ended in a stalemate. Eventually he had given up, but his disapproval was easy to read on his face.

"Why is that?" I asked taking his hand in mine.

"You don't ask the questions I expect a woman in your position to ask."

"In my position... interesting choice of words." I laughed slightly then said. "You mean the *will I ever see you again, or was any of this ever real or all a wicked plot to get you expelled by the Emperor, or did you ever really care anything for me*, kind of questions?"

He nodded. "Mmm pretty much."

I shifted so that I could look directly into his eyes. "Why would I ask you such stupid questions when I already know the answers?" I asked. "You would never have even considered having anything to do with me if were I remotely like that. Possessiveness and insecurities are not traits men like you value." He remained silent, his strange red eyes never moving from my face, so I continued. "Do you think I do not know how much you desire to be back in space doing what it is you were born to do? Did you think you hide that part of your being so well I could not notice the longing in your face when you look up at the invisible stars from this wretched planet?" I shook my head and slid out of bed, found a robe and put it on. "Maybe you hide that from everyone else but you've allowed me to get close enough to you that I see beyond that cold façade you love to wear. You miss space, star ship command and being in charge so much you ache for it as much as you make me ache for you. It was only a matter of time, I knew that. Nothing lasts forever and you needed to find a way to get back out there. Did you think I would claim you as my own, tie you down and demand you stay here at my side?" I shook my head and took a deep breath. "I have been waiting for this moment for some time now... but while the result was inevitable but the execution of it all was a bit messy." I told him with a sigh, and then headed for

the kitchen to get a new glass so that I could help finish the bottle of wine we had started earlier.

A moment later he joined me in the kitchen, after retrieving his glass from outside. The little mouse-bot I had named Mo had already taken care of the broken glass and spilt wine on the balcony. I glanced at the chrono on the wall and sighed. Time seemed to take a huge delight in speeding itself up when ever I wanted a moment to last forever. He must have sensed something about my thoughts, because he pulled me to him gently and held me close. There we stood barely dressed, wine glass in hand, holding on to something that was never really there to hold on to, to begin with.

“For someone so young, you really do surprise me with your insights, you know.” He told me.

I shrugged. “I was never young. Even as a child I knew things I never should have.”

He sighed and caressed me gently. “That nasty little talent of yours?”

I gave a slight nod then added, “Among other things, it made it hard to be a kid sometimes. I always knew secrets I wasn’t supposed to. It grew into a talent for reading people. That and I almost always knew when someone was lying. Everyone always said that I seemed so grown up beyond my years, just no one really knew why or understood except Zte’sa Vahlek and maybe Jyrki.”

He cupped my face with his free hand and drew it upwards close enough so that he could kiss me. Bringing up Jyrki’s name had made him suddenly protective and possessive and as much as he tried to contain and control these emotions they leaked out anyway. I found them strangely gratifying.

In that singular moment I wanted to tell him how I truly felt, that despite my grand speech, I was scared to let him go. That sometimes I ached for him so much when we were apart it was like a physical illness, that I wanted to open my heart and give him my soul but I told him nothing of these thoughts instead I kept quiet and just kissed him back, trying to forget that anything else in the galaxy existed. It occurred to me then, that despite our different worlds, our different physiologies and ages, perhaps we were not so far apart. Neither of us had been children in the truest sense of the word, he because of his race and culture and me because of my unwanted force talents.

“It isn’t the end of things, you know, it is just the beginning.” He said breaking the silence. “I meant what I wrote.”

I sipped my wine, listening to the sound of his heart beat in his chest. When I didn’t look up at him he put his glass on the counter and lifted my chin with the crook of his forefinger. I could see he wanted to ask what I was thinking but he didn’t. What was there to say? In another few hours we would once again be divided by light years of space and fields of twinkling stars, quite literally worlds apart. I believed him when he said I was a part of the future, whatever that was, but it didn’t make the fast looming parting any easier to take. I sighed.

Had we not played out this exact same scenario a month or so prior? It was like a bad holo-film glitch replaying the same bad scene over and over again, except this time we were both flying off in different directions with no plans to return to the core. I finished my drink and tugged at his hand.

“Let’s go back to bed, Za’ar, we don’t have so much time left I want to waste it on mindless talk about things we already know and can do nothing to change. Remind me why everyone calls you a tactile genius.”

“You mean tactical.” He corrected.

I just arched an eyebrow and smirked. “Whatever.”

He got the joke and smiled. He finished the wine in his glass and then much to my delight; he did exactly as I had asked. Our parting in the morning was wordless and painful. Neither of us looked back.

The flight back to the *Executor* was anything but restful. I was tired and cranky; Lord Vader was moody and snarky. He had insisted I fly, much to the annoyance of Colonel Jendon who was officially Lord Vader’s shuttle pilot. I personally thought Lord Vader took a perverse sense of pleasure in making me pilot when he knew I was tired and had not gotten much sleep. Still, I didn’t complain. I loved flying the Lambda class shuttles and being alone in the cockpit with Lord Vader meant we either got to talk about things or I was left in peace to do the job of flying while he meditated or slept.

Depending on his mood he was either generous with his knowledge of the ship and his own flying skills or the trip was essentially silent. This time the trip was a terse teaching session with lots of sarcasm and yelling. The shuttle had been equipped with a new defence system and he wanted to make sure I was up on those latest developments, plus I think he liked giving the men riding in the passenger area something to worry about.

Today’s lesson was on how far one could ultimately push an L-class shuttle before all the warning bells and lights screamed blue murder. Twice Colonel Jendon came up to ask if everything was okay. I suspect he would have done so a third time if Lord Vader had not growled at him for interfering in my flying lesson. The Colonel shot me a dirty look which I returned and then dutifully went back to his seat muttering something about female pilots. Inwardly I smiled but outwardly I was trying to make sure I didn’t burn our hyperdrive out. While I was pretty sure I could have fixed it if it broke, I really, really didn’t want to. I think there were a lot of frayed nerves by the time the shuttle safely landed in the hanger of the *Executor*.

I gathered my bags and with Lord Vader’s permission was allowed to return to my quarters. It had taken us nearly nine hours to reach the SSD, five hours and three hyperspace jumps longer than it should have thanks to Lord Vader’s insane instructional methods. I was exhausted through and through. I tossed my bags on the bed and went to shower. It had been a really trying trip all around and all I wanted to do was sleep.