

## What the Eye Doesn't See...

I had thought that the fall out from the mess stirred up on Coruscant would have been greater but instead the buzz and gossip surrounding Thrawn's public disgrace and consequent punishment died down relatively quickly, replaced by newer gossip as was always the case, infamous today, forgotten tomorrow. I was grateful for the fickle nature of those who cared anything for the steamier nature of news. Only Shiv and my father had anything more to say about the entire thing.

Shiv's holo-mail had arrived three days after I was back on board *Executor* and had that wonderful touch of cheer that Shiv always did so well.

*Hey Rim-Girl,*

*I saw you in the Grand Hall for Thrawn's spectacular going away party but I didn't get a chance to talk to you after the show, your boss dragged you out of there so fast I thought he had reached light-speed. That was some even, though. Who would have thought that Thrawn would actually end up in the Emperor's bad books?*

*I hope that you are okay and nothing bad happened because of the Emperor's innuendos. I guess you'd be happy to know that most people here don't really know exactly who he was talking about and the speculation is over three girls, including you. I keep my mouth shut and when pressed I just ask people if they really think that Lord Vader would allow you to get involved with the Emperor's pet alien in such a way that it would dirty his own reputation. That usually shuts people up. I hope you are not too sad though, I guess you won't see each other for a while now and I hope that Lord Vader wasn't too mad at you.*

*Mostly people have forgotten already and moved onto the next big thing, namely Prince Xizor and his big bust up with the reporter girl he was seeing. Apparently she wasn't too happy at being told to get lost and did some huge splashy story about him, which really ticked him off. She claims that her story about him actually being not only involved with the Black Sun Corporation but that he is also the leader for it all is the truth. He, of course is suing her for defamation of character and denying everything. It's all the news nets can talk about. The latest is that she has been receiving death threats in Black Sun's name. It's very messy, makes your little tryst with the Admiral seem pale in comparison. No one even cares that Thrawn and a bunch of loyal officers got shipped out to the arse end of the galaxy, except Tygs who sort of flipped out, but wouldn't explain why. He's very bitter at the moment but he never seems to want to really talk about it. His uncle, Admiral Harkov doesn't help much.*

*Anyway, kiddo, just wanted to let you know that you are no longer hot topic of the moment so when you come back you won't need to hide your face! Miss you, love you too*

*Hugs,  
Shiv*

I smiled as I watched his expressions and listened to his voice. Shiv's holograms were always full of warmth and I missed him greatly, he was the big brother I never had. I answered his mail right away and sent it as soon as I was done. Unlike Thrawn, Shiv did not mind using holo technology to correspond with, it was faster and easier. I had had lengthy discussions about this with him, because I was rather fond of real letters written on paper and I wasn't all that fond of making holo-letters much.

My father's mail arrived a few days later and was less cheerful. Unlike Shiv, my father sent his letters via data chip. He was old fashioned enough to dislike holograms and he never used them.

*Dearest Merly,*

*I hope this reaches you as we are not at all sure where you are at the moment. We had an unexpected visitor yesterday to the dock, namely Boba Fett, some minor ship repairs which needed parts he didn't have on hand. I was a bit surprised when he asked if I had seen the latest holonet news to come out of Coruscant because your name had been mentioned.*

*I told him we didn't subscribe to Core feeds and rarely had time to watch the news let alone the gossip nonsense. So you can image my surprise when he filled me in on what had happened. I was a bit shocked to learn that my little girl is part of such a scandal and I hope it is not true at all. I do recall the man at the center of it all, then Captain Thrawn. I did wonder if there was something going on between you too when you were both here, but he is considerably older than you are so I dismissed it. I see now I should have sat down and had a long chat with you about the dangers of older men. I hope that you know what you are doing; I would hate to see you get hurt, again.*

*Fett said he had been surprised to see your face on the news and asked how long you'd been on Coruscant for. I filled him in about your job and how that all came about and he'd laughed. He asked me to tell you that when he had said to get out of the job at Jabba's had not meant to swap one palace of iniquity for another. I assume this some sort of joke between you two. I told him about your work as Lord Vader's PA and he seemed impressed that you had lasted so long in the job. He told me he does quite a bit of work for the Empire; particularly for Vader. I was a bit surprised he hasn't bumped into you yet, but he said you work in different circles and despite the gossip, the Empire is quite large. I had no idea that you and Fett knew each other so well.*

*Not much else going here, in other news, Bel started seeing a Rodian named Kall, works at the Cantina but it didn't last very long so of course she has been impossible to live with the last few weeks. Bedi has been great with her, but I am sure you know how it is, right now all men are scum of the desert when it comes to Bel. She had some very uncomplimentary things to say about*

*your Captain when she heard the news from Coruscant. I think that is the very first time I have ever heard Boba Fett laugh.*

*Business is good and Tatooine hasn't changed. The Hutts still rule and Mos Eisley is still the biggest magnet for the worst the galaxy has to offer. I was out at Tosche's the other day and both he and his mechanic, Fixer, said to pass along their hellos. Fixer got married to that nice girl he was seeing, Camie, I think her name is. It isn't easy for a young couple starting out on this sarlacc forsaken rock, so I wished them luck.*

*Anyway pet, I need to get back to work. Send news when you can, we are all on pins and needles to hear the truth behind that terrible holonet gossip.*

*Take care of yourself and for goodness sakes stay out of trouble.*

*Love,*

*Dad*

*Ps. Your uncle Vahlek might be in your neck of the desert some time soon. He said he was doing a couple of jobs for your boss so don't be too surprised if he shows up unannounced.*

I sighed and answered his letter as truthfully as I could without giving everything away. I didn't see the point in lying about my relationship with Thrawn to my father but I down played it, as well as the scandal that had been making its way slowly to the Outer Rim news nets. I hoped that would placate him enough. I was pretty certain, that while he did not dislike Thrawn he would not have a high opinion of him sleeping with his daughter. Fathers were funny that way.

I had not expected to hear from Thrawn for some time and I tried not to think about him because those thoughts made me melancholy and achy from the inside out, so I was very surprised when Jarack showed up at my office with a courier package for me just less than two weeks after my last night with Thrawn.

He had made me jump when he had knocked on the doorframe to signal his presence. I often programmed the door to stay open because I hated the closed in sensation I got when it was shut.

I looked up and saw him grin. "Nice office." He said as he sauntered in. He handed me the surprisingly bulky envelope and waited while I signed for it.

"It does the job." I told him. "You have time for spiced coffee?"

"You get to make that here?" he seemed surprised.

I grinned as I poured him a cup and told him about how Lord Vader liked to make sure I was efficient at my job and my ability to make spiced coffee was a part of that.

He shook his head as he sat and sipped the sweet, spiced drink. "You lead a charmed life, you know."

"So I keep hearing." I replied. "So, how have you been?"

He shrugged. "Good, keeping busy. Here and there, you know." He was being vague and I didn't press, we all had our secrets to keep. "How are you doing?" he asked in such a way that I knew what it was he really wanted to know.

"I'm good. Keeping busy, keeping a low profile, if you know what I mean." I told him. "I don't enjoy the spot light despite what the Admiral might think."

Jarack grinned knowingly. "He said to send you his best regards. I'm sure he'll tell you all about the latest adventures from the *Admonitor* in his letter there so I won't spoil the story for you. I guess you have nothing to go back with me yet?"

"I do actually. Just because I wasn't expecting him to write doesn't mean I didn't. Hang on a sec I'll fetch it." And before he could say anything I slipped quickly to my quarters to get the letter I had finished writing the night before. I stuck it in an envelope and sealed it then handed it to Jarack when I got back to the office.

"He'll be surprised, you know, he isn't expecting me to bring back anything." Jarack said as he readied a secure courier envelope and I signed for it.

"He thinks he knows me as well as he knows himself." I said tartly. "You can tell him I am not just a pretty piece of over studied art for his collection and I still have a few surprises left in me yet."

Jarack laughed. "I'll be sure to pass that along!" He said, handing me the empty coffee glass. "See you next time I'm in the neighbourhood."

"Take care of yourself it's a rough galaxy out there!" I said.

"Always, Miss Gabriel, always!" he said with a wink as he slipped out of the office to go back to where ever it was he had come from.

I looked at the bulky package and smiled, something to look forward to after I had finished my work. The to-do list from Lord Vader was fairly extensive and I needed to get that done first of all.

Things had not been quiet on board. Lord Vader had recently taken the *Executor* earlier on to Corulag to rendezvous with the *Devastator* and as he had so eloquently put it, "*Deal with another idiot who thinks he is smarter than I am.*"

When I pressed for an explanation, Vader told me that Imperial Security Bureau officer Sollaine had tried to wrangle a way to take over command of the *Executor*. I had nearly choked on the sip of spiced coffee I was drinking when he told me this.

"Is he completely stupid?" I asked when I got my coughing fit under control.

Lord Vader's reply was terse and to the point. "Yes!"

"So what happened to him?" I asked.

"He met his maker." Lord Vader replied with a definite air of satisfaction.

"And Rivoche Tarkin?" I asked wondering what had become of Grand Moff Tarkin's niece who had turned out to be a rebel sympathiser and a spy.

I knew her peripherally, as I did many of the Imperial Palace courtesans. She had not so long ago become engaged to Vastin Caglio, the son of Moff James Caglio who was in charge of the Bormea Sector. Then all hell broke loose when the Emperor realised that there was a deep undercover agent amongst his courtesans. He had wanted Lord Vader to deal with it but Vader had his hands full with other problems and had given the job to Sollaine. I was never sure when Lord Vader became aware that Sollaine wanted to usurp him as commander of the *Executor* but when that happened Sollaine was already a dead man, he just didn't know it at the time. When the *Executor* had jumped into the same sector as the *Devastator* to rendezvous with Sollaine for reasons I still wasn't clear on, this had inadvertently allowed Rivoche to escape. That was all the excuse Lord Vader needed to remove Sollaine. The lesson to be learned was that one could never fool the Dark Lord and trying it was deadly.

Lord Vader shrugged. "She is of little concern." He said letting me know that he had been more annoyed with Sollaine's ambitiousness than with chasing a single informant.

Now we were currently underway to Talay, where Lord Vader was to meet General Rom Mohc and be given a demonstration of the Dark Trooper Droids.

The Dark Trooper Project was interesting. The Dark Troopers were not flesh and blood like the storm troopers were but rather very advanced battle droids. They had armour made from a dark grey metal called phrik which was practically indestructible. They were equipped with better weapons and jet packs and were usually deployed alongside regular stormtroopers. They had the advantage of adding chaos to the fights and usually scared the sandjiggers out of the enemy. The whole project was the brainchild of General Mohc and Lord Vader was quite impressed with the whole thing thus far.

I had gotten to see the project as it progressed because Lord Vader liked to talk about the droids and I enjoyed it when he talked to me about anything that didn't involve force choke or shouting.

When I had completed my to-do list for the day I went back to the quiet of my quarters and after I had showered and eaten, I settled down to open Thrawn's mail. I wondered, as I opened the envelope, if he missed me as much as I missed him.

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*A'mia Tekari,*

*Here we are, once again, engaging in the delightful art of written correspondence and I ask myself, how shall I begin this letter? With elegant prose proclaiming how much your presence fails or maybe with witty banter to cheer you up? Perhaps, because I can picture you rolling your eyes and telling me to get to the point, I should just imagine you sitting curled up next to me, wine glass in hand, the scent of what ever bubble-bath you soaked in*

*permeating the air and write as though there were no light years of space lying between us, as though you were here listening as you always do.*

*Just like you, I departed from Coruscant at 0900 hrs CST and rendezvoused with ISD Admonitor in orbit above the planet. I can assure you my welcome was anything but warm. As you so correctly surmised only Voss Parck was actually aware of the real reason behind my so called exile so consequently the men under my new command believe me to blame for their downfall.*

*Captain Dagon Niriz was cordial but did not hide his disdain of the fact that I am not human very well and I had been briefed by Voss that it would take some doing to win this man over. I told Voss that it wasn't my job to win anyone over it was their jobs to learn to trust not only their new commander but also themselves. I wished you could have seen Voss's face; he reminded me very much of you at that moment and it required a lot of my self control not to smile.*

*Niriz is an old school Imperial Naval Officer who comes from four generations of Imperial service. He was a bit stiff and at first, very angry with the situation he and his fellow officers and men had been thrown into. Like everyone else they all believed they were being punished for crimes they had not committed.*

*We arrived at the edge of the Unknown Regions after a long series of hyperspace jumps, mostly designed for me to see just what this ship is capable of. The Admonitor is a bit of an old beast of burden but there have been some modifications done and I wanted to make certain she was running at peak performance. By the time we arrived where I wanted us to be, let me say that nerves were a little frayed, exactly how I wished the situation on board to be. It is always very interesting to see how the men under my command will perform when they are already running on high tension. Needless to say our first encounter with an alien species was cause for some alarm, primarily caused by how I dealt with the situation at hand. Of course you know how I tend to teach and having seen and felt your reactions to my methods on more than one occasion, I was prepared for the disbelief and disdain that permeated the bridge.*

*Captain Niriz was infuriated by the fact that I continually countermanded his orders. I find it almost laughable at how quickly such intelligent men fall back on pre prescribed methods of warfare and first contact without stopping to consider all the possibilities. It was fascinating to watch him struggle with himself. He wanted to trust me but all his training and his own set pattern of beliefs made that very difficult. He along with several others truly believed that I would betray them and considered mutiny. For a few moments it was certainly interesting on the bridge. I am always amused by the fact that so many smart men do not see beyond their own noses. There is a*

*great presumption that neither the Emperor nor I actually know what we are doing. It would be laughable if it did not get in the way of the work.*

*The aliens we encountered call themselves the Ebruchi and we are well on the way to discovering more about them. I shall not bore you with all the details but thanks to the work of Voss and several very good men under my command we were able to secure the information we needed without a single casualty, unless one would call pride a casualty. I imagine it will take a little while before Niriz and some of his men come to terms with the fact that I am not quite as stupid as they thought in the first place and that our so called exile might actually be a blessing in disguise. At least now I am fully aware of the loyalties on board and where they lie.*

*Niriz tendered his resignation and was convinced that I would have him court-martialled for conspiring to mutiny. I almost wished I could have seen his face when Voss explained the situation to him and told him I would not accept his resignation and would not be shipping him back to Coruscant with General Haverel. Trust, as I have said before, my dear, is a delicate matter.*

*So now as it stands we are underway searching for the leaders of the Ebruchi who had charged Creysis, the alien "commander" we encountered, to hold the planet we discovered. Between the upgrades made to the ship and the ship wide drills we have been running I am confident we are in top form. Niriz does a very good job at training the pilots and I am pleased with his skill in this area. In the months to come, we will be sent reinforcements in the form of more ISDs, with both fighter pilot and ground crews. As you already know I have established a base on the planet Nirauan and it is my hope that we will expand the Imperial presence greatly by the end of the year.*

*I have included two books I thought you might enjoy as well as a data chip which I would like you to deliver to Lord Vader. I hope that you do not mind playing messenger for me in this manner but at the moment when it comes to getting information to Lord Vader you and Jarack are the safest routes. Please see he gets it and should he wish to answer I have asked him to utilise the fact that we correspond. Jarack is on call for just this reason. The small communications pad is yours and contains all the codes you will need, everything is in Cheunh, as a small security precaution, but do try to keep it safe. Due to the distance between us, holonet transmissions will be virtually impossible so believe it or not, courier is the fastest way of delivering information also the least noticed. On the comm-pad there are protocols in place for getting in touch with me in an emergency but only if it is truly a dire situation should they be used.*

*So, sj'iu tekari, I am afraid I must end this missive and return to the bridge. I hope that you are well and taking care of yourself. Know that you are on my mind in quiet moments and I miss your presence at my side. So stay alive and out of trouble, I am quite sure we shall some very interesting stories*

*to swap the next time we meet up.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ja,  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I sat and looked at the two books, the data chip and the small comm-pad. The books were both in Cheunh and, like so many books that came from Csilla, had been written by hand. I wondered how he could ever part with such wonderful things but was grateful that he did. I folded his letter to me carefully and held it to my nose, catching the scent of what ever soap or cologne he had been wearing when he had written it. My entire body ached for him so suddenly that I had to consciously catch my breath. If someone had told me three years ago that he would come to mean so much to me I would have laughed at them and told them right where to go.

I slipped the letter into the box I kept all of his letters in, tucked away in my satchel, and put the books on my bedside table to read later. I centered and touched the force just a little to find Lord Vader's presence, awake and on the bridge. He became aware of me searching for him and acknowledged it. I made sure I was dressed appropriately, meaning that I was wearing shoes, and made my way to meet him.

It was late according to standard time and we were well into the midnight watch. I liked this time, the quiet shifts, even though in reality it should not make a hill of ants bit of difference when the watches fell.

The bridge was peaceful. Admiral Ozzel was no where to be seen and despite the fact that Lord Vader stood gazing out into space from his usual spot on the walk way the atmosphere was relatively calm. Captain Piett, who was on duty nodded at me with a slight worried grin as I passed him. I just smiled back. What I had in my hand did not concern him at all.

Lord Vader did not turn to look at me as I approached him; he had sensed me the moment I stepped onto the bridge and was merely waiting for me to come and stand by his side. I followed his gaze and wondered what he was looking at.

He glanced at me for a second and then said. "We came out of hyperspace two minutes ago. We are now in the Arkanis Sector."

"Outer Rim." I said. "Isn't this under Moff Julsten's jurisdiction?"

He nodded.

"How far away are we from Tatooine then?"

He pointed to two tiny spots of light in the upper left quadrant of the viewing window. "That's Tatoo one and two there. About seventeen light years. A short enough jump." He said.

"And Talay?"

"Another two hours in normal space, too short for a hyper jump. The Executor isn't well equipped to make micro jumps." He said. "You have something for me?"

I handed him the data chip.

“I take it he is enjoying his new playground?” Lord Vader said after a few moments of studying the chip in his hand.

“I think so.” I said.

“No trouble onboard then?”

I glanced up at him. “No more than was expected.” I told him.

He nodded. “He has given you instruction for return messages?”

“Yes, my lord.”

He was silent for a moment and I allowed myself to enjoy the view. It was rare to see space from the bridge of a super star destroyer and even I didn't get so many opportunities that I would take it for granted.

“How was your lightsaber practice today?” he asked suddenly.

“Erm...non existent.” I told him truthfully.

“Then we shall have to rectify that.” He told me tartly. I groaned inwardly I had wanted to go to bed.

Lord Vader turned around and motioned for me to accompany him. He stopped by Captain Piett who paled a little.

“Alert me the moment we reach our rendezvous point, captain.” Lord Vader said.

“Yes, my lord.” Piett replied. I shot him a small grin as Vader turned away.

“Keep up girl!” snapped Vader as I tarried slightly. I ran to keep up with him as he strode out of the bridge and through the halls to the turbo lift. “Get ready and meet me in the training room. I assure you, you will think twice before you forget to practice again.” He told me as we stood side by side in the too small turbo lift.

I sighed. “Yes, my lord.”

He glanced at me. “It would not be prudent for you to push your luck with being insolent this evening. I teach you this skill so that the next time your friend drops by to harass you, you are better able to defend yourself.”

“I keep telling you he is not my friend.” I told him crossly.

Vader made a noise that sounded a lot like a snort. “Not any more he isn't.”

The sudden wave of sadness that swept through me at his words was both unexpected and puzzling. He had felt it.

“You must let go of your attachments to the past, girl, they will be your undoing.” He admonished as the lift came to a stop.

I nodded. As ironic as that statement was coming from him, he was right. I walked away from him towards my quarters to get ready for what I was pretty sure would be a gruelling and painful lesson. Lord Vader didn't tolerate slacking off for any reason, especially not from me.

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I stood as calmly as I could and watched as the storm that was called Lord Vader unleashed itself with a fury that was as astonishing as it was vicious. I had seen him angry before but it never ceased to amaze me just how destructive his anger truly was. I looked around the room he had destroyed and at the body of the man who had displeased him with the news he had delivered and sighed.

“I absolutely will not tolerate such incompetence!” he snarled. The air crackled as he used the force to hurl the last surviving bit of furniture against the bulk head.

I wanted to yell at him about killing the young officer who had reported the destruction of the Gromas Mines but thought the better of it. He had summoned me to give me work but he also wanted to show me his anger. I was never quite sure why this was but I suspected he just liked having an audience. I looked around the chaos that was once a nice looking debriefing room and had to bite my tongue. It looked now the way building did when a category ten sand storm busted its way through it. Nothing and no one survived intact.

It had been almost two weeks since Lord Vader had gone to Talay to meet Rom Mohc and be given a demonstration of how the new Dark Forces droids worked. They had chosen a Rebel base on the planet called the Tak Base as a target and everything had seemingly gone well. The base was effectively obliterated but one ship managed to escape.

The Rebellion had sent someone to investigate this project and whoever it was had managed to figure out who had manufactured the droids, a man named Moff Rebus. After Lord Vader discovered that Rebus had been interrogated by a rebel fighter named Kyle Katarn, Rebus didn't last terribly long and Lord Vader had been in a foul temper when he returned because, and he was correct in his summation, Rebus knew where the new alloys for the Dark Trooper droids were being tested and had given up the location to his interrogator.

The young man, whose body now littered the floor along with everything else that had been in the room, was the messenger sent by Mohc. It angered me that Mohc had not come himself and now this young man was dead all because he had delivered the news to Lord Vader. There should be rules about not killing the messenger. The Gromas Mines, where the metal called Phrik, a vital part of the Dark Troopers' indestructible armour, was found had been destroyed. This was a terrible blow to the project because Phrik wasn't easy to find and the Gromas mines were a bountiful supply until the facility had been obliterated by the rebels.

So I stood as still and as quietly as I could by the open door and waited for this latest storm to pass. He had woken me up to get me here and I was standing in bare feet, my nightdress and a robe, one of Thrawn's that I had 'borrowed.' I actually had quite a few articles of the Admiral's clothing, some he knew about and some I was pretty sure he didn't, like his favourite black long sleeved, crew necked shirt, the one made from the really soft, stretch fabric, and there was his

black silk sweater. He'd be mad when he found out I had absconded with that one as well, but I liked how it felt and his scent lingered in its fabric.

"Get this mess cleaned up, deal with that body and get me General Mohc on the comm at once!" Vader growled, his fury spent. He stood amidst the mess and looked about then he stormed passed me. "I'll be in my chambers, patch Mohc through the instant you have him."

"Yes, my lord." I nodded and stepped back to let him sweep by me, grateful he hadn't decided to take his temper out on me as well, as he was often wont to do. When I was sure he had gone I made my way through the mess and knelt down at the young man's lifeless body, put my fingers to his neck and sighed. He was dead, no pulse at all. A wave of sorrow for the dead young man washed through me and rippled about.

"*Stop dawdling about girl, unless you wish to end up next to that boy!*" Vader's angry thoughts intruded on my sadness.

I didn't dignify him with an answer and ran down through the hall to my own office to start the process of getting a clean up crew in the wrecked room and alerting the med center that they'd better send a team down for the body.

Getting a hold of General Mohc proved to be slightly more difficult and after almost forty minutes of bad links and fuzzy holos I had him on the line. He wasn't too happy about my interrupting his supper but the mention of Darth Vader's name soon smartened him up. I patched the comm through to Vader's chambers and then went to make some very strong tea. I had the distinct impression this was going to be a long night.

A knock on my door made me jump. I looked up from the work I was in the middle of doing to see Jorae.

"Hey." I said.

"Not disturbing you am I?" he asked looking nervously around him.

"He's not here, you're safe." I said. The look of relief on his face was so funny I had to smile. "You're on duty late."

He nodded plunking himself down in the chair nearest my desk. "Who was it this time?"

"He was just a kid, one of General Mohc's boys; I didn't even know his name." I said, trying to swallow down the sadness I felt. At least I hadn't been there at the time Lord Vader was actually killing the poor young man. That had happened only twice and I still sometimes had nightmares about that. Having been on the end of Lord Vader's temper numerous times and felt the icy touch of Force Choke, it wasn't something I wanted to watch. I was always saddened by his abuse of this power but I came to realise a long time ago that if I was going to cry every time he killed someone I would be forever in tears. It wasn't so much that I got used to it, more like I learned to distance myself from it. "I guess he drew the short stick."

Jorae pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Do you know what the rest of the navy and the entire army call this ship instead of the *Executor*?"

I shook my head. "No."

"The *Executioner*." He told me.

"Figures. We probably have the highest non combat mortality rate around." I said.

He shrugged. "Yeah, probably, but no one wants to count. Anyway, I'd heard there was a casualty and wanted to make sure you were still here."

I gave him a wan smile. "I'm still here."

He nodded at my clothes. "New dress code?"

"When he gets me out of bed with the words '*this instant*' he doesn't mean *you have time to dress and look decent*." I said.

"If Badmiral Ozzel ever catches you running around barefoot he'll blow a valve."

I rolled my eyes. I could care less what Ozzel thought of me. "Oh bring on that happy day!" I often ran around barefoot, but the long skirts and dresses I wore usually hid that fact.

He gave me a knowing look and stifled a yawn. "Guess Vader doesn't care what you wear as long as you get the job done."

"Dress code isn't high on his list of priorities." I gave him a slight smile. "You look tired, hard shift?"

He nodded "There's been another defection and he was leaking information about the Dark Forces Project. We've been trying to sort some of it all out and see if we can't flush him out or find out where the transmissions are coming from."

"Oh fun, that will really make Lord Vader's day or does he know already?"

Jorae nodded. "Yeah, he knows, thankfully." He said. "Some guy named Madine."

"Crix Madine, the man responsible for heading up the Storm Commandos?" I asked with surprise.

"Yeah that's the one. I wouldn't think you'd have heard of him."

I made a face. "I am required to know the oddest things about the Empire. Lord Vader insists on it. So I get to read all sorts of tasty tidbits on all sorts of personnel. I am certain that news didn't make him happy at all." I sighed.

"Not really, but then again does *anything* make him happy?" He said stifling another yawn. "Anyway glad you are still alive. Maybe see you for lunch some time if the *Old Meanie* lets you have a moment's peace."

"Sure." I grinned and waved as he left.

Another defection. This was getting to be a regular occurrence and I was starting to wonder if the saying about wamprats and sinking sail barges was not a bit true. If that was the case I had to wonder where this was all leading, because it sure did not feel good.

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“You’re not concentrating!” CJ said as he hit me again with a superb kick that brought me to the mat for a second time. “You’re so much better than this, get up!”

“I’d like to see you do as well on almost a week of no sleep and two days of non stop Vader induced adrenaline!” I snapped at him.

He laughed. “That’s a piece of spice cake next to the training we Royal Guards undergo so shut up and put up!”

We had been sparring for the better part of an hour and I was just too tired to think straight. CJ had said that this was as good a time as any and that pushing my limits was a good thing since one never knew what sort of situations one might get one’s self into. That had made me laugh and I told him he didn’t know the half of it. When he sent me backwards again for the third time I just lay there and sighed. He stood over me, shaking his head and then decided I was a lost cause and sat down beside me.

“What’s he in a tizzy for anyway?” CJ asked.

“I take you know about the Madine defection?” I asked as he handed me the bottle of water.

He nodded, “Yeah, stupid bastard stole a shuttle full of vital information and took off for the rebels. That alone will earn him instant execution if they catch him.”

“Well they did catch him, I mean Lord Vader and General Mohc did and he was sent to the Orinackra Detention Center.”

“Pleasant!” CJ said sarcastically. Orinackra, a prison planet notorious for its high mortality rate, was probably one of the most infamous and detested places in the galaxy next to the spice mines on Kessel. If you went in there, chances were you never came out.

“No it’s not, it’s actually horrible.” I told him with a sigh.

“Hey wait a sec, you make it sound like you were there.”

“I was.” I told him unhappily.

“Why would you go there?”

“Well, as Lord Vader’s personal Assistant it is my duty to accompany him everywhere he wants me to.” This was my stock answer.

“And he needed you in a prison? Why, did he need a special order of spiced coffee or something?”

“Ha very ha.” I said swatting his thigh with my hand. It had become a running joke between us that my role in Vader’s life was really that of a pretty stimcaf maker. “If you wish to continue to enjoy the privilege of my amazing spiced coffee then you need to show a tad more respect for its maker!”

“Okay, okay!” he said sitting up to start his cool down stretches. “So why would he drag you all the way down there? I mean really that’s not part of your job description, is it?”

“There is no job description for what I do.”

“That’s not what I hear from the holo-news!” he teased.

I just looked at CJ with my *you are so not funny* face and shrugged. “One of my better force talents is being able to discern truth from lie, sometimes Lord Vader finds me useful in this respect. He often has me with him during an interrogation.”

“Oh that must be pleasant.” CJ said sarcastically.

“Yeah, like bathing naked in the pit of Carkoon is pleasant.” I nodded.

“So what happened?”

“He had me fly out to this Corellian hell of a planet to listen in on the interrogation, as if the drugs and the droids were not enough, except just as I get there the Rebellion launches a bloody strike on the prison and manages, and you’ll love this, to haul Madine out of there right under Vader’s nose.”

CJ’s mouth opened and then closed then opened again.

I nodded. “Yeah, it was messy.”

“Are you serious?”

“Deadly.” I told him. “I thought Vader was going to blow up from the inside out, to be honest, he was apoplectic. I’m pretty sure if there were vents in his mask I would have seen steam. I don’t remember when I have seen him just so angry and that’s saying something. So now General Mohc has hired a bounty hunter to go after the rebel who was responsible for this mess.”

“Do they know who it is, the reb? Do they have a name?”

I nodded. “Some young guy named Kyle Katarn.”

“Katarn?” he asked in surprise. “I know that name.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, now there’s a story and a half.” He said.

“You gonna tell me or will I have to read your mind?”

He shot me a look. “You’re good sweetheart but not that good!”

I just raised my eyebrows in a *like you would know* manner.

He gave me one of those grins that I was sure made other girls’ knees weak. “You had your chance…” he told me.

“So you keep reminding me.” I retorted.

Shortly after I had come back from Thrawn’s exile assembly CJ had found me alone in the room where we worked out sitting on the floor crying. I had thought he was on duty so I was not expecting anyone to come in when I had gone to work out. Despite the fact that I was exhausted, I had not been able to sleep, so I had thought working out might help. Instead of finding release in the movements I had been taught I had ended up on the floor. I could no more stop the flood of tears than I could Lord Vader’s temper. That room was code

activated and only a few people had the code. It was probably the first and maybe the only time he had dropped the cute bad boy act and been genuinely kind. Because I needed to talk about it, I had told him what had happened and confirmed what he had already guessed anyway. It told us both two things, one: I was not about to have a fling with him no matter how much he flirted and teased and Two: I was not quite as tough as I had hoped. It had been a moment of weakness neither of us ever spoke of again, but he teased me mercilessly about everything else afterwards.

“Tell you what, I want to shower and grab a bite to eat, meet you in your office in twenty minutes, if you make some of that famous spiced addiction of yours I’ll spill the beans!” he said getting up.

“Okay, but bring food for us both then!” I told him realising I was hungry and I couldn’t remember the last time I had actually eaten.

“Aye, aye ma’am!” he said with a grin as he left. He knew I hated being called ma’am.

As I made my way back to my quarters I wondered if it was just my imagination or were there more and more people going over to this Rebel Alliance. Maybe it was just I was more aware of them now than I had been before, but it seemed to me it happened with more frequency than it should. By the time I had showered, dressed and made my way to my office, CJ was already waiting with what looked to be amazingly delicious sandwiches. He watched as I put the ingredients in my coffee and set the pot to slow cook. My office had a small lounge corner set up with comfortable seats and a small table, and we often used that as a place to eat after we worked out. It was private and easier to talk more openly in my office than in the mess hall.

“I’ve watched you make that stuff a billion times now and you never do it the same way. How am I supposed to steal the recipe if you don’t keep it consistent?” he complained handing me a sandwich.

“You’re not.” I told him. “I swore a blood oath to my uncle I’d keep it a secret!”

“What will he do if you tell, hunt me down and slice me into tarn food?”

“Does the word *Tze’yusha’Jin* mean anything to you?” I asked remembering the title that Rikka Blane had given my uncle. I was grinning as I said it but the sudden look on his face chilled me.

“Yes it does.” He said quietly, almost fearfully. “Forget I ever asked. I don’t need that sort of trouble on my neck, not now, not ever.”

“Oh.”

He regarded me carefully for a moment. “You don’t even know what that really means do you?”

I shook my head.

“Probably a good thing if this guy is your uncle.” He said quietly, thoughtfully, “And if he hasn’t told you, I sure as hell am not going to!”

“I can see that Zte’sa Vahlek and I are going to have to have a serious heart to heart the next time we meet.” I muttered.

CJ just looked at me and took a bite out of his sandwich. “Your spiced coffee is going boil over.” He said effectively changing the subject. When we had finished eating and I had dutifully poured the spiced coffee he began to tell me about Kyle Katarn.

“He’s from Sulon, the moon colony in the Sullust system out on the Outer Rim. He joined the Imperial Academy on Carida and graduated with honours. He was given the medal of Valour from none other than Jerec, one of the Emperor’s Agents, for his part in neutralizing a rebel held asteroid AX-456. It was a messy mission and Katarn held it together well enough that he got noticed. The Empire doesn’t hand out that medal to just anyone for just anything.” CJ said. “He was touted as one of the hottest new graduates to come out of Carida in a long time.”

“So what happened to make him switch sides?” I asked.

“Yeah well, as I heard it, just after his graduation he got news that his father had been murdered by rebels. His mother was killed years ago. He was on his way to his first posting when someone from the rebels got through to him and told him the truth, that his father had actually been murdered by the Empire. He was beheaded by Jerec or something. Morgan Katarn was supposedly a part of the rebel cell on Sulon. Knowing Jerec there was probably more to it than that but I couldn’t tell you what. Seems that sort of made Katarn rethink his allegiances and he walked. He’s been a bit of a pain in the rear ever since.” He said stopping to take a drink. “If my information is right, it was Katarn who got a hold of the technical readouts for the Battle station everyone called the Death Star for the Rebellion. You know the rest of that story.”

I gave a low whistle. “Ouch.” I said.

CJ nodded. “Yeah, he is definitely on the Empire’s Most Wanted list.” He said. “Do you know who they sent after him? You said that a bounty hunter had been hired.”

“Who else but Boba Fett.”

CJ grinned. “Now there’s a showdown I’d love to see.”

“My credits would be on Fett any day of the week.” I said.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Katarn has an almost magical way about him. Lucky doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

“You think he’s force sensitive?” I asked.

CJ shrugged. “No idea, but he’s got some guardian angel on his shoulder is for sure, to get him in and out of the stuff he’s been through.”

“How do you know all this stuff anyway?”

“It’s my job to know everything about possible threats to the Emperor and the Empire. You forget what I am, sweetheart. Just because I play nice with you doesn’t mean I am. Actually if you want the truth I am a real bastard most of the

time. You don't get to be a Royal Guard by being the pretty boy next door." he said coolly. "I just have a soft spot for you because you try to beat me up."

I was going to say something else, something rude but I changed my mind. "I'll take your word for it." I said instead.

He grinned and I am sure he was about to make some sarcastic reply when a knock at the door stopped him.

I got up and answered it, surprised to see Jarack. He walked in with his usual cheerful grin but the second he saw CJ that changed and the air crackled.

"Jax." Jarack said coldly with a nod of his head as he walked into the room.

"Behl." CJ answered matching Jarack's icy tone.

"I take it you know one another." I said carefully.

Jarack looked at me and handed me the courier envelope. "You might say that." He replied coldly. "Do you have anything for me, Miss Gabriel?"

I nodded as I signed for the envelope.

"Thanks for the drink and the chat, *sweetheart!*" CJ said with special emphasis on the nickname he had decided, much to my annoyance, to call me. "I'll see you tomorrow for practice." And with a wink, he left.

When the door closed and the air stopped crackling a bit I looked at Jarack for an explanation, instead he gave me one of those looks that men give you when they think you've been up to no good.

"Does the Admiral know you spend time with *him*?" he asked.

"I don't know if I've ever mentioned CJ. I spar with him and sometimes, like today, we eat together. Why?"

Jarack shook his head. "He's not nice people." He said.

I looked Jarack in the eyes. "Maybe so, but he's my sparring partner at the moment and so far he has never done me any wrong."

Jarack nodded slowly. "What do you have for me, Miss Gabriel?" he asked coldly.

I handed him the two envelopes. One held a letter for Thrawn and the other held a data chip from Lord Vader. I was well aware of the look he was giving me and it annoyed me.

"What is your problem?" I finally asked.

"Nothing." He finally mumbled. At least, I thought nastily, he had the good grace to actually appear embarrassed.

"You think something is going on between CJ and me?" I asked, knowing full well that is exactly what Jarack was thinking. Part of me had to stifle a laugh at the ridiculousness of the whole situation and part of me had to wonder at the loyalty Thrawn inspired and a part of me had to refrain from screaming blue murder.

"I don't know you well enough to say, Miss." But his tone of voice held uncertainty in it.

I shook my head. "Well, perhaps you should ask Admiral Thrawn what he thinks."

"I would not presume..."

"Oh but you do!" I said crossly. "You came in here and looked at CJ sitting there and you immediately thought that something weird was going on." I snapped. "He's on stormtrooper rotation and I spar with him because there are no other Bunduki artists on board, as far as I know. Maybe he's not nice people, and maybe you don't trust him but you should trust me!" I said almost shouting.

He sighed and I felt him back down. "I'm sorry. I just don't have a good relationship with that man, few people do."

"He's a Royal Guardsman so that doesn't surprise me." I said tartly.

"The Admiral won't like knowing you spend time alone with him though." Jarack said.

I arched an eyebrow. "How would you know what the Admiral likes and dislikes? I can tell you this for nothing, Admiral Thrawn does not get to dictate to me who I spend time with, or who my friends are and neither do you!"

He looked at me coolly for a moment then nodded. "You are quite right, I apologise."

I shook my head at him. "Why is it men always assume the very worst?"

He managed a short sharp laugh. "Experience." He said sadly.

I looked at him and signed for the outgoing envelope. "Who ever it was I am not that person, you are not Thrawn and CJ is just someone I spar with and talk with. He's a friend and nothing more, but feel free to tell the Admiral what ever you want." I did not manage to keep the frost out of my voice.

"I'm sorry Merlyn, it was a gut reaction. Maybe some time I will tell you about it," he said using my first name which he almost never did.

I nodded. "And maybe some day I'll even ask." I said. Now I was being mean.

"I suppose I deserved that." He said.

"Yes. You did." I told him pointedly and then, relenting, asked, "Do you want something to drink?"

He shook his head. "Can't this time, the Admiral is waiting for this." He said waving the envelope at me.

"Next time then?" I asked lightly, hoping the anger I still felt no longer showed.

He grinned tentatively. "Next time."

I watched as he left and then let out the breath I had been holding. What in the name of sarlacc was it in the air that made men act like total brainless morons? I sighed and looked at the envelope I held in my hand. I liked CJ and we did flirt from time to time but he was not in my heart. It was not his touch,

his body, and his presence I longed for when I lay awake in bed sleepless and restless. It was not CJ I thought of when I wanted comfort and guidance. I enjoyed CJ's company and even his attentions because they took away the sting of missing the one man who knew me better than anyone else, but they did not replace him. No one could do that and suddenly the terrible pang of separation shot through me like a solar flare causing tears to well up in my eyes, making me annoyed with myself.

*Attachments...* they caused nothing but trouble. No kidding!

I knew then it was time to go to my own quarters, pour a generous drink of the bottle of brandy I had smuggled on board and shut off the comm for the next twelve hours at least. Lack of sleep made me very cranky and even worse, maudlin and this was not a good combination. I hoped there was something cheerful in Thrawn's letter to me because I could use some nice news for a change. I was beginning to think I should have stayed put on Coruscant.

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Most of the time I relished any opportunity to be on the bridge of the *Executor*, but not this time. I had come up to deliver Thrawn's latest datachip and had walked in on the middle of a nasty debriefing. My timing was, as always, impeccable. I stood rock still, as did everyone else and held my breath while Lord Vader absorbed the news that the *Arc Hammer* had been destroyed. Somehow Katarn had not only managed to stow away on board the *Executor* but then he had managed to get himself transferred to the *Arc Hammer* by hiding in the cargo shipment. In destroying the *Arc Hammer* he had effectively destroyed the entire Dark Trooper project. General Mohc was dead and Lord Vader was beside himself with fury, it had not been a good couple of weeks. The young officer who had delivered the news was remarkably calm as he waited for what everyone thought was inevitable but much to my and the entire bridge crew's surprise Vader dismissed the young man with a flick of his hand. I couldn't recall the last time I ever saw anyone move so quickly and still appear to walk.

Lord Vader stood staring out of the huge view window for a few moments further and I could feel the storm that brewed within him so it wasn't much of a surprise to me when he swirled around and stalked towards the exit, grabbing me by the arm on the way. The lingering looks of mixed pity and relief from the men in the pits did not escape me.

His grip on my arm hurt but I was used to this and had learned to keep up with him and not squeak in pain. In the turbo lift he let go but his anger had not abated. I stayed still and worked on centering. I was surprised when, instead of heading towards his private training room when the turbo lift stopped, he dragged me to his personal chambers.

"You have something for me?" He growled, sitting at his desk and starting up his personal computer system.

I remembered the datachip gripped my hand and nodded. I handed it to him gingerly. He had not dismissed me so I waited; standing with my arms behind my back while he studied the datachip that had come with Thrawn's most recent letter.

"Tell me, girl, before the cargo was being offloaded to the *Arc Hammer*, did you notice anything unusual?" he asked.

I had to think about that for a moment because we had done the cargo drop one and a half standard days ago. I closed my eyes and let my memory work backwards and found the reason he was asking me this question.

"There was a ripple." I said. I remembered that because it had happened in the middle of a conversation we had been having, that is to say he had been ranting and I had been nodding my head a lot when right in the middle of a sentence he had stopped and stood very still, as though he were listening to something no one else could hear. I had reached out as much as I could with my own small talent to see if I could figure out what had stopped him mid rant. It had felt as though something had stroked my spine from the inside out, though just barely. My senses were not nearly as in tune as Lord Vader's were and I doubt I would have even noticed it had he not been so aware.

"Yes." He spat. "Katarn is force sensitive."

"Is that why he was successful?" I asked, tempting fate by bringing up the reason for his anger again., but thought what the hell you only live once and my nosiness got the better of me.

Lord Vader was thoughtful for a moment. "Perhaps." He said. While his anger had not abated the immediate fury had. "This Rebel Alliance is becoming more than just a thorn in the Emperor's side." He snapped. "The Emperor wiped the Jedi out for exactly this reason."

I didn't know how to answer that. My birth mother had been one of those Jedi. I sighed. "What happens to your Dark Trooper project now?" I asked.

"Nothing, it is finished. The Emperor will only pour so much money into a single project and even I cannot sway him to do otherwise." He told me. "The Rebel Alliance costs the Empire more and more each day."

I nodded. I agreed with him. "Why *do* they want to topple the government?" I asked him after a lengthy silence.

He looked up at me and shrugged. "Why does anyone want to do anything?" he asked me. "They disagree with how the Emperor rules. They wish to return to an outdated method of government that didn't work, but they forget the bad things and see only the romantic view of what was."

I frowned. "Why did the Republic fall?"

"It became mired in corruption and bogged down in bureaucracy. It stopped listening to the needs of its people. The system stopped working." He told me. "The Republic was full of greedy individuals who only wanted to serve their own interests. I can still remember when Padmé called for a vote of no

confidence in Chancellor Valorum.” The sting of pain in his voice as he spoke her name made me shiver but he continued despite the sorrow in the memory. “She was unafraid to fight for her people.” He said. “But she was a rare breed of politician and even she did not see what was to come. The Republic was crumbling long before Palpatine began his rise to power, but everyone turned a blind eye to it and looked to the Jedi to solve their problems for them.”

“I thought the Jedi were just keepers of the peace?”

Lord Vader snorted. “You should have seen how peaceful they all were during the Clone wars.” He said.

I had no idea how to respond to that so I just shrugged. He glanced up from the screen he was looking at to stare at me. I wished I could see beyond the mask and look directly into his eyes. It was always so hard to gauge what he was thinking and what sort of mood he was in.

“Did they not teach you any of this in school?” he asked after a lengthy silence.

I gave him a sheepish look. “I grew up on Tatooine, you know how that is. I didn’t think that school was important.”

That caught his attention and he regarded me sharply. “I know how it was to grow up as a slave on Tatooine. I was not afforded the luxury of school.” He said bitterly and I felt the flush of embarrassment creep into my cheeks. I nodded to let him know that in the area of rotten childhoods he won hands down.

“I was bored in school; I wanted to learn how to fix and fly ships not study history and geography.” I told him by way of explanations. “I didn’t think I would need to know that stuff, but then again I didn’t think I’d be working for the galaxy’s second most powerful man living on board a floating city either, so what do I know?”

He just nodded and continued to work at the computer. “The Jedi were arrogant. They believed they were right above all else because they had the Force on their side. They preached the dangers of the dark side but many of them skirted that path as a means to an end. I remember one in particular, a Kiffar named Quinlan Vos. His master sent him deep undercover to play the other side. Vos was never the same afterwards. You could feel the subtle touch of the darkside in his being, but they all ignored the warning signs in favour of getting the job done, telling themselves that the bodies which littered the way were just casualties of war.”

“What happened to him, this Quinlan Voss?” I asked. I was curious because my birth mother had spoken about this Jedi.

“No one knows. It was rumoured that he perished on Kashyyyk but I did not sense his death in the force. If he was smart he took that doxy he was in love with and vanished to the unknown regions.”

“I thought the Jedi were forbidden to love?”

Lord Vader surprised me by laughing. “Love... platonic compassion was encouraged. Passionate, physical love was forbidden. Of course it was far more rampant amongst the Jedi order than most would admit. You cannot stop that nature from rearing its ugly head. To forbid such basic needs, such basic emotions, was to invite trouble. Idiots, self righteous idiots, the lot of them.” He spat. “Preached the moral high ground but did not bat an eye about requesting someone do their dirty work for them when it served their purpose.”

I shivered at the sudden coldness in his voice. “They used you?” I asked.

“Everyone gets used, girl, have you not learned this by now?” he asked coldly.

I just made a face.

Lord Vader laughed nastily. “Still young enough to be naïve!” he shook his head and went back to his work. Tired of standing, I sat on the floor and rested my chin on my knees which I had drawn up to my chest.

“May I ask you something?” I asked after a lengthy silence.

“You may.”

“Why were there so many Jedi and no Sith?” I asked.

“Did my master not explain the nature of the Sith to you? I was under the impression you had been educated in this area of lore.” He asked, leaning back in the chair to stare at me.

“I know a little about the history, the Great Sith Wars. Some of the better known members of the sect like Naga Sadow and Freedon Nadd but I don’t understand why the Jedi were so many and the Sith so few?” I said. “I would have thought a balance between the two sects would have made more sense.”

Lord Vader shook his head. “Where do you get your ideas from?” he muttered. “Sith lore dictates there are only ever two at a given time.”

“Why?” I asked. “That’s just dumb.”

I felt the flare of anger from Lord Vader and flinched but he did nothing. “The rule of two was enforced to ensure that the order survived despite the power hungry nature of those who chose to walk the path of the dark side. Darth Bane saw what happened when too many Sith hungry for power clashed. The New Sith War lasted around a thousand years and ended with a battle on Ruusan that saw the near destruction of all Sith. The lure of power was too great for all involved and they destroyed themselves for it, fighting the forces of light. From that time on there has only ever been two Sith. The law states; *two there should be; no more, no less. One to embody power, the other to crave it.* It is not so much, as you so eloquently put it, dumb as it is a matter of survival.”

“So what happens if both the master and the apprentice die at the same time?” I asked. I still thought the whole idea of just two was a bit stupid but I held my tongue on that.

For a long moment I wasn’t sure he would answer me but when he did his words were icy. “The Dark side waits. Sith teachings are out there to be learned

and there will always be those who can manipulate the force who seek power over anything else. Just because the physical beings who embody the teachings no longer exist does not mean the ideals die with them. There are always willing candidates all too eager to let the dark side of the force supply them with strength and power.”

“Could I be a Sith Lord, like you?” I asked after digesting this information.

“No.” his answer was immediate but without jealousy or anger.

“Why not?”

“Because girl, you do not have enough power lust in your soul to give into the dark side so utterly and you are not nearly strong enough in the force.” Then he added, “And you think too much.”

I sighed. “Is that a good thing?”

He chuckled. “For you yes, otherwise I would have to kill you as you would be competition for my master’s *affections* and my place at his side. There can be only two!” He said.

“But I could still turn to the dark side?” I just wasn’t getting this whole lights side dark side thing.

“Of course. Surrender to the darker emotions, let your anger rule you but that doesn’t mean you will be more powerful.” He said and then he got up, removing the data chip from the system as he did so. He motioned for me to get up and when I was standing he handed me the chip. “When is the next pick up?”

“Not for two standard days but I can arrange for sooner if expedience is needed.” I said slipping the chip into my pocket.

“No, two days is adequate time. Now I suggest you go and make yourself ready.” He said.

“Ready for what?”

“I wish to find out how your well your skills with the combat staves have improved since your new sparring partner has been working with you.” He replied with a nasty little edge to his voice that said *you didn’t think I was going to let you off the hook that easily, I am still angry and someone has to bear the brunt of it.*

“Ah.” I said with a small nod. “Yes, my lord.”

“Be ready in the small training room in ten minutes.” He said. “Do not be late.” And with that he turned his back to me signalling he no longer wanted me in his presence.

It had been a while since we had sparred with each other using combat staves but I wasn’t exactly overjoyed at this prospect. While working with lightsabers was a daunting task at least I didn’t come away from the session covered in bruises. I was grateful I wouldn’t be seeing Thrawn any time soon, he never reacted well to the colourful results of Lord Vader’s little combat lessons to me.

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After staring listlessly out of the view port in my office for what felt like hours I came to the conclusion that time was like a rubber band. It stretched out long and slowly, almost agonizingly so, only to suddenly fling itself forward as if in a mad dash to catch up with the time it lost elongating itself in the first place. Right now we were in one of the long stretchy phases.

It wasn’t so much that I was actually bored, life as lord Vader’s personal assistant did not allow such luxuries as boredom but there were moments when I wondered if time conspired against me because it seemed unending and, much like hyperspace, void of anything meaningful.

What had felt like forever and was in fact only a month or so that we had been meandering through space with no apparent purpose, or so it appeared. Lord Vader was as much on board as he was away doing things that were, in his words, *‘None of your concern girl, so stop asking and do your job or else you might find yourself floating back to Coruscant in an EV suit!’* To say he was a little foul tempered was a kindness.

I suppose that being the Emperor’s Iron Fist had its perks but for the most part his job as second in command of the Galactic Empire did not seem to bring him much joy and he delighted in taking his bad moods out on everyone and everything around him, including me. Although I was becoming very adept at circumnavigating his temper tantrums, I still felt the heat of them. There were days when I tried to avoid him like the Bandonian plague unless it was absolutely necessary to be in his presence but this was a tricky thing because through the force I was easy for him to find.

Since the very first moment I had ever laid eyes on him, he was not exactly the happiest person in the galaxy but as of late there were enough things to upset him further, including an unusual number of defections to the Rebel Alliance of some fairly knowledgeable people, making him almost unbearable to be around. To be fair it wasn’t as if the Emperor was very forgiving of mistakes made or even problems that had no immediate solutions.

On more than one occasion I had been present during an Emperor chewing Lord Vader out session and it wasn’t pretty. The Emperor was as cruel as he was powerful. He seemed to get great joy out of inflicting pain and uncertainty amongst the people who worked under him, looked up to him and for reasons I would never understand even actually liked him. I put this cruel streak down to boredom, after all when you have everything the galaxy could offer what else is there to do? Meanness was the playground of the powerful, cruel and elite.

My own work had not lessened with distance from Coruscant but rather had seemed to triple. The amount of correspondence, meetings and the general day to day organization of Lord Vader’s schedule had increased almost exponentially. The worst of the lot was Prince Xizor, who had astoundingly enough managed to worm his way into the Emperor’s inner circle and was now

jockeying for power and position number three. I was not entirely sure why the Emperor allowed the Prince such liberties as he did but it was not my place to question anything the Emperor did. I asked Lord Vader about it but even he refused to speak about it out loud, his thoughts were another matter and over all he hated the Falleen Prince with a darkness that scared even me.

Most people knew very little about Prince Xizor, but I had a dossier on him larger than the story of my life and I had been expected to learn it off by rote. I suppose Lord Vader's thinking was if I knew his enemy I could help in the playing the dangerous game of dejarik he had engaged in or perhaps it was simply a case of misery loving company.

My first experience with Prince Xizor had been at one of the Palace functions, I had stumbled into him by accident and he had been not merely forgiving but downright pleasant. I had felt as though there were bees in my belly and had fallen madly in love. It had been Shiv who had dragged me away, explaining that the Falleen had the ability to use pheromones to basically seduce members of the opposite sex. After that I had either kept my distance from the Prince or played the besotted courtesan in his presence. Like most powerful men it was the chase he desired not the end result. He went through more girlfriends than Lord Vader went through officers. But his social life was only the veneer on the surface of a man who was as complicated as he was devious.

Xizor came from Falleen, a planet in the Mid Rim in the Falleen system. It was a pleasant world with temperate zones, vast plains, rain forests and ice covered mountains. It had also been the site of a Bacteriological Research facility under the command of Lord Vader. I had asked him once about this but he had told me it was none of my business. I couldn't find much in the way of information about it and assumed, like most things Imperial, it was considered top secret and in the end I decided I really did not want to know.

Xizor, like most of his species, was tall, reptilian in appearance and vain. Although the Falleen were considered to be among the most beautiful and aesthetically pleasing species in the galaxy I would have disagreed. I found him repulsive when I was thinking straight. They were long lived, having life spans that rivalled the Hutts, with an average age of two hundred and fifty years. They were also cold blooded and semi aquatic, able to hold their breaths underwater for very long periods of time. They believed themselves to be superior to most other species in the galaxy and were as arrogant as they were self disciplined. It was an annoying mix of traits that only added to my utter dislike of the Prince.

Despite his fine clothes and elegant manners, there was a nastiness to him that, like the rotted core of teega apples, could not be seen from the outside, but you knew it if you bit into the fruit. In true current Falleen fashion he wore his long inky black hair in a single top-knot, the rest of his skull bald and dressed himself in the most expensive fabrics and designer clothes available. Cati had, on occasion, provided him with one or two of her exclusive designs. His skin, which

was scaly, was normally a greenish hue but it changed with his moods, and he had the blackest eyes I had ever seen. Like most of the Falleen, Xizor was also one of the most patient beings I had ever met, able to seemingly bide his time with a calmness that bordered on scary. He was one of the wealthiest men in the entire galaxy and he lived an obscenely opulent lifestyle. He owned legitimate multi million credit firms such as Xizor Transport Systems and on the outside seemed every bit the refined, respectable business man. What most people did not know was that he was also the current Vigo of the Black Sun Corporation.

Black Sun was an enormous criminal syndicate which spanned the galaxy. It had been around for a very long time and had a Force like grip on the underworld which it ruled jealously. Dealing everything from black market weapons to illegal spice, Lord Vader considered the syndicate a thorn in his side, but the Emperor turned a blind eye to the wheeling and dealings of the crime organization and held Lord Vader on a tight leash when it came to anything to do with the prince.

None of this made Lord Vader very happy and despite the fact that the Emperor had more than once reigned him back from dealing directly with the problems that arose from the Black Sun Syndicate, as well as making him 'play nice' with the Prince, Lord Vader had other plans. I was never quite sure if it was simply jealousy on Lord Vader's part which made him so averse to Xizor's seemingly important place within the Emperor's chosen few or if he really saw right through the Prince's oily words and obsequiousness for what it actually was, an attempt to usurp him as second in command.

I wondered if that was actually possible for Xizor to do because while perhaps he was devious and powerful he was not force sensitive and would never be able to replace Lord Vader as the Emperor's Sith apprentice. I wasn't sure there was room at the top of that food chain for two second in commands but I never brought this thought up. The mention of Xizor's name made Lord Vader tetchy enough that I knew better than to aggravate his already raw nerves.

I had asked Thrawn about it once, some time ago after a particularly volatile meeting with Lord Vader and Prince Xizor had turned into a furiously vile pissing contest. I had come home with a massive headache, full of spit and venom that was mostly transferred mood from Lord Vader, wanting kill something, anything. Thrawn, in his usual cool manner, had diffused my foul temper with a glass of wine and his practice of a Chiss meditation-relaxation technique called *Tan'le'nwi*, which mostly involved pressure points on the back and the neck. It reminded me a great deal of what Master Kjestyll would do to release the tension I seemed determined to hold on to in the muscles there. I suppose the names of the techniques differed but tension and the pressure points to release it never really did. As I sat on a foot stool, between his legs while he worked on my back, I had vented my wrath from the day's aggravation. Under the almost painful ministrations of Thrawn's strong, long fingered hands I

complained bitterly about the endless hours of ridiculous back and forth discussion which I considered to be a stupid waste of time. I did not understand why the Emperor set these two men up the way he did. It was like adding fuel to a fire. My rant had earned me a fairly lengthy lecture from Thrawn about the Emperor's love of games. It was not the first time he had tried to explain to me how and why the Emperor chose to do what he did, but it did not ease the annoyance I felt about it all.

"Surely this cannot be productive for the running of the Empire?" I had asked as he kneaded a particularly stubborn knot on my back.

I had sensed rather than seen his shrug. "There is a somewhat misguided belief that rivalry promotes productivity." He had replied. "Palpatine feels that by pushing his servant, Vader, in a certain direction of hate and envy he will obtain more use from him as well as make him more pliable to suggestion. By allowing Xizor the position of power and favour that he does, Palpatine sends Vader the message '*you are expendable; do not get too comfortable in your role in my life*', thereby, willing him to work harder to please Palpatine. There is something in Lord Vader's make up that desires the Emperor's approval, despite his utter hatred of the man, Palpatine knows this and exploits it."

"Well I wish they'd go play these childish games elsewhere then, they really bug the sandjiggers out of me!" I had said crossly, almost petulantly.

Thrawn had chuckled, stopping his work for a moment to caress the back of my neck. "The Empire does not revolve around you, my dear." He had chided gently. "And the Emperor loves an audience, a role which you play very well."

"Why must men always prove they that they have the bigger...Ow!?" I had started to ask crossly only to finish with a squeak as he had dug extra hard into a particularly painful knot.

"If I had the answer for that, sj'iu tekari, I would perhaps be a god." He had said with a laugh.

"You mean you aren't? I thought you knew everything?" the retort had just sort of slipped out and considering the pain he had been inflicting with the *Tan'le'nwi* techniques I should have been more circumspect.

As he applied more pressure than I thought ever possible to a part of my back I hoped would just vanish he said. I exhaled loudly as I was told to do and felt the tension dissipate with my breath. "As much as I enjoy the thought that you believe I am not only all knowing but also infallible, this is sadly not the case. I assure you, my dear I am every bit as mortal as you are, the difference between us is that I don't desire to test just *how* mortal I am every time I come into the Emperor or Lord Vader's sphere of existence. I am well aware of my place in this universe and try to work accordingly. It is what it is."

I had sighed and given up then, relaxing back into his hands, letting the topic drop momentarily. If the question was as old as the universe then I reckoned the answer was just as antique and three times as elusive. Still, it

played on my mind. Was everything centered on huge power plays? Was that the ultimate truth of it all that what all beings wanted in the end was simply more power? If this was the case then my question always came back to what happened when you had all the power there was? What then? I had asked Thrawn this and after a very long and thoughtful silence he had told me he didn't think it was possible to attain such a position. He had gone on to explain that the universe, according to Chiss scientists, was expanding, and as such so were the possibilities for power... it was therefore, impossible to have it all.

"Hence," he had added, "the lust and drive to acquire more. It was a never ending circle, the more one has the more one wants."

"Why are we never satisfied?" I had asked.

"You do ask the difficult questions." He had said, his kiss on the back of my neck telling me he was finished de-stressing me and that he wasn't going to answer, so I'd pushed.

"Surely you must have some ideas on this subject."

He had sat back on the couch, beckoning me to come and sit with him. As I curled up into the circle his arm made for me, he said, "Humans are the most astonishing creatures." He had said. "Your capacity for compassion and courage knows no bounds, by the same token neither does your greed or viciousness. I have rarely met such contradictory beings in my life; much less had the amount of time needed to understand all your unique talents and traits. You build great communities and draw many diverse cultures together while at the very same time devising the most appalling methods of destruction and tearing everything you build apart. If I were to sum it up I would say you are voracious in all things both good and bad. You are ruled by your passions and you are very much creatures of appetite. It is as much your strength as it is your weakness and ultimately your undoing."

I had digested this for a moment and then asked. "So what does that make you and your people?"

"Extremely cautious." He had smiled and with that smile had come the end of that particular conversation.

Now I stood gazing out at the inky blackness of space, these thoughts rattling around in my mind. Lord Vader was off ship and I was grateful for the peace and quiet. The moment he stepped off the *Executor* the sense of relief was so enormous it was as if the ship herself had sighed.

A knock on the door broke my thoughts and I turned around to see Jarack enter.

"Credit for them?" he said with a tired smile.

"Nothing worth a credit, I'm afraid, just enjoying the calm." I told him taking the envelope from his hand.

"Ah yes, Vader is away. I noticed the distinctly festive mood when I came aboard." He said.

“So how are things out in the Unknown Regions?” I asked, pouring him a cup of spiced coffee when he nodded at my offer. I dug into the drawer of my desk to hand him the return correspondence.

“Busy.” He replied. “I can’t talk about much, but the Admiral is very good at his job and he and his crew have accomplished much in a fairly short period of time. Of course he had laid much of the ground work down before this.” He said. “I’m sure he tells you about it, though.”

I nodded. Thrawn had spoken often of his work. “There is a communiqué from Lord Vader in the letters I gave you.”

Jarack nodded. “Right, I’ll see that it’s taken care of. Sorry about the short visit, things are a bit mad right now. See you soon enough I reckon.” He drained his cup and gave me a smile as he left.

There was a storm brewing in the galaxy. I could sense it. It buzzed at the edge of my senses making me edgy and restless. As I read the daily reports of the small triumphs the Rebel Alliance made against the Almighty Empire I could not help but wonder at the tenacity of the rebels. They reminded me of tiny rock warts, at first glance they were just a pest but upon closer inspection one realised they did immeasurable damage and could be deadly if not controlled. A shudder ran down the length of my spine. The balance of the galaxy, it seemed to me, was a very precarious thing.

I glanced at the chrono and decided that it was time to stop for the day. All I wanted to do now was to return to the quiet of my quarters and read Thrawn’s latest letter. This was a welcome respite from my normally hectic schedule. His words were a kindness in an otherwise cruel environment, balancing out the darkness and quiet despair that often threatened to overtake me when I actually had time to think about things, which thankfully wasn’t often.

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*A’mia Tekari,*

*It was good to read that you were not harmed during the attack on the Orinackra Detention Center but I had to question Lord Vader’s reasoning for bringing you to such a dangerous place. Even with your gifts there was no real reason for that, the Empire has more than enough means at its disposal to obtain information from prisoners. I hope that the experience was not too overwhelming for you.*

*Your colourful description of your life on board the Executor delighted me. It is a rare thing to be able to bring to life in such a manner what is normally considered dull and tedious work. It speaks volumes about your character that you can find wonder in the most mundane things, such as watching Imperial mechanics fix TIEs. I hope that you never lose this because it is such a lovely part of who you are.*

*Do not worry about Jarack. I found his over reaction to your sparing partner and friend, CJ, more amusing than anything else. It is, I think, flattering that he feels protective about me but I have no concerns about you in this manner. I would like to think that I know you better than Mr. Behl and am reasonably certain that if your feelings for me changed I would be the first to know. Subterfuge of that kind is not your style. I had to work hard to hide my smile as he described how angry you were at his accusation and that now he fears that you will no longer trust him or worse no longer gift him with your special blend of Tatooine spiced coffee. I told him that holding a grudge in this manner was not your style and that you understood he was simply being a friend. I also told him that if you had really been angry with him you would have thrown something at him.*

*You asked about my work in the Unknown Regions and we are indeed making headway. In the past three weeks we have gone a long way to continuing the set up at Nirauan. Eventually, I hope that Voss will take over a far more active role in the day to day running of the base as he is more capable of this than anyone else I know at the moment, plus there is no one I trust more with this responsibility.*

*I also wish to populate the base with Chiss loyal not only to Csilla and some of the more noble ideals of my people but who are also open to new ideas and not outdated dogma. This will take time as many of those willing to work with me speak only Cheunh and will need to learn basic fluently if they hope to integrate and become a bridge between the Chiss and the Galactic Empire. The same must be said of the Imperials who will eventually populate the base; they should be at least fluent in a basic understanding of Cheunh. As you can well imagine this will take some time, not everyone has your astonishing skill and talent with languages. However, that issue aside, I am hopeful that this project will be a success. Not all my people feel that the Ascendancy is right in how it conducts its affairs and rules but as I have explained before, the Chiss are a slow moving and cautious people who do not like change and who do not welcome strangers easily. It will be a project that will require patience and time, both of which I have. Meanwhile, we continue our surveillance of this region of space.*

*It was interesting to read your snippets of gossip and news from the Core worlds. The perception of my downfall pleases me greatly as it was exactly the desired effect I had hoped to achieve. It is, as you correctly surmised, most difficult to work in an environment where one’s race or species calls into question one’s abilities and talents. It would be almost impossible for me to accomplish any of my long term goals were I to have stayed on Coruscant and both you and I know this. Even Palpatine, despite his dislike of non humans understood this better than most and with his manipulations and orchestrations of my disgrace the work which I had previously discussed with*

him as theory can now be made a reality. Oddly enough in the coming year I will probably be working far more close at hand to you than you would think. There are several projects on the go in which I am quietly involved that require my physical presence and I am quite certain that I shall be called to converse with Lord Vader in matters of state too secret to allow for holonet transmissions. So, while I read between the lines of your last letter and understand that you miss me; do not fret too much about distance. It is not as wide as one might think.

Do not take this to mean that I do not miss your presence. On the contrary, my dear, I had not thought for a single moment before I met you that there would be someone so dear to me in my life. While I do my utmost to maintain my professional manner, there are moments when the distance between us seems as edgy and painful as a dull vibro blade ripping into flesh. I have a lovely holo-capture of you on my desk in my private quarters. It was captured at the last Grand ball we attended together and you were unaware of the image being taken. The only other person who has seen this capture is Voss, who asked about it. He has known me for longer than anyone else in the Empire and is a dear friend. What could I tell him? How could I put into words what you are to me? How I feel when Jarack delivers one of your delightful letters to me and I catch the scent of your perfume in the paper? What it is like to feel incomplete without you by my side? There are no words to describe these things but Voss seemed to understand when I told him that you are the one person who reminds me of that which is bright and good in the universe.

I know you will sit there reading this shaking your head. It is unusual for either of us to express so openly these feelings which I know we both have and try our best to hide. But I wanted you to know that despite the distance and the time apart, you are close to my heart. I do not wish you to think this is not the case, merely because I lack the ability to produce lengthy letters full of flowery prose. Chiss are not known for their ability to express affection openly and I am afraid in this I am no exception.

I understand your loneliness and your frustration in terms of being in a long distance relationship because I, too, feel these things. There are reasons why such relationships as ours are forbidden, they complicate things and steal away from the utter devotion to one's duty and work. You and I both know this. We are both creatures who desire to complete our appointed tasks to the best of our abilities. Still I believe there can be room for more than just duty and work, a difficult balance to be sure. However, you and I are more than capable of this balancing act. Do not be sad, s'jiu tekari. We are not so far apart as you might think or feel and time passes quickly for those who keep busy.

Now, I am afraid, I must end this letter and return to duty. Be well, my dear. Enjoy your time on the Empire's flag ship. There are many who envy your place there greatly and your unique position at Lord Vader's side. Do not

waste it by being maudlin and moody over things you cannot change. Instead take the opportunities being given you and learn all you can about how the Empire and the Imperial Navy works. You never know when you will need such information and right now the resources available to you are almost limitless, use them. And for goodness sake do try to stay out of trouble.

*Ilath'mera'talashti'ia,  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

It was rare for Thrawn to write so openly about his feelings and I held his letter close to my heart as I absorbed what he had written, biting back the sting of emotion he had provoked. Until I had become so utterly involved with him I had not realised what it was to miss another being so completely. I hated the sensation. He had described it so aptly, a wound, edgy and dull that echoed through my core as though some invisible being had reached in and wrenched out a part of my spirit with ragged claws. He had become a part of me and I was missing that part now so greatly I would have given almost anything to have it back.

What was there to do? Duty came first, no matter what. I allowed for one last moment of feeling sorry for myself then along with his letter, I tucked it away. After all, perhaps it had been fate that had placed us in a situation where we had come together but in the end we had chosen to follow it through. With his words and these thoughts in my head, I went to bed but sleep was a long time in coming. In the bed, which was large enough for two, my arm lay across the space where his warm body would have been had he been with me. Time and distance, honour and duty, I sighed at these words and thoughts. It would have been so much easier to have stayed on Tatooine, fallen in love with a simple mechanic, married and had a parcel of annoying children. As soon as this thought rattled through my brain I shuddered. Perhaps such a life would have been easier but I was certain I would not have been happier. Despite the crazy things that had happened to me, despite the pain and the difficulties I rather liked what I was doing, I enjoyed the challenges of it and I would not swap my relationship with Thrawn for all the simple mechanics in the entire galaxy. It was with that thought on my mind, and his face in my memory that I finally drifted off to sleep.

Of course, the next morning when I got up and started my day my feelings on how exciting my life was were re-evaluated.

I stared at the computer screen and sighed. At Lord Vader's insistence I was doing more research on bounty hunters. He had reasoned that because of my previous experience working at Jabba's I was the perfect person to find the best and weed out the worst of the list he had given me. I found it sort of laughable that I was supposed to be the expert on the subject of the galaxy's bounty hunters because I was fairly certain he knew way more on this topic than

I ever could but given his present mood I wasn't going to argue. Sometimes he just liked to give me make work projects to keep me busy.

Many of the names I knew, some of the hunters I had actually seen and met but many were a mystery to me, which meant a lot of reading. I was skimming through the list when one name jumped out at me, Jodo Kast. He wasn't a bounty hunter I was familiar with but I remembered the brief conversation with Thrawn one night at the Emperor's Retreat. He had asked me what I knew about Boba Fett and then had brought up Kast's name. Some years prior I had done some preliminary research and had given my research to Thrawn but now I had access to greater resources and a much better clearance.

I stared at the screen and then began the process of searching. The image of Kast that popped up on the little holo-imager puzzled me because on first glance he looked just like Boba Fett. I found it a little odd that there would be two bounty hunters running around the galaxy in Mandalorian Armour. It wasn't easy or cheap to come by a complete set and what surprised me even more was the fact that his set looked more or less exactly as Boba Fett wore his. Only the braids of Wookiee hair were missing, and some of the minor detail work on the armour was different.

Details, I thought, it all comes down to details. If Kast wanted to be a Fett look-alike he had sure put a lot of work into getting the image mostly right. Even the tiny things most people would never notice were correct.

My security clearance allowed me a lot of access to classified information, no questions asked, so I decided, just out of personal curiosity to do some digging of my own. Boba Fett had once had a special place in my life so the thought of some impostor running around in the galaxy annoyed me, though I could never have said why. I was so engrossed in my work that when my comm beeped it scared the life out of me making me jump and then cross.

"What!?" I asked not bothering to conceal my annoyance.

"Lord Vader wishes you to meet with him on the docking bay, landing slot twelve immediately." A gruff voice barked the abrupt order.

"Thank you." I said and shut the comm off.

I sighed and took one last glance at the holo image and then saved my work and shut the system off. I briefly thought about stopping by my quarters to make myself more presentable, which is to say, put on some shoes but thought the better of it, when Lord Vader said immediately he usually meant yesterday.

The main docking bay on the *Executor* was an enormous space with several ways to access it, depending on what part of the ship one came from. I liked to enter from the upper levels which meant walking along a gantry and down the side steps on the starboard bulkhead. From this entrance one was afforded a view of the entire place and it was always breath taking to see the ships and crews working there.

Everything gleamed. The floor was a beautiful black material, so highly polished that it reflected everything to a mirror image. I suppose it made the hanger seem twice as large but from a practical point of view it was a pain to land on. As I made my way along the gantry I paused for a moment to take in all the hustle and bustle. There was always something going on, the hanger was never a dull place. I was about to continue along when something caught my eye. Standing at the ramp of the shuttle on landing slot twelve was a figure that looked awfully familiar to me. From where I stood it was difficult to get details but when he turned around to address Lord Vader who was already there I had to draw a deep breath to quell my surprise and sudden anger. My father had mentioned that Uncle Vahlek was 'in the neighbourhood' but I hadn't thought much about it. Then I remembered what my Uncle Vahlek had said to me in the little note he had left the last time I had seen him. *'We will see one another soon enough, don't be surprised and don't give everything away either.'*

I drew a deep breath as I hurried down the steps to meet Lord Vader as requested. It required work not to show recognition on my face when uncle Vahlek turned around to look at me. I had learned well the lessons given to me over the last three years and not only masked my feelings from my face but from Lord Vader as well. Vahlek gave me a curt nod. When our eyes met I understood he was playing the same *I don't know you* game. What I didn't understand was why.

"My Lord, you requested my presence? What can I do for you?" I asked politely. It was good to be polite to him in front of guests.

"There you are!" he snapped ignoring my question. "I see our versions of what *immediately* means are remarkably different!"

I just nodded because that statement didn't really require an answer. He was just pulling rank and being grouchy.

"Akosh, this is my assistant Merlyn Gabriel. She will in charge of seeing you safely to your destination." He explained and I frowned. Destination, what was that supposed to mean??? I began to get a slow sinking sensation in my gut.

When Lord Vader turned to look at me I gave him my full attention. "You will be piloting Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh to a rendezvous point which will be given to you at time of departure. You will leave in an hour from now so I suggest you pack and prepare." He said.

"Pack and prepare for what?" I asked him telepathically while I nodded dutifully.

"Prepare to be a guest on board another ISD!"

I sighed. "Yes, my lord."

"The data will be ready for you shortly and delivered as soon as it is compiled. You will be flying the *Sigiri*." Lord Vader continued. "I suggest you make all the necessary preparations. Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh is on a tight schedule, see that you do not disrupt it." And with a wave of his hand he dismissed me and

turned back to uncle Vahlek to continue discussing what ever it was they had been talking about before I had arrived. I nodded and with a polite bob of my head I left the hanger wondering just what the heck was going on.

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The *Sigiri* was a lambda class cargo shuttle that had been highly modified. The L class shuttles were perhaps the most versatile of all the space-craft that the Empire had. They were standard light utility craft, approximately twenty meters in length, a maximum acceleration of fourteen hundred G's with a tri wing design, based on the Theta class shuttle that had been used during the Clone wars. L-class shuttles could transport up to eighty tons of cargo or twenty soldiers. Usually they had a crew of four to six, which included a pilot, co-pilot and navigator, comm officer and gunner but they could be flown by one person if the need arose. The L-class were all equipped with class one hyperdrives and very well armed with two double laser cannon and three double blaster canons, one of which was rear mounted. They had heavily reinforced hulls that could deflect laser fire and were protected by a powerful deflector shield.

The *Sigiri* was configured for longer hauls and carrying primarily passengers rather than troops. Her cockpit was set up for a possible maximum crew of four not six. So there were four passenger cabins and a small crew room as well as a common seating area and a very small galley with a little dining table. She was mostly used for non military and non essential personnel ferrying and some cargo. Even so, she like most imperial ships had teeth. Despite the reason for my trip I was overjoyed to be back in the pilot's seat of a L-class shuttle.

I arrived fifteen minutes before I was supposed to and after I had dumped my bags in the small crew room, I did my pre flight check much to the annoyance of the officer of the deck.

"Miss, we've already checked her out." He told me as he had seen me do a quick external sweep.

I gave him a sweet smile. "I am sure you were very thorough." I told him without pausing in my check. "It's a pilot's habit, I just like to be sure. This way if poodoo hits the rotary oscillator I know I did all I could."

The man sighed as though he were long suffering and I was only contributing to his pain. "I assure you Miss...er... miss...."

"Gabriel." I helped him.

"I assure you Miss Gabriel we were exact in our exam." He said tartly.

"Oh, so I guess I shouldn't tell you that the port auxiliary thruster warning light was showing?"

"What?"

"Oh don't worry I checked it out, just a glitch, a short in the onboard. But you might want to have it looked at when I get back." I told him and took a great

deal of satisfaction in the look on his face. It had the desired effect and he went away, grumbling something uncomplimentary about female pilots.

I finished my pre flight when Lord Vader swept onto the deck, with my uncle in tow. He had his large satchel slung across his shoulder and in his hands a very large duffle bag. I frowned when I saw it, because it was unlike my uncle to travel with that much stuff.

Lord Vader handed me a datapad. "Here are your instructions and clearance codes." He said and motioned for uncle Vahlek to go one board.

"You're not coming?" I asked, a bit surprised.

"No, I will be joining you later." He said looking up at the ship. "What he is carrying is important, do not fail me, girl."

I nodded. "I shall try my best not to."

"Trying does not interest me. Do your job well or suffer the consequences." He growled. I took this as Vader speak for '*Have a good trip; see you in a few days*'.

"Yes, my lord." I nodded. Without further word he swirled around in that *look at me, I am magnificent* sort of manner and stalked away. I scowled at the datapad in my and with a last look around went on board, closing the ship up after me. It felt very odd to be flying a shuttle solo carrying only a single passenger.

I glanced at my uncle who had seated himself in one of the passenger seats. The look on his face said *we still don't know one another*. I just shrugged. I was cross with him enough as it was without all this ridiculous game playing.

"Strap yourself in Mr. Akosh, we will be taking off momentarily." I spoke coldly, two could play this game.

Before he could answer I made my way to the cockpit, shut the door and let go the breath I had been holding. I was angry. I was angry at being placed in this situation. I was furious at my uncle for not telling me that he knew Jyrki from before. I was angry at having to play solo ferry pilot and annoyed at the vagueness of the job at hand. Mostly I was just angry and that anger wasn't going anywhere useful, it was just giving me a headache.

I sat for a second and contemplated the controls then began the pre flight start up procedure. Through the head set I could hear flight control and when I was ready I requested clearance for exit.

"You are all clear, Shuttle *Sigiri*, happy hunting!" said flight control. The voice sounded young and his cheerfulness was startling. Usually the flight controllers were humourless and by the book.

"Copy that, *Executor*. Stay out of trouble till I get back!" I thanked him and took the shuttle out. As we dropped out of the shielded hanger I marvelled at the sheer scope of the ship we were leaving. I never tired of seeing her from this vantage point. Next to the *Executor*, the *Sigiri* looked like a gnat on a Krayt dragon. I watched the read outs and locked the wings down as they unfolded

gracefully. A part of me was sad that I could not be on the outside watching the shuttle's dance because of all the vessels in the Imperial Navy these were my absolute favourites.

I piloted away from the Super Star Destroyer and then looked at the datapad. The first thing was a course heading which I punched into the nav computer. We were away from any gravity wells so it was not too long before we slipped into hyperspace. I swept through the rest of the data and shook my head. It was a set of co ordinates for a rendezvous and a couple of clearance codes. No destination name, no information on who we were meeting and worst of all no reason for the trip. I puzzled at the jump points and then unstrapped. This was a mystery that would unfold itself in its own time.

I sighed as the start of what promised to be a nasty headache began to blossom from the back of my neck. I checked over the system readings and set the auto pilot on. I had analgesic patches in my satchel so before the headache that played across my shoulders could get worse I decided to take care of that first.

As I walked back through the ship to the state rooms I saw my Uncle sitting there. He looked up at me, questions in his eyes but all that did was fuel my anger at him and the pounding at the base of my skull increased. I shot him a filthy look and then ignored him as he undid the flight straps to get up to follow me.

He watched, standing just behind me, as I opened my satchel and rummaged around it for the small analgesic patches.

"You seem troubled lei'lei." He said breaking the heavy silence.

I just glanced at him and peeled the back of the pain patch. When I tried to apply it to the nape of my neck he stepped forward and took it gently from my hands, doing the job for me.

"No. I am not troubled." I replied coolly.

"Then my second guess would be that you are angry." He said stepping a pace back from me, folding his arms across his chest.

I sighed loudly and turned my back on him, digging around in my satchel again. Everything that was precious or important to me was in this satchel and touching these things somehow reassured me, grounded me, well most of the time. My fingers brushed the little container that held the things I had taken from Jyrki's room. Reminding me that my uncle had not been very forthcoming about all the information he had on Jyrki. I touched the handle of my lightsaber.

"What is going on Zte'sa?" I asked through gritted teeth. I stayed with my back to him.

"I can't tell you that." He said quietly.

"Is there *anything* you can tell me?" I hissed trying to control that deep seated burning sensation that boiled away in my gut. This time I glanced over my

shoulder to look him in the face. I was clenching my jaw so tightly that I wondered if my teeth would break.

He gave me a puzzled look. "We're not talking about this mission now, are we?"

"Is this a mission?" I asked. "All I was told is that I have to ferry you to a given point in space. You tell me? What are we talking about?"

"What is it, lei'lei? Why are you so hostile? What have I done to make you so angry, because I know it has nothing to do with this particular meeting?"

My anger spiked and without even thinking about what I was doing, or worse, who I was doing it to, I grabbed the lightsaber from my satchel without turning it on and spun around on my uncle. With a strength that my anger fed me I slammed against him, then with a move Master Kjestyll had taught me I used my leg to buckle his knee and he went to the ground with a thud on both knees but before he could react I shoved him backwards and straddled his chest, bracing his arms to his sides with my legs. I shoved the lightsaber handle up under his jaw hard enough to push his head back. He was surprised but he didn't fight me, instead he stayed very calm, ready but not tense. In the back of my head I knew he did not, for one moment, consider me any sort of a threat but I chose to ignore this in favour of my fury, after all I was the one holding the weapon. His eyes never left mine and he waited, patiently, for me to get to the point. My rage spilled about us like an out of control fire.

"Why did you lie to me?" I growled.

"I have never lied to you. You know this." He said gently. His pale green eyes never looking away from my face.

"You haven't told me the whole truth though either!" I said raising my voice.

"Be specific, lei'lei." He said with just a hint of annoyance.

"Why did you not tell me you knew Jyrki from before?" I snarled.

The play of emotions on his face startled me. There was a sudden and terrible sadness in his eyes that I did not want to acknowledge. When he sighed it was as if his heart was breaking but he didn't say anything so I jammed the lightsaber harder into the soft flesh under his chin. I was happy to see him wince.

"If I turn this on, it won't be pretty." I told him.

"No," he said softly, "but it would be quick." His utter calm unnerved me, confused me.

"Damn it Zte'sa, talk to me!" I yelled, feeling my self control slip. "Why didn't you tell me you knew Jyrki? What is he to you? Why are you protecting him?" The knuckles on the hand that gripped the lightsaber had turned white.

A flash of pain that had nothing to do with me flicked in his eyes. He spoke quietly but his words screamed at me.

"Because I think he might be my son."

Time seemed to stop while his words took root in my brain. Somewhere in the great over all scheme of things in the universe a tiny piece of an enormous puzzle slid neatly into its rightful place. I wanted to throw the lightsaber away and bury myself in his arms as I had done as a child. Tell him I was sorry and rewind time so that none of this had ever happened. He had been right; some secrets should never be spoken. This new piece of news had shaken me to the core. I should have backed down, but instead I let my anger step forward and speak for me. I wasn't a little girl any more and I wasn't sure I knew who this man was that I had called uncle and loved dearly for as long as I could remember.

"Think or know?" I asked, when he didn't answer I pushed the lightsaber even harder.

"Lei'lei, you're hurting me." He said quietly.

I didn't budge and we were at a sort of impasse. My own fury was now mixed with confusion and sorrow. The conflict of needing to trust him and knowing that he had been withholding information made me uncertain. His terrible calm made me sad and the sadness drowned the anger. Tears welled up in my eyes and I blinked them away. This man was my family and suddenly I didn't know what to do, or what I had even been thinking. I had wanted answers and I had let my anger speak through me but now bereft of the fury that had driven my action in the first place I was just bewildered. He watched the play of emotions dance across my face. I had never been good at hiding anything from him and now was no exception. In a move so elegant and swift, I never even saw it coming; he flipped out of my grip, put me flat on my back then not only got to his own feet but had pulled me to mine and had disarmed me with surprising gentleness.

He looked at the lightsaber in his hands for a long, tense moment and then he tossed it on the bed. Then he turned his attention to me. I looked for some sort of anger in his eyes but saw none, only a guarded compassion. The gentle caress of his hand on my face was so unexpected and so tender that it brought another batch tears to my eyes. I had to stifle an unwanted whimper with my hand. He made a small 'hmm' sound, brushed the tears away with the fingertips of the hand that had stroked my cheek and shook his head.

"I think I would like a cup of tea now. How about you, little lei'lei?" he asked and before I could answer he left the cabin to find the galley.

By the time I had calmed myself down enough that I could join him, he had found the small galley, put the kettle on to boil and dug out some tea. As I watched him it sank in, I had just physically attacked one of the few people in my life who had never done me harm and the flush of shame that shot through me was almost unbearable. I could no more stop the shakes than I could the

dreadful sense that I had let him down, disappointed him. I had let my fury rule me. Guilt wracked through me and I felt awful.

"Zte'sa, I'm sorry I..." I began but he abruptly held up his hand to stop me from speaking.

"Sit down." He said gesturing to the small dining table. I did as he asked and watched while he made tea, poured two cups and sat down across from me. I took the cup he offered and waited for him to speak.

"How did you find out?" he asked after what seemed a very long silence.

I told him about finding the locket and the holodisk.

"So you went back." He said. It wasn't a question, but I answered it anyway.

"Yes."

There was a lengthy silence and then he nodded. "The lightsaber?" he asked.

"It was in the same drawer. It was a practice weapon, it has no real memories." I said.

He just stared at his own cup thoughtfully and said nothing for a moment that seemed to last forever. "You let anger move you too much, you know." He chided. "That's not a good path to walk and I think you are better than that."

Once again I felt shame, mingled with anger but I swallowed them both down. "You never answered my question." I fenced back, avoiding the topic he had just brought up. "Do you just think or do you know that Jyrki is your son and why did you never tell me?"

He took a slow sip from his tea and watched my face. "I think." He said, "I don't know for certain." He added. "I didn't tell you because it's none of your business."

I felt annoyance stir in my gut and frowned. "None of my business? Jyrki Andando is trying to kill me. I think it is my business to know that he plays an ever bigger part in my family than I had known about before."

He sighed. "It's complicated."

"Oh for Sarlacc's sake, Zte'sa, everything is complicated!" I exploded, slapping the table with the flat of my hand making the cups rattle. "For once, will you just tell me the truth?"

"I have never lied to you." His eyes were hard as he spoke.

"No you haven't," I conceded slumping back in the chair, "but you omit things and that's just as bad."

He watched me for a very long moment and then nodded slowly. "Long before you were born, while there was still some semblance of peace in the Galaxy, I was often hired as a sort of body guard. While it's not my main profession, I am very good at it. My services do not come cheap so it wasn't a job I did often. Shortly before the Clone wars broke out I was asked to take care of a young woman who came from a very wealthy family and who was under threat of

being kidnapped. As far as jobs went it should have been easy but it wasn't. It became very complicated very quickly because of the underground connections her father had with some very shady organizations. What was supposed to be a simple transport from one planet to another turned into a serious chase halfway across the galaxy with me and my charge crash landing on some forsaken planet at the edge of the Outer Rim." He paused to sip his tea. "I was used to roughing it, but she was a bit of a spoiled princess who had never done a day's work in her life so the trek we had to make in order to find away off the planet was very trying. I don't think I had ever heard anyone complain so much in my life." He smiled slightly at the memory.

"But as the days wore on she began to change, toughen up a bit, and accept the situation at hand. After that we began to get to know one another. She talked about her life and in the end I actually felt sorry for her. Being the daughter of this man I had been hired by could not have been easy. He was not a kind man, you understand and his expectations of her were high. She told me that the reason for this particular journey was not a happy one. She was almost glad we had crashed. She told me that she was on her way to be married, an arranged marriage that would join two of the most powerful syndicate families together. She didn't know the man who was to be her husband and she was afraid. The reason we had been chased and shot at was a third feuding family had not wanted this marriage to take place, fearing a shift in the power base. Bloody stupid, really." He looked at me and I nodded that I was listening.

"She spoke about this situation with a certain humour. She knew that in her father's eyes she was a bargaining tool nothing more. There was no love in this family. I suppose that given the circumstances what happened next was normal but I still have a hard time forgiving myself for it. I lost my objectivity and let emotion get in the way of the job at hand. She was pretty, intelligent and we had gone through a fairly traumatic experience together. In this situation the only thing I had to offer her was physical comfort. While it would be an honest assessment to say she initiated it, it takes two to continue and I did so willingly." He stopped, realizing he was trying to skirt the subject and then looked at me directly. "To be blunt, lei'lei, we had sex with each other. It was stupid and completely inappropriate but at the time neither of us was thinking with a clear head. When we were rescued two days later we both decided and swore to never speak of what happened. I think she was embarrassed and I was grateful she didn't want to discuss the indiscretion which could have cost us both our lives. Once we reached the original destination we parted ways. I never saw her again."

"Some years later, I was contacted by her father who said that he had more work for me, a delivery. He was never a man to mince words and he got right to the point. His daughter and her husband had been killed but they had had a child, a boy named Jyrki, who had been taken from them when he was just a baby to be trained as a Jedi. Now he wanted the boy to know who his parents had

been. I agreed to deliver the locket and the message but before I left he told me one more thing that made my blood run cold. While no one had questioned Jyrki's parentage at the time of his birth, after the death of his parents it was revealed that the son in law, due to a previously unknown medical problem would have been unable to father a child. I think the hope was that Jyrki would be dismissed as a successor to the families' fortunes. Her father had then come to the conclusion that the child could only have been from one other man, me, but he had no way to prove this absolutely."

I sighed. "So, you don't know for sure?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I had hoped that the information I had taken from the Jedi temple would have given me a DNA sample to test against but it didn't."

"You don't even know if this man was telling you the truth about Jyrki?"

"No, but it is hard to disregard. The timing of his birth, when she and I were together, the fact that she was married almost within the hour of her return to the family and I am guessing, had no chance to be unfaithful after the union, among a myriad of other things..." He shrugged. "The evidence is fairly in favour of me being his biological father."

"Jyrki doesn't look anything like you." I said, picturing his black hair and icy blue eyes in my head.

"No, he doesn't but he does bear a great resemblance to my mother. She had black hair and the same colour eyes. I get my looks from my father's side of the family where the white hair genes are dominant."

"Does he know?"

"No and there is no reason he should. He knows next to nothing about his family, just what was passed along to him. That they were good people and they loved him."

I looked at him. I didn't know what to think. Then another little piece of puzzle fell into place. "You're the reason he came to work at the docking bay, aren't you?"

He nodded. "He contacted me asking for my help. I was the one person he felt he could trust. He said he needed a place to live, a job, somewhere quiet where he could just escape the rest of the galaxy. Vader was still hunting the last of the Jedi and he was running scared. I knew more about him than he realised and I felt that with his mechanic skills your father could use him. I also knew that he was force sensitive and had some training. It was my hope he would help you come to terms with your gifts. I had no idea how messy it would all get."

I buried my head in my hands. "Papa knew?"

He shook his head. "No. All I told Kit was that he was a decent mechanic; the rest I felt was up to Jyrki to discuss if he chose to." He paused. "The Zabracki have a saying, *what the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve*, and I felt it in this case to be apt. The less Kit and you all knew about him the better it would be if the Empire caught up with him. Your father would have just worried about

things that had not happened yet and which he had no control over.” He said. “I had no idea how things would turn out, that Jyrki would go off the deep end over you.”

“You know he’s quite mad, right?” I said angrily.

My uncle didn’t answer right away. “He’s angry and not thinking terribly clearly but I don’t believe he’s insane.”

“He thinks I betrayed him, Zte’sa, and he’s punishing me for it”

“I know.”

I shook my head. “This is why you don’t want to kill him, isn’t it?”

“I would prefer not to be placed in a position where I might have to take the life of a young man who may be my son, but by the same token, lei’lei; I swore a blood oath to protect you.”

I barked a laugh. “That places you in a pretty precarious position then. What will you do if you have to choose?”

“I hope I never have to find out and I am hoping he can be reasoned with if I ever do catch up with him.”

“Reasoned with? He kidnapped me and tried to break me with torture and drugs! He broke in and destroyed my home. He snuck into the palace and set incendiary devices to blow up. No one can find him, or catch him. He’s stalking me and I don’t have a clue why, except he has a real problem with the Empire, which I can understand but I don’t understand his problem with me. He has no idea what reason is any more, he hates me.”

My uncle frowned and shook his head. “No, hate is not the problem.” He said quietly. “That he loves you, lei’lei, is the problem.”

I nearly choked on my tea. “Love? If that’s love he has an awfully strange way of showing it.”

He nodded. “I know but the line between love and obsession is very fine. Somewhere along the line he crossed it.”

“Why did you never tell me you knew him?” I asked.

“Because it is a very personal issue and you didn’t need to know. It changes nothing.” He said coldly. The tone of his voice was hard. It said *stop pushing*.

I didn’t want to argue with him. For a long pause I said nothing but then I asked. “Did you love her?”

He shook his head. “No.” he said honestly.

“You slept with her though.”

“Sex and love are not the same things, lei’lei.”

He waited, watching me as if he were expecting me to ask further questions about this topic but I just nodded. The look on my face told him I knew a little more about that subject now than the last time we had seen each other. I was certain he would have asked but the jump alarm sounded letting me know we were coming out of hyperspace. We made our way back to the cockpit. I didn’t argue when he strapped into the co pilot’s chair. The stars began their

backwards slide into normal space. I grinned at the sight; I never tired of it even if it meant sliding into the unknown. I hoped what ever was waiting for us was at least friendly.

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Neither of us spoke as normal space settled around us, the star-lines shifting in to ordinary, brilliant dots of light. My uncle watched as I worked the controls of the ship and smiled.

“What’s so funny?” I asked as his smile turned into a chuckle.

“You never seem happier than when you are flying. For as long as I have known you, it is in the cockpit or the engine room of a ship you seem the most at home. Why did you not take a job as a pilot?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Papa is the pilot, it was his domain. I wanted to be different at the time. We were fighting, a lot. I wanted to get away from home. I needed to get some distance between papa and me. Things were difficult. I got the chance to work at Jabba’s and I took it because it was as far away as I could get at the time without going off world.” I said, some of the old anger resurfacing. “And it’s not as if you were around to referee.”

My uncle nodded. “I’m sorry. I had my own problems to sort out and work kept me away for long periods of time.” He said with genuine sadness in his voice. “Your father felt as though his world had fallen in on itself, first Bedi left then your mother was killed. You turned into a difficult teenager with problems he did not understand and Jyrki, well he didn’t help matters at all. Bel filled me in on most of what happened.”

“They were so angry when I took the job as a dancer, but they didn’t get it. Dancing was my escape; I didn’t care where I danced just so long as I could.” I shrugged. “I loved flying but I gave that up in favour of getting away. Flying and ships was papa’s domain, so if I had gone into that world he would have always been there, judging me, pestering me. Sometimes I just never felt as though I was good enough.” I told him, holding up my hand before he could say what I knew he would say next. “I know better now. And we talked about a lot of this when I was home after ...well you know... I’m not saying that our relationship is perfect now, but I understand my father a whole lot better now than I did six years ago and I think he understands me and some of what I was going through.”

“Are you sorry for the choice you made, then?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. I made good connections working at Jabba’s and I got to know some people who have helped me a lot. I also learned a lot about myself. And while it seemed I also made enemies there who thought that by sending in an application for an Imperial position my life would be over, in the end they did me a favour. When this job with the Empire came up it was almost a blessing in disguise.”

He looked at me. “Why did you not refuse it?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Would you have refused if you were me?” I asked. “I was younger, naïve, scared and told there was no choice.” I said. “Plus it got me off Tatooine and away from the Hutts.”

He nodded, and then asked. “Why did you stay?”

“Because I like my job a lot. I have made some good friends. I stay because I have a place here and... attachments. And,” I added, “I get to pilot these gorgeous shuttles, I was given a ship of my own, and I get to do and see things, people and places I would never have even dreamed of. I feel as though I belong here. I have a lot of freedom despite what everyone seems to think.” I said with a little shrug. It was so much more than that; it was more than I could ever explain so I looked him in the eyes hoping he would understand.

He nodded, I know he wanted to say more but he didn’t and once again we were silent. It was I who broke it.

“Zte’sa what does *Tze’yusha’Jin* mean?” I asked.

He glanced at me with an annoyed sigh. “It’s a title that translates into basic, more or less, as *He who hunts*.”

I frowned. “For such an innocuous title, why is it that when I say that word, people who know what it means turn white? Even people who kill for a living?”

“Would you wish to be hunted?” he asked carefully. He was skirting the question.

“Who are you really?” I asked.

He was about to say something when we were suddenly hailed by a ship that I couldn’t see. I grabbed the headset and slipped it on.

“Unidentified vessel, this is the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor*, Identify yourself and state your business.”

“*Admonitor* this is the Imperial Transport shuttle *Sigiri*, we have a rendezvous in this area with ...”

Whoever had the comm interrupted me. “Shuttle *Sigiri* switch to channel one-one-five and transmit appropriate clearance codes.”

“Copy that, *Admonitor*,” and I did as he asked, switching to one of the lesser used Imperial frequencies. “*Sigiri to Admonitor*, transmitting now.” For a few moments we waited in silence.

“Shuttle *Sigiri*, you will proceed to the co ordinates we are sending.”

“Copy that *Admonitor*. Proceeding to rendezvous point now.”

I set the computer and let the auto pilot take us to where ever it was the *Admonitor* was hiding. If I read them right the ISD was hiding behind the second moon of the small un-named planet.

“You never answered my question, Zte’sa I said, removing the head set and looking at my uncle.

“What answer do you want Lei’lei?”

“The truth?”

“There are many truths. Ask your father who I am and he will give you a very different story from say, Lord Vader. I am many different things to many different people. Right now I am your Dajdofa guardian and, I hope, your friend.”

I just shook my head. I wasn’t going to get much of an answer from him on this topic. I knew him well enough to know that he could and would circumnavigate this subject forever and never give me any answer that made sense.

“People are scared of you.” I said.

He nodded. “They should be.”

I made a “*tch*” sound and shot him a filthy look.

He was equally adept in the dirty look department. He told me bluntly. “Look, what I do is varied, who I am is complicated and my reputation is well earned.”

“Why won’t you tell me?” I was bordering on whining.

“Because I am selfish.” He said cryptically.

I frowned. “I don’t understand. You’re a hunter? A body guard? A finder? An assassin? People are terrified of you. And you won’t tell me who you really are, what it all means because you are selfish?”

He sighed. “*Tze’yusha’Jin* is a title achieved by only a very few. People are not so much terrified of me per say as they are the title. I am part of an elite group of men who you might lable as special operations but it’s so much more than that. It is very complicated to explain and I am sworn to secrecy so will you please stop asking for explanations I cannot and will not give you?” he said with a hint of crossness in his voice. I was starting to try his endless patience.

I scowled at him but nodded. I knew better than to push him too far.

“Oh and there is one more thing,” He said, turning to make sure that he had my fullest attention. “Lei’lei, I love you with all my heart, I have known you since you were a baby, watched you blossom into a beautiful, intelligent and talented young lady. I am more than amazed by your ability to survive working for one of the most powerful men in the galaxy and your combat skills impress me greatly.” He paused. “I have sworn on a blood oath to keep you from all possible harm but if you ever pull a stunt like you did earlier today with me again I won’t hesitate to put you over my knee. Am I making myself clear?”

“Crystal.” I mumbled feeling as though I were six again, getting caught doing something I knew I shouldn’t be. He’d do it too because that was one thing about my uncle that I knew for certain. He never made an idle threat.

He sat back with a satisfied nod. “It was a nice move you pulled though. You have been well taught.” He conceded with a hint of pride.

“You didn’t seem too concerned and you disarmed me pretty quickly.”

He gave me a knowing smile. “That is why I am *Tze’yusha’Jin* and you are not yet done with your Bunduki training. You still have much to learn. I’d like to

see you live long enough to do so.” He said, and then added with a touch of ice in his voice. “You should learn to reign in your temper a little better. I expect that sort of behaviour from Vader not from you.”

I just sighed as the *Admonitor* came into view, he was right and I knew it but that didn't mean I liked hearing it. “Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor* this is the shuttle *Sigiri* requesting clearance for docking.”

“Shuttle *Sigiri*, docking clearance will be given upon transmission of your verbal clearance codes.”

“*Admonitor* this is Shuttle *Sigiri*, twelve, Vader, Aurek, Aurek, Blue, Resh.”

There was another long pregnant pause, all the while my uncle watched me intently.

“Shuttle *Sigiri*, you are cleared to commence docking procedure. Admiral Thrawn welcomes you both on board the *Admonitor* and will meet you in the landing bay. *Admonitor* out.”

I smiled, I couldn't help it, and my heart fluttered, just a little, at the mention of Thrawn's name. “Copy that, *Admonitor*. Please inform the Admiral we look forward to seeing him there.” I clicked off the comm and began the procedure to dock although it was more like being swallowed by a huge mouth.

“Do you know this Admiral Thrawn personally?” My uncle asked.

“Why do you ask?” I didn't look at him because I was too busy watching the deck officer guide me in to the landing slot.

“Your smile when his name was mentioned was almost as rosy as the blush on your cheeks.” He said. He didn't miss much, but then again I suspect I hadn't hid my reaction all that well either.

“Do you remember the conversation we had about the pendant I wear?” I asked, absently touching the necklace I never took off.

He nodded.

“Well,” I said with a slight pause, “the Admiral is the man who gave it to me.”

He raised both eyebrows. “The man courting you is an Imperial Admiral?” he asked. I had managed to surprise him and the look that flashed across his face was worth it. When we had talked about my pendant and the person who had given it to me, I had not been very specific. As the thoughts progressed and played across his face I anticipated the next question cutting him off before he could finish asking. “Are you and he ...?”

“Now *that* is none of your business, Zte'sa.” I said smugly enough so that he knew the answer to his question was more than likely ‘yes’. “And the only reason I am telling you this is because you're not stupid and you know me too well, you'll read it on my face no matter how well I try to hide it. And,” I added, “Unlike Lord Vader, he knows who you are to me.”

“Well, little lei'lei, you are just full of surprises.” He said quietly. “Does your father know about this ...?” he was searching for the right word and I wasn't going to help him, instead I simply answered the question.

“Yes he does and actually, they have met.” I said without further explanation. As I set the ship gently down I added “There's one more thing you might want to know.” I shut everything down and unbuckled my harness.

“What?” he asked.

“He's not human.”

And before he could say any thing at all, I left the cockpit to get my stuff with a grin. This was going to be fun.

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We disembarked to be met by a small group of men, Thrawn standing in the middle. The corners of his mouth twitched in a smile when he saw me but it was so brief I could have imagined it.

“Welcome on board the *Admonitor*, Miss Gabriel.” He said stepping forward. “It is nice to see you again.” He gave me a polite smile but there was an unmistakable twinkle in his eyes. Sandjiggers fluttered in my belly and I had to take a deep breath to quell them. He still took my breath away but I didn't want the entire ship to know this. I smiled back just as politely and he then glanced over my shoulder to my uncle.

“Thank you Admiral. Have you met Tze'yusha'Jin Vahlek Akosh.” I stepped back and watched as the two of the most important men in my life met each other face to face.

They sized each other up and shook hands. I couldn't read either of their expressions. There was a moment of silence and then Thrawn spoke.

“Welcome aboard, Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh. I trust your journey was a pleasant one?” He asked.

My uncle smiled as he glanced at me. “Well, it was certainly interesting.” He said.

Thrawn glanced briefly at me, raised an eyebrow slightly and then asked my uncle. “You have the requested item?”

Uncle Vahlek nodded and indicated the large carry bag he was holding.

“Excellent, if you'll both follow me.” He said and turned on his heel and walked out of the hanger bay, the men who had been at his side all saluted as he passed.

The *Admonitor* was an Imperial class Star Destroyer, formerly known as Emperor class. I was familiar with her design and layout but after living on board the *Executor* for so long the *Admonitor* seemed tiny by comparison.

We followed Thrawn to a briefing room where we were met by the man I assumed was Captain Niriz and two young officers who remained nameless and were dismissed once we arrived. After the introductions were done my uncle

handed Thrawn the large bag and waited while the Admiral opened it and looked inside without taking anything out.

Thrawn nodded. "Let's see how it fits, shall we?" he said and with the bag in hand he left the room, pausing for a moment to tell us to make ourselves comfortable.

"Please, sit. Help yourselves to refreshments." He said gesturing to the array of beverages that sat on the table.

My uncle nodded and I just sat on the nearest chair. Captain Niriz watched us both with the air of a man deeply suspicious of people he didn't know. The silence in the room was thick. No one wanted to break it and I wasn't about to start making small talk with the Captain who seemed to regard me with a particular distrust or worse, resentment. My uncle ignored this and poured himself a cup of tea as though he were sitting at home and then without asking poured one for me as well.

I took my time to study the Captain that Thrawn had described so carefully to me in his letters. He was a native of Corellia and came from a proud military family that served to the best of their ability. Dagon Niriz, according to the Thrawn, was no exception. He had been sorely tested and in Thrawn's eyes had passed with flying colours. If the Captain actually understood this, though, well that was another thing altogether.

He was a slight man of average height. He had cropped blond hair and dark green eyes. He was almost handsome in a very hard sort of way, with high cheekbones and a long, aristocratic nose. Only his lips which were fuller, lacking the thinness which most gaunt faces tended towards, lent his face a softness that would have been missing otherwise. Here was a man who worried too much, thought too much and although he had reached the rank of captain, he remained uncertain in the circle that Thrawn cast.

The Admiral had written of Niriz's slow but steady transformation from a man who mistrusted his commanding officer greatly to a man who would give his unwavering loyalty for the same commanding officer. Thrawn, as he did with so many people, had won Niriz over with his quiet brilliance and utter patience. But while Niriz may have trusted Thrawn, he wasn't about to include either my uncle or me in that circle. My uncle he did not know at all and like many less secure men he sensed the hidden danger my uncle represented. Me, well... he knew my face well enough from the Imperial Court, from the very public exile and I was reasonably certain from the HoloNet gossip columns. I was one of those young ladies and I was not welcome on board his ship, regardless of who I worked for and what I actually did for the Empire. He didn't know the exact nature of my relationship with his Admiral and more to the point he wasn't sure he wanted to know. I watched him as he watched me but I didn't smile or say anything. There wasn't any point.

We waited for about ten minutes when the door to the second room opened and everyone looked up. My first thought was 'What the heck was Boba Fett doing here?', then I realised the armour was all wrong, and that the man in the Mandalorian armour was taller than Fett. I stood up. Captain Niriz remained in his stiff 'at ease' position, and my uncle chuckled softly.

Thrawn removed the helmet and smiled. "Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh, you are as good as Lord Vader said. The fit is perfect."

My uncle inclined his head and took a sip of his tea.

"Well, Miss Gabriel, what do you think?" he turned to me.

I got up and looked him in the eyes, wondering what game he was playing. I walked around him, looking carefully at him. Mandalorian armour was difficult to find, especially a complete set.

"Who are you trying to be?" I asked after a long silence. "If you want to impersonate Fett, you need to do a bit of work on that armour."

Thrawn gave me that smile which said 'Clever girl'. "Close, Miss Gabriel." He nodded.

"Ah..." I nodded, suddenly making the connection. "You wish to imitate the one who imitates Fett, Jodo Kast."

"Your thoughts?" he asked me again.

Captain Niriz made a snorting sound and I glanced at him but before I could say anything Thrawn stepped in.

"Be at peace Captain, Miss Gabriel is the one person in this room who quite likely knows more about this topic than any of us here, with maybe the exception of Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh." He returned his gaze to me.

I sighed and circled him again, taking in the details and recalling all I had learned about both Kast and Fett. I smiled when I figured out what it was that was bothering me about how Thrawn was wearing this mando armour.

I went to make some adjustments to the armour when Niriz stepped forward, his hand on his side arm.

Thrawn made a placating gesture with his hand and then with a conspirator's glance to me said. "At ease, Captain, if Miss Gabriel wished to do me any bodily harm she has had plenty opportunities before this. I do not think that killing me is on her agenda." He was teasing me more than he was putting his nervous captain at ease.

I gave him a look. "*You should watch what you say, just because your man here has a happy trigger finger doesn't mean I can't still hurt you before he gets off a shot.*" I said in Cheunh. Thrawn grinned and much to my and Thrawn's great surprise my uncle chuckled then quickly stifled it.

I shot him a look. He just shrugged. "*If you two want to be alone I can leave and drag the captain with me.*" He told me in Huttese.

Thrawn glanced at my uncle, then back at me and smiled. "*That will not be necessary at this time, Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh.*" He told my uncle in the same

language. Captain Niriz just watched all of this the way spectators at a pega-ball match watch the game. I had to bite my tongue to keep from giggling.

My uncle looked at me, both eyebrows raised. He had not expected Thrawn to understand let alone speak Huttese. I just gave him an *'I'm innocent and know nothing'* look and shrugged.

"Guess we should stick to Basic." I said. I went back to the task at hand. "May I, Admiral?" I asked before touching the armour he wore. I glanced at my uncle again, I had not known he could understand Cheunh and I wondered if he could speak it as well. I would have to ask him about that if I got the chance.

"Be my guest, my dear." He said standing still with his arms raised. He watched what I did with great interest as did my uncle, only captain Niriz remained guarded and watched me rather than my hands. I began to make the appropriate adjustments. When I was done I patted the chest plate and looked up at Thrawn who smiled.

"What did she do exactly?" the Captain asked Thrawn, completely ignoring me.

"*She* changed how the joiner straps lie. Fett doesn't attach them the standard way," I said, "And made some minor adjustments here and there." I wasn't about to give all the secrets away.

"How do you know how he wears his armour, Miss?" Niriz asked. He sounded both sceptical and irritated at the same time.

I gave him one of those smiles that said *none of your damned business* and replied. "Because I undressed him once." As I expected, this remark caused all the male eyebrows in the room to shoot up.

I looked at Thrawn again. "At a glance you pretty much have the basic look down pat. There are a couple of other little details but unless someone really knows Fett well or Jodo Kast for that matter, they won't matter."

"Would you notice them?" Thrawn asked.

I shrugged. "Honestly, not right away, no. Although I suspect they would bug at my subconscious. But since you are not impersonating Fett I don't think that matters much." I told him. "But you should know that Fett wears spats to cover the tops of his boots, stops junk from falling inside the footwear. Kast wears a distinctive chest emblem that is not the same as the one Fett wears."

"Anything else?"

"Kast doesn't wear Wookiee scalp hair braids, Fett does, here." I tapped the left shoulder.

Thrawn nodded. I suspect he knew everything I was telling him already but just wanted to hear if I knew anything else he did not.

"As you are so up on the details Miss Gabriel, you can work on them with me later." He said dismissing me with the tone of his voice.

"If you insist." I gave him a small grin and sat down beside my uncle.

"Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh I am very pleased with the work you have done. I understand that you have requested transport to the nearest planet?"

My uncle nodded.

"We should be in the Corellian sector in a few hours and I would be happy to arrange transportation for you to Corellia if that is acceptable." Thrawn said. "Payment has already been arranged as per your request."

My uncle nodded. "That would be fine, thank you."

"I am afraid the pilot will be different as Lord Vader has requested Miss Gabriel remain on board the *Admonitor* until we can rendezvous with the *Executor*." Thrawn continued. "If you both have nothing else planned we would enjoy your company at the dinner table. We dine in an hour from now. In the mean time, guest quarters have been made ready for you both."

"Dinner sounds delightful." My uncle said.

Thrawn smiled. "Good, Captain if you would be so kind as to show Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh to the quarters provided. There are some details about her work that I must discuss with Miss Gabriel in private."

"Yes sir." The captain said but he didn't seem too pleased with the situation at hand.

My uncle got up, shook hands with Thrawn and with a sly wink to me he left in the captain's wake.

"You have done your homework, my dear." Thrawn said as he began to shuck off the armour he wore. Without thinking about it I got up and assisted him as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

"You knew that already, I sent you information on these bounty hunters ages ago." I was cross. "What are you up to?" I asked, stepping back and handing him the bits of armour that could be removed.

He just smiled. "Hold that thought." He said and he vanished into the other room, only to return a few moments later dressed in his own uniform, the Mandalorian suit of armour tucked back in the bag.

I sat at the table with my head resting on my hand. I was suddenly tired. "So?"

Thrawn sat across from me and poured himself tea from the thermos carafe. "Just a little side trip, call it pest control. Nothing serious." He said.

"You're impersonating a bounty hunter who impersonates one of the galaxy's most renowned bounty hunters and that's *nothing serious*?" I made a face. "And just what am I doing here? You knew everything I told you today."

Thrawn arched an eye brow. "Not everything." He said. "That trick with the armour is curiously clever."

I nodded. "Fett told me it was something his father taught him."

"So how exactly did you come to know this bit of privileged information?"

"I told you. I helped undress him."

"And that's all you will say on this matter?"

I told him cooly. "A girl has to have some secrets. But it was not what you all thought."

Thrawn smiled. "Well, you dropped the information in such a leading way, how was a room full of men supposed to react? Or was it that you wished a certain reaction from me?"

'*Everyone reacted exactly as I wanted them to, especially you.*' I thought. I resisted the urge I had to stick my tongue out at him and gave him a shrug instead. "So why am I here?" I asked him again.

"Because Lord Vader suggested it might be good for you."

"Now why don't I believe that?" I sighed.

He pulled out a data pad from his pocket. "He sent this for you."

I reached out to take it from his hand and shivered at the gentle brush of his pinkie finger against the back of my hand. For a moment our eyes locked. The world paused and I forgot to breathe. The flush of heat that seemed to burn through me, making my cheeks blush was minor compared to the sensations flooding my insides. It would seem we were back to subtle playing games of seduction. I sent just a bit of the sensations that spun through me back to him and smiled sweetly when his eyes widened in surprise. Two could play this game only I didn't even need to touch him to send shivers down his spine. The colour of his eyes darkened ever so slightly and he arched an eyebrow giving me a slight '*okay you win this round*' nod and I withdrew my hand from his with the datapad. He had not forgotten what I had done to him on Myrkr. Neither had I.

I looked at the information and sighed. "This is Lord Vader's way of punishing me, isn't it?" I said cooly. "I have been given orders to remain on board until further notice. Good job I brought extra clothes. I'll need a secure terminal to work from."

Thrawn just nodded then sat back, folding his arms across his chest to watch me carefully.

"I suppose this dinner is a dress up affair?" I asked.

"Yes. Think of it as your chance to convince my ship's captain you are not some mad assassin."

"No," I replied sarcastically, "that would be my uncle."

"Ah yes, the *Tze'yusha'Jin* title does give it a way." He said getting up.

"You know exactly what he is, don't you." I said with an air of resignation. Standing and picking up my bags.

"Obviously I understand more than you about the title he bears, perhaps we can trade information later?" he said.

"If your over protective captain doesn't have me shot first. I am surprised he didn't post guards at the door."

"Well, actually he did, one anyway, and the young man will be showing you to your quarters."

I had time to shoot him a dirty look before he had opened the door and nodded to the young man who waited silently.

"I shall have an escort come for you in forty five minutes, Miss Gabriel." He said.

"Very well, Admiral."

"I hope that you will find dinner a pleasant affair. We have an excellent chef on board." He said politely with a nod.

"I'm sure it will be as long as there is no Corellian spiced cake involved." I retorted and turned to leave, the young man having to trot to catch up with me.