

## Cloak and Shadows

The last time I had officially dined with Thrawn on board of his ship it had very nearly been the death of me. I hoped, as I followed my young escort to the dinning room, this time it would not be so dramatic.

It was a small affair, with just me, my uncle, Thrawn, Captain Niriz and Commander Parck. My uncle had changed into less worn looking clothes and I was wearing a classic backless, semi formal, little black dress that had been easy to pack and travel with. After being caught out once I had asked Cati to make me something pretty to wear, easy to pack that required no ironing. As with all my requests she had worked miracles. With my hair done up in a flattering manner, ringlets framing the side of my face and just enough makeup to take the dark circles away I felt ready for what I was pretty sure would be a stiff and somewhat dull meal. The young man who escorted me to the Admiral's private dining room left me at the door. When I entered the room my uncle was already there speaking with the Admiral. He stopped mid sentence when he saw me.

"Lei'lei, you look stunning." He said and I realised he had never seen me so dressed up before. I smiled shyly.

Thrawn gave me a warm smile. "Yes, I must second that opinion. You look quite fetching, my dear. I don't believe I have seen you in that particular dress before."

The two men glanced at each other for a moment and I knew in that instant that I had been their topic of conversation before I had walked into the room. I frowned but before I could reply the door opened and the last two members of this dinner party arrived. Thrawn introduced Commander Voss Parck and indicated we take our seats. While appetizers and a light aperitif were served Thrawn began to make small talk and much to my surprised my uncle joined him. We had been seated so that Thrawn took the head of the table, my Uncle sat on his left hand side and I sat next to my uncle. At Thrawn's right sat the captain and across from me was Voss Parck.

I listened quietly while Thrawn and my uncle began to discuss the current rebel situation with Captain Niriz joining in the conversation. It was an unusual move for Thrawn who had often told me that in his culture meal times were places for light conversation not heavy topics. At first I was surprised but then as I listened more carefully I noticed how Thrawn steered the conversation in certain directions, what was more interesting was how my uncle tacked against him, pulling the conversation in a different direction. It was a little like watching two Krayt Dragons of equal size and strength vie for territory, except in this case it was mostly friendly. My uncle was enjoying the chance to verbally fence with someone who was very good at what he did. Captain Niriz joined in the conversation making it a very interesting verbal threesome to listen to.

Over the main meal both Voss Parck and I spent more time listening than talking but when desert came he turned his attention to me.

"The Admiral tells me you are from Tatooine?" he said.

I nodded. "I was born and raised there. What about you?"

He smiled. "I am from Corulag." He said. "On the Perlemian Trade Route. My family has lived there for generations. Have you ever been there?"

I shook my head. "No, I rarely got to any of the core planets before I started working for the Empire and since then I don't get a lot of time to go sight seeing."

"Well, I dearly hope that you can find some time to visit the planet, it's quite extraordinary. Especially the great Bamboo forests." He said with a smile.

"How long have you been in service to the Empire?" I asked.

He shrugged slightly. "I think it would be safe to say, all of my life really. I followed in my father's footsteps as he did with his father before him. The military tradition is strong in my family. I knew more about it than anything else as a child." He said with a smile.

"I heard you were one of the first people to ever meet the Admiral and it was you who introduced him to Imperial service."

Parck glanced to the other end of the table and smiled at the memory. "Yes, I suppose you could say that. Although I am quite certain he knew what he was getting himself into far more than I did."

I grinned. "Yes, he has a nasty habit of doing that." I said.

"He has mentioned that you have a gift with languages." He said. "He said that you have been learning Cheunh."

I raised both eyebrows and nodded.

He chuckled. "Don't worry, he only mentioned it to me because I got into a discussion with him about how impossible it is and my own inability to learn it. He used your talents as proof that it was possible for a human to learn and speak it very well."

"You are trying to learn the Chiss language?"

He nodded. "Try is the operative word. It is incredibly difficult for me, but I was never much good with foreign languages even in school. What is your secret?"

I laughed quietly. "You'd never believe me if I told you."

He nodded, not wanting to be impolite or push. "What other languages do you speak?"

I listed them off and Parck gave me that holy banthas look. "Wow. So what are you doing working as Lord Vader's office girl? The Empire has need of humans with such skills, while translation and protocol droids are efficient they sometimes lack the edge that humans can have in negotiations and adaptation."

It was my turn to laugh. "That is the question, isn't it?"

"No, the real question is how you have managed to stay alive for so long." He countered.

I grinned. "That's not a question Commander that is a small miracle."

He laughed loud enough that it stopped the conversation at the other end of the table.

“Something you’d care to share?” Thrawn asked, looking at Parck, then to me. Parck glanced at me and shrugged slightly. He was about to answer but I beat him to it.

“I was just giving the Commander here my job description.” This earned me raised eyebrows. “The staying alive bit was what amused him.”

My uncle smirked, Thrawn raised an eyebrow and Captain Niriz scowled.

I looked at the Captain. “You disapprove, Captain?”

“I fail to see the humour in making light of your superior officer.” He said tartly.

I shook my head. “I am not making light of Lord Vader at all. On the contrary, I have the greatest respect for him, Captain. He allows me much freedom and I have learned a great deal from him, but surely you must admit there is a certain element of danger involved working so closely with his Lordship.”

Thrawn had to work to contain the twitch of his lips and my uncle turned what sounded suspiciously like laughter into a cough. I glanced at Voss Parck who merely smiled.

The captain had to work to maintain his scowl. “I have heard he can be, ah... difficult.” He said relenting slightly. “So Miss Gabriel, what is your secret?”

“Ah, well if I knew that I could probably sell it for a great deal of credits and retire.” I said.

And for the first time since I had come onboard Captain Niriz allowed himself to smile. For the remainder of the meal the conversation was a more relaxed affair.

When the dinner had ended Captain Niriz and Commander Parck excused themselves, citing duty as the reason. With the two men who had been flanking me gone I moved up to sit next to Thrawn, across from my uncle.

“Well,” my uncle continued the conversation he and Thrawn were in the middle of, “I have noticed since the Empire’s formation that many of the underground criminal organizations have slowly been squeezed out by Black Sun, or perhaps better to say they have been absorbed. I am sometimes surprised at the tolerance shown for Black Sun but I suppose they do serve a purpose.”

Thrawn laughed. “Perhaps, but I don’t see it that way. Tolerating criminal activities only encourages more. Part of the issue is, of course, that in the more out of the way places it is hard to control not only the criminals but the weak minded people in power who can be bought off by these criminals.”

My uncle nodded. “Yes, well we see a great deal of that on Tatooine with the Hutts and now it is becoming a serious issue on Corellia as well.”

“Corellia?” Thrawn’s eyebrow rose. “Seems surprising given the strong Imperial presence there.”

Uncle Vahlek laughed. “The local governing body turns a blind eye for the most part, and CorSec doesn’t get much co operation from the local Imperial detachment. It is difficult; I think to fight corruption on all sides. The local Black Sun rep is quite a bastard. Xizor is using the planet to train his brood at the moment.” My uncle paused and looked at the Admiral fully, “But then again, you know that already anyway.”

Thrawn nodded, “Yes, I am aware of the Black Sun issues on Corellia.” Then he asked. “Have you had to deal with him personally?”

“Yes although, I try to stay away from people such as Thyne. While he’s fairly intelligent, he’s a very nasty piece of work. He hires local thugs to strong arm for him and they are just a real pain in the neck to deal with. Most of the time what I do doesn’t concern or touch on their business so our paths don’t cross that often.” My uncle told him. “Most people with any brains don’t want to get in my way. Sometimes it is good to have a dangerous reputation; it means for the most part, I am left alone to conduct my business in peace.”

Thrawn smiled. “Yes, that does have its advantages.” He glanced at me but I kept my expression neutral. “Black Sun is a blight in the Empire and they are getting quite bold, it seems, flaunting their ability to run around the rules.”

“Well, Zekka Thyne is not someone to be trifled with. People are scared of him and his thugs. He’s bought off many of the locals and terrified the rest into submission. It’s hard to know who is working for him and who isn’t.” My uncle said.

Thrawn nodded. “Yes, it becomes a bigger issue when the local authorities are ineffectual. Good and loyal people who cannot be bought are hard to find these days.”

“Greed is a difficult vice to over come and the promise of easy credits will always be a strong lure to the weak minded.” My uncle said as he sat back in his chair and cradled his cup in his hands. “I have had run ins with Thyne and his thugs on numerous occasions. Mostly irritating, they are too cautious to interfere with my work, they fear bringing the Brotherhood down on them, but they have tried my patience on occasion.”

“Why not simply eliminate Thyne?” Thrawn asked.

My uncle allowed a small, almost nasty smile to play across his lips. “The thought had crossed my mind, the problem with that is it would solve nothing, another would spring up in Thyne’s place. Besides, I do not ‘eliminate’ anyone unless it is within my job parameters.” Uncle Vahlek said coolly, giving me a quick look which I returned. “I must say you seem well informed about the Tze’yusha’Jin, or is it just me that you are well informed about? I assume that the Empire keeps extensive dossiers on everyone who has done work for them.”

“I am aware of the reputation of the Tze’yusha’Jin but I cannot speak for the Empire on that. You are not the first of the Brotherhood that I have met. You will be pleased to know that as far as the Empire is concerned, you personally do not officially exist.” Thrawn replied.

I watched the back and forth silently. It was like being between two power couplings. The sparks were flying.

Uncle Vahlek nodded. "Well, I prefer my solitude and privacy as I am sure you do too." He said. "I take it the Empire has its own issues with Black Sun?"

Thrawn nodded. "We do. Black Sun does seem to get their talons into everything."

"I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't be a good thing just to go in and wipe the entire organization out."

"No, a head on confrontation with the organization would be futile." Thrawn said thoughtfully. "It would lead to more hate for the Empire, which is already seen as strong arming the little man."

My uncle nodded. "Perhaps you are right. Besides a full out attack on such a huge organization would take years. It's hard to flush out the under-ground factions and splinter groups. And doing so would cause no end of headaches. Better a little subterfuge than a head on attack, I suppose. I must admit, I am grateful it isn't my problem to deal with." He said. He finished his drink and looked at me with a smile then turned to Thrawn. "I need to be on my way, Admiral. As much as I have enjoyed this evening I am afraid I have appointments to keep."

"Yes, of course. I will arrange transport right away. I am certain that Miss Gabriel would be happy to escort you to the landing bay and have a chance to say goodbye?" he directed a slight smile towards me. "Now, if you will both excuse me, I must attend to some business." He said getting up.

We left the dining room; Thrawn and uncle Vahlek shook hands and parted ways. I walked with my uncle to the quarters he had been given so that he could grab his things. I waited while he changed into travelling clothes and slung his satchel across his shoulder. What had been slowly burning away at me finally came to the surface and before it was too late I blurted out to him.

"Zte'sa, I'm sorry about what happened. I was wrong to do that to you." My guilt was overwhelming. "I love you; I never wanted to hurt you. I don't know what I was thinking."

He regarded me for a moment then beckoned me to come to him. I did as he asked.

"Perhaps we are both to blame, lei'lei. I wonder now, if keeping such a secret from you was a good thing. You already carry so many secrets and burdens I didn't want to add to it, but that was wrong, I think." He said as he held my face in both of his hands. "I can understand your anger and your frustration but I just hope you learn to control it a little better. I am not your enemy."

I nodded. "I do try, Zte'sa."

He smiled, planted a little kiss on my forehead and let me go. "I suppose considering all you have been through, who you work for and are being trained by, you are doing a very good job at not turning into a spoiled little brat but my threat still stands." He warned.

I made a face. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Come on then, I am quite certain that efficient Admiral of yours has transportation waiting already."

I grinned and we began the walk to the landing bay.

"He is a very interesting, intelligent man." My uncle said after a few moments. "I can see what draws you to him."

"You two were talking about me." I said crossly.

He chuckled. "What did you expect? It is my job to look out for you; this includes grilling your love interests on their intentions with you." I scowled but before I could say anything he added thoughtfully, "He thinks very highly of you and *when* he speaks about you it is with a great deal of respect but he doesn't give much away. You seem to be a part of his life he keeps very private, which tells me a great deal about him. I can't say that the age difference between you two pleases me, although you were always attracted to older men, and choosing an Imperial Navy lifer, well that's your heart ache , lei'lei, not mine, but if he makes you happy...."

"He does." I said quietly. "And I owe him a lot. He helped me get through the aftermath of what Jyrki did, without his help I would probably still be a real mess." I said with a shrug. "I don't know how to put it into words, Zte'sa, he just gets me, you know?"

My uncle gave me a smile that reached his eyes. "Then I won't have to hurt him." He joked and the topic of conversation changed to chatter about home. As expected a shuttle was already prepped and waiting when we arrived at the landing bay. Not being fond of public displays of affection my uncle stopped with me a little ways from the shuttle, in the shadow of the gantry.

"Take care of yourself, lei'lei; if you need me you know how to reach me." He said giving me a light kiss on my forehead. "Oh, and for goodness sake, try to stay out of trouble; you're driving both me and your father to distraction!"

I nodded wordlessly and watched as he boarded the shuttle with a final wave of his hand. I watched the shuttle leave and then made my way back to my assigned quarters to change and hopefully get some rest.

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I stood staring out of the small window but I wasn't actually looking at anything. I had lain in bed in the pleasant enough guest quarters I had been assigned for nearly three hours tossing and turning. Restless and over tired, I just could not sleep. Finally at sometime around two am I had given up, wrapped a robe around my nightdress and gone for a walk. It never occurred to me that wandering around the *Admonitor* in my night clothes might raise some eyebrows, it was something I was used to doing. Lord Vader often got me out of bed at strange hours with sudden requests for work that urgently needed attending to. Most of the crew of the *Executor* who inhabited the same part of the ship where I lived and worked were more than used to seeing me hurry along

to passageways in my night clothes, bare foot rapidly tying my robe. Me being perfectly dressed was not something Lord Vader placed a high priority on.

There is a place in an ISD where most of the time no one ever goes, that's quiet and still. It is a small space near the ship's bow that is rarely used but has a small view port and more importantly silence. I stood staring out of the small window for what seemed an age, breathing in and out as I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. I missed him sorely, his guidance and his presence but he had given me enough tools that I could usually sort this inability to sleep out on my own. Once I felt calm enough I knelt in meditation pose, concentrated on breathing and let my thoughts drift. It was easier to be the stillness when stillness was all around. Unfortunately it didn't last long.

"Miss Gabriel?" a tentative voice asked.

I sighed and opened my eyes to see a young, somewhat nervous officer standing in the open door way.

"Yes." I answered without moving.

"Admiral Thrawn requests your presence immediately." He said.

I looked up at him. "Very well." I said getting up. "I should get dressed, then."

"Ma'am, he stressed immediately." He said.

It was half past two in the morning, standard Coruscant time, I wasn't going to start an argument, so I followed him in silence as he led me through the ship to Thrawn. He sounded the door chime to the Admiral's quarters and we stepped inside. Thrawn stood with his back to the door but turned when we entered.

"Miss Gabriel, please come in, sit down." he spoke politely. "Thank you Mr. Pirri, that will be all." The young man gave the Admiral a curt nod, turned beautifully on his heel and left, the door closing silently behind him.

I stood, my arms folded across my chest, and stared at the Thrawn. "Well?"

He smiled. "Please, sit." He gestured to the small living room section of his quarters.

I ignored him. "What is so urgent that it couldn't wait till I at least got some proper clothes on?"

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "As I understand it from your letters, this is proper dress for you much of the time." He said. "I am glad to see that my favourite robe is getting use." He waited a few heartbeats and then said for a third time. "Tekari, will you please sit down?"

I gave him a dirty look but did as he asked. "It's almost three in the morning." I said glancing at the chrono on the wall, then sitting on the small couch. He sat in the chair adjacent to me.

"Yes it is, which is why I was alerted that you were wandering around. I take it you are having trouble sleeping?" he asked pouring a glass of brandy and handing it to me. He sat back and refilled his glass of mineral water.

"Not joining me?" I asked taking a sip of the brandy and relishing its deep smoky flavour.

"I am on duty, my dear." He explained. "So what is keeping you up?"

"Strange ship, different engine noise and a bed I am not used to." I said with a shrug. He arched an eyebrow. I sighed. "And knowing you are here but untouchable doesn't help."

"I understand." He said.

"How did that young man know where to find me?"

"I remembered you telling me about the quietest place on an ISD. If you do not want to be found, sj'iu tekari, you should not share your secrets." He teased, just a little.

"You should respect my secrets!" I said.

"I do, but when you don't take your comm with you then I must use all means necessary find you. The last time I let you out of my sight, as I recall, the results were unpleasant. Let us just say I am covering my bases, it would reflect terribly on my record if I lost Lord Vader's personal assistant a second time."

I sighed and curled up on the couch, tucking my feet up under me. I hated when he was right. "So, what is on your mind Za'ar?"

"I thought you might want to tell me about your adventures with the Bounty Hunter." He said lightly.

"At ten to three in the morning?"

"You are awake, and right now nothing else demands my attention." He countered.

I grinned. "You mean I have aroused your curiosity concerning my knowledge about Fett and his armour." I said. "If I didn't know you better I'd say you were jealous."

He made a face. "Chiss do not believe in jealousy." He said a tad more sharply than he meant to and I felt the hint of untruth under his words. It made me smile.

"Well, you have nothing to worry about with me." I said.

"I do not worry about you in that respect." He said and then added quietly. "But I do miss you."

I looked up at him in surprise. His last statement had been unexpected. I had no idea how to respond to it without getting sentimental so I just nodded, sighed and sipped my drink; slowly the knots in my shoulders and the tension that had kept me awake began to ease up.

"Your uncle is a most intelligent and interesting man. I was glad to make his acquaintance." He said changing the subject. "I can see why you adore him so much."

I laughed. "He said almost the exact same thing about you."

That earned me a raised eyebrow. "Really, I was under the impression he did not approve of me and my relationship with you."

I smiled slightly and repeated my uncle's words exactly to Thrawn who nodded. "He is right in all he says."

"It's a bit late to go back to just flirting now." I told him tartly.

He came to sit by my side. "I did not mean it that way." He said gently.

I sighed and made a face. "It's late, I'm tired and I can't sleep. It is absolute hell being so close to you and having to be so formal all the time, so if you have a point will you please make it?"

He caressed the side of my face gently and nodded. "Tell me how you knew about that little trick with the Mandalore armour." He coaxed. I was too tired to resist.

I stared at my brandy as I swirled it about in the glass. Its fumes combined with the scent of the man sitting near me made me sad, made me homesick, but I wasn't certain exactly what home it was I was sickening for. I looked up at his face.

"If I add 'please' will you indulge me?" He asked.

I drew a very slow deep breath. I wasn't sure where to even begin. It had happened such a long time ago. I had known who Boba Fett was for most of my life, once my father had taken over the docking bay. The first time he had shown up it had caused great panic. He wasn't known for his happy personality but he and my father had established a good working relationship. He would show up, every now and then, needing some serious work done on his ship, repairs he could not fix himself. He would be polite and to the point. He told the mechanics working with him on his ship exactly what he wanted and often how to do it. At first he was a fascination for me, his face always covered by his helmet and I was as curious as a jax so I would follow him around and ask him all manner of questions which he mostly ignored until my father, apologetic, would haul me away. Fett had fascinated my child mind and imagination. He became one of my father's customers that I adored.

Once I had started working and learning the mechanic's trade I also began to work on his ship when he would occasionally show up, usually trailing after Jyrki because he was the head mechanic at the bay and I was the student. By then I wasn't really interested in Fett any more, it was Jyrki who held me in sway. This did not go unnoticed by the bounty hunter who had found it all very amusing.

I stopped for a moment, lost in these memories, to sip at my brandy. If I closed my eyes I could see him in his armour as clearly as if he were standing next to me. I could smell the engine oils and dusty air of the docking bay and feel the heat and weight of Fett's unseen gaze. I smiled.

Thrawn watched me carefully. "So you have known this bounty hunter almost your whole life?" he asked breaking into my memories.

I nodded. "Odd really I never thought about it that way before, but yes I suppose you are right. Although on Tatooine that isn't so hard to believe, I mean Fett works for Jabba the Hutt a lot and my father's docking bay has a really good

reputation, people trust him. A lot of people use his services. Fett has known me since I was a very little girl."

"What happened next?" He asked.

I sighed.

Next had been Jyrki and all that glorious mess, the arguments with my father, the desperate desire for change, for escape from the horrible disaster of a teenaged broken heart. I did not see Fett next until after I had left home and started dancing at Jabba's palace. I told Thrawn about how Fett had come to my rescue and what he had said and done. The description of my lesson in head butting had made Thrawn smile. It was after that incident and shortly before I got out of the palace job when I got the chance to repay Fett's gesture. I had been dancing the late shift. The very late shift so that by the time I was done, the last of the drunks, Jabba's courtiers and the party goers had fallen into a coma on the main audience room floor, meaning that I could go to my room and rest. I had hated dancing the late shift, it was the worst but because I was the newest hire I got stuck with it often.

It was quiet as I made my way through the labyrinth of corridors to the out of the way quarters set aside for people like me. At that hour of the morning nothing in the palace moved except the B'omarr monks, so the last thing I was expecting was to be grabbed when I walked into my room. One hand had clamped over my mouth and the other grabbed my arm, making sure I didn't struggle.

"I won't harm you, so don't scream. I just need your help." I knew the voice and had nodded.

He let me go and I turned around to see Boba Fett, he had slumped slightly and was holding his side.

"You're hurt?" I had asked.

"Yes and I can't get to the wound. No one here must see me this way." He had growled.

I had nodded and then I had shut and locked the door. "I understand. Tell me what you need me to do."

And that is what he did. I helped him take off his helmet and he instructed me on how to undo the armour and the liner shirt. The twist in the joiner straps frustrated me and he had tried not to laugh as I swore because laughing hurt him. He was patient as he explained their trick and although he made no sound, I know it had hurt to move as I helped strip off the shirt which was actually part of the armour he wore. There was a nasty scorch in the fabric and across his back, under his shoulder blade, was a terrible looking burn. He had brought with him a med kit and he walked me through what needed to be done. I didn't have a lot of experience at playing nurse. While I washed the nasty looking wound he had explained to me why he wore his armour that way.

"My father taught me this trick. There was a time when it was popular, even fashionable to steal Mandalore armour. He found out that by twisting the

joiner straps this way it was virtually impossible for someone to undo without serious co-operation from the wearer.” He had explained. “Not many know about it.”

“I thought this armour made you virtually invincible?” I had said as I finished up cleaning the wound.

He had nodded. “It does, but there are some weapons that can penetrate the liner material and the duraplast doesn’t cover everything. It was a lucky shot with a powerful weapon.” He had winced slightly as I applied a bacta salve.

“Sorry, I am not a medic and I’m not very good at this.” My hands had trembled as I had bandaged his wound.

“You are doing just fine.” He had said and had tried to get up but failed. For the first time I had looked carefully at his face. He was very pale and exhausted. I knew enough to understand that he had to rest.

“How long...?”

“Three days.” He had said. “Out on the Rishi Maze, I ran into some unexpected trouble. Will be paying a visit to your father tomorrow to get some parts for Slave I”

“You need to lie down, rest a bit or you won’t be able to do anything or go anywhere.”

He had shaken his head and argued with me, but he was in a great deal of pain and I had sedatives. I had pressed the hypo-spray to his neck before he could stop me and then realised how stupid that was, because he was heavy and dragging him to the bed was a difficult procedure. With a lot of work, I got him on the bed lying face down so that his back had a chance to heal. He was naked from the waist up and I had never seen a body with so many scars on it.

I had watched him for a few moments to be sure he really was sedated and then I had showered and changed out of my dance costume. Once I had cleaned up the mess of bloody rags and bandage material, I had sat by the bed and watched Fett sleep. It wasn’t the first time I had seen him without his helmet but it was the first time I had ever seen him utterly relaxed. Without the bitter, hard look he carried with him at all times, he was a handsome man after a fashion. I had wondered about his past then, where he had been born, who his family had been but I knew that he would never talk about such personal things, even with me, someone he trusted enough to come to when he needed help. I know I dozed a little but never fully slept. It was the first time I had ever seen someone badly injured, let alone had to help them. I didn’t want him to up and die on me. In the morning I had slipped out for food, locking the door. When I came back Fett was awake and sitting up.

“How do you feel?” I had asked offering him the food and tea.

“Like hell, but I will live to fight another day.” He had said. “You have my gratitude.”

“Well, I think we are even.” I had said shyly. “But why come to me? I mean a medic would have been better and maybe even closer.”

“I knew I could trust you to keep word and keep your mouth shut.” He had said simply.

I had just stared at him then. I had adored him since childhood. Hearing that he trusted me was like being given the keys to the galaxy. I had nodded shyly and smiled. I didn’t know what to say so I just said ‘thank you’.

He had merely inclined his head, finished his food and after a time in the ‘fresher, with my help, he got dressed.

He had stopped before putting his helmet on, before leaving to give me a stern look, lifting my chin with two fingers, the way he often did with Rystáll, one of the other dancers he spoke with on and off. “Get out of this place, Merlyn. You don’t belong here.” There was a hint of threat mingled with sadness in his words and while it had not been the first time he had said them to me, I suspected it would be the last. It had not occurred to me then that he had known me since I was a small child, in some ways, from a distance at least had watched me grow up. He had been a part of my life but I had also, in some strange peripheral way, been a part of his and I had never really noticed or considered that at all. Thinking about it now made me terribly sad but also grateful. Fett had not said anything else but had given me a nod of his head as he left.

I sat back and watched Thrawn’s face carefully, while sipping my brandy. “I smartened up and quit working at the palace after that. I suppose part of me felt I owed it to him and I also felt I was pushing my luck. I saw him once more, briefly at the Docking bay. We didn’t speak to each other but he had given me that nod which told me everything I needed to know. That *‘we share a secret’* sort of nod. I never spoke of this incident to anyone ever and you are the only person who knows about it.” I said. “I hope it stays that way.”

He nodded. “You have my word it will.” He reached over and stroked that annoying lock of hair from my face. “You get yourself into the strangest situations. Most people would have been terrified of even being in the same room with a bounty hunter of his reputation.”

I shrugged. “People feel the same way about Lord Vader. I think it is just what you are used to, you know? And maybe I am not so easily scared by some of the rougher side of the Galaxy, growing up in a place like Mos Eisley has to be good for some things. Plus he was known to me. He’d never done me any harm; in fact he had saved my neck. It never occurred to me to be scared.” I yawned. “Now it’s your turn. You did promise that this was an exchange of information.”

“It’s just past four in the morning.” He spoke gently.

I shook my head. “Uh uh, no deal.”

He smiled, caressing my cheek with the backs of his fingers. “You need to sleep; you are fighting it as we speak. If I start to tell you any story you will crash in the middle of it and I shall be forced to repeat myself and you know how much Chiss loath to repeat themselves.”

I gave him a cross look. “No. You said an information swap not a one sided no trade affair!”

“I will be asking you for your help in about four or so hours from now, to sort out the details on that Mandalorian armour. I need you awake and aware for that. I promise I’ll tell you what you want to know then.” He said.

I fought back on another yawn. He was right, as usual, which annoyed me to no end. He knew he had won when I drained the last of the brandy from my glass and got up. No matter how tired I was I knew that falling asleep on his little couch would be neither appropriate nor comfortable. Sharing his bed here was out of the question.

He stood up with me and cupped my face in his hands. “You are not the only one who finds this situation frustrating, my dear.” He said softly. His hands were warm and I closed my eyes. His sudden kiss was gentle, at first, but it soon became breathtakingly intense. I ached for him with such a longing I thought I would shatter from it. It was heart breaking. I opened myself up to this and sent the sensation back to him. I felt him respond as he pulled me closer; the kiss which had begun tender and careful became possessive and more aggressive. I thought if one could die from drowning in the sensations that kissing stirred up, then this was a mighty fine way to go. He was extraordinarily good at kissing me and I didn’t want it to end but I pulled away from him anyway, even though he fought to keep me close.

“Please don’t.” I shook my head, both hands pushing against his chest. “I am barely hanging on to my self control as it is. This won’t help. All this does is make me want more, which I can’t have, can I?” He shook his head so I continued. “And before you give me the devotion to duty and how would it look to the men under me lecture, just let me say I do understand, I just don’t like it very much. I didn’t think it would be so difficult to be in this situation.”

He looked at me for a moment then nodded. “We are such creatures of appetite.” He said softly, his voice had gone husky. “Sometimes even with the best of intentions it still rules us.” He was fighting his own battle with the lust and desire he felt. We stepped back from each other, taking a moment to catch our breath, to come back to our senses.

“Whatever.” I told him crossly as I headed for the door. “This bites bantha butts, you know that? I have no idea what I am doing here and apparently neither do you.” It was easier to be angry with him, with the situation than it was to want him as badly as I did. He made thinking clearly impossible.

“You are here because I requested it. I knew you had knowledge about certain bounty hunters and I thought you might be helpful, and as it turns out I was right.” He said retreating to the cool, alien reserve he so often hid behind.

“Is that all? Because I could have told you all this stuff via HoloNet transmission.”

He shook his head. “No, even the most secure transmissions can be sliced. This needed to be kept quiet. And I wanted it delivered personally by you.”

“More bloody secrets!” I snapped ignoring the backhanded compliment.

“I am helping Lord Vader, it will make him happy.”

“Nothing makes him happy! He’s never happy!” I was now officially cranky.

Thrawn just chuckled, following me to the door. “Now you are just being difficult. Go to bed. We have serious work to do in a short period of time. I need you rested not argumentative.”

“You like me argumentative!” I replied.

He smiled. It made me shiver. “Only when we have time to play, my dear.” He said, caressing the side of my face, toying with my hair. Now he was just being mean.

I shook my head, backed away from him and did the smartest thing I could, I opened the door and got out of there as fast as possible. It was beyond me how he could whet my desire and make me cross both at the very same time. I stormed back to my quarters, burning my fury and frustration out along the way. I was well and truly exhausted by the time I cleaned my teeth and tumbled into the bed. Sleep found me almost before my head hit the pillow unfortunately it didn’t last nearly long enough.

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The just over four hours of sleep afforded me before I received my wakeup call were full of vague and restless dreams. I showered and dressed, then stumbled along behind my young escort to the ready room to meet Thrawn.

“Good morning, my dear. I trust you slept well?” he said cheerfully as I entered the room.

I looked up at him crossly. “Not really.”

He smiled. “I thought you might want to eat breakfast first.” He said, his hand on the small of my back leading me to the table set of two.

I wasn’t awake enough to argue with him; instead I sat down and watched as he poured me a cup of what smelled like very strong stimcaf. He added cream and sugar and pushed the cup in front of me, then sat down across from me. He didn’t try to engage me in any sort of conversation until I had taken a gulp of my drink, he knew me just too well.

I sipped from my cup and stared at him blearily, watching as he buttered the Corellian scones he often enjoyed. It seemed so odd, so out of context to be sitting across from him, as we had so many times before, eating breakfast as though nothing had changed. He handed me a scone and I took it.

“I require your assistance in finishing the Mandalorian armour to pass as Kast. I seem to recall you are fairly skilled at that sort of thing. I have seen you work on your ship so I know what you are capable of. As you so often say, it is all in the details.” He said, switching to his native language because we alone.

I nodded. “Okay. Then what?”

“Do you not have work of your own to do?”

“Probably, I still need a terminal and secure access though.” I conceded grumpily.

“That is already being arranged, my dear.” He said, refilling my empty cup.

“How long will I be here?”

“Until Lord Vader joins us.”

“Which will be?”

“When the job at hand is done.”

I sighed and looked up at him. “You know,” I said. “You really annoy the sandjiggers out of me.”

He smiled. “Yes. I do know.” He said and then with a sly grin added. “And now you can tell me that in my own language.”

We finished breakfast in silence and then in the quiet of the other room we sat down and began the work to make the Mandalorian armour look the way it should. I was surprised at the fact no one else seemed to know about this project and asked about that while I was trying to paint the decal on the left side of the breast plate that Kast wore.

“This project is one which, due to its nature, I wish to be kept quiet. While the outcome will greatly benefit the Empire in general and Vader specifically it is an unconventional project.” He said. “Besides, I prefer not to have too much attention turned on my affairs.”

I arched my right eyebrow and gave him a look.

“Sorry, bad choice of words.” He smiled.

I finished the decal and sat back. “You owe me some information.” I said.

“Ah yes, you desire to know about the Tze’yusha’Jin.” He said.

I blinked at him and waited for a better answer.

Thrawn sat back and looked at me carefully. “Have you ever given any thought as to why your uncle has not wished you to know the exact nature of who he is, what he does?”

“Of course.” I said as I started to chip some paint off the armour with my finger nail.

“Then why do you push?”

“What could be so bad that he doesn’t want me to know? I don’t understand all this secrecy.”

“Is it not enough that he simply does not wish you to know?” he countered.

“What is Tze’yusha’Jin?” I asked ignoring the implications of what he was asking.

His expression stayed neutral but there was a brief flash of disappointment in his eyes. He sighed. “Tze’yusha’Jin is a title.”

“I know that!”

“Then you know what it means.”

I nodded. “But what I don’t know is why everyone is scared of it.”

“Why are people scared of the Dantassi?” he asked.

I frowned. “Well, they have a pretty fierce reputation.” I said.

“But you know more than the average person, what do you think of this now, are you still scared of them as you once were?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Vahlek Akosh is not the only member of the Tze’yusha’Jin that you know.” He said slowly.

“Oh?” I said halting what I was doing and giving him my full attention.

“What if I were to tell you that Kirja’navaar’inkjerii also held that title.”

I didn’t know how to react to that. It was just about the last thing I expected to hear. After a very long silence I asked. “Would he and Zte’sa Vahlek know each other?”

He nodded slowly. “Most likely, although as to how well, that I could not say.”

I sighed, remembering the way my uncle had looked at my bone mask, the wistfulness in his voice when he had spoken about the Dantassi. It also perhaps answered how it was he understood Cheunh. Now his reaction made more sense but it also stirred up more questions.

“Sj’iu tekari, the Tze’yusha’Jin is a brotherhood that is both secretive and elite. While the title means ‘He who hunts’ it describes nothing. These men, and it is exclusively men, are hand picked, difficult to get to know and about as dangerous as they come. They are chosen for various reasons, skills and strengths. How and why they are chosen I could not tell you. I am not privy to that information.” He said thoughtfully. “I suppose the best way to describe them in a very general way is to liken them to a hybrid of assassins, hunters and trackers, but again none of these things describes what they are and do with any degree of accuracy.”

I sighed. “But people fear them, why?”

“Because they are very good at what ever it is they are asked to do. The reputation they have comes from the damage left in their wake, well, the damage that is visible. Make no mistake the Tze’yusha’Jin are deadly, but they also protect and they act as finders.” He shook his head. “I lack the words to tell you what you want to know.”

“I guess I wanted to know why everyone is so scared of him when I don’t think he’s scary. What it is about my uncle that terrifies them when his name and that title are mentioned in the same sentence.”

“They do not fear the man so much as they fear the reputation.” He said. “Kirja’navaar’inkjerii is also greatly feared and respected but you are not scared of him because you know him, just as you know your uncle.”

“I don’t get it. Everyone who knows my uncle as Tze’yusha’Jin comments on the attachment he has to me, how is it that Navaari has a family?” I asked. “I got the impression that these Tze’yusha’Jin didn’t like attachments.”

Thrawn raised an eyebrow. “Some people believe the Dantassi are cannibals. Is this true?”

“No.” I snorted.

“The more a fearful myth is perpetuated the larger the fear behind the myth becomes.” Thrawn said. “Perhaps to the outside world Tze’yusha’Jin Akosh

has led a quiet life of solitude, without attachments and family, but you know that is not true, don't you?" Thrawn asked. "He befriended your father long before you came into the picture, then your family and then you. He is just as much a family man as Kirja'navaar'inkjerii. People believe what they are led to believe and like the Dantassi themselves, the Tze'yusha'Jin like to allow the myth of fear to shroud their truths." He said. "Do not ask me what those truths are, tekari, I do not know and I do not ask."

"Zte'sa Vahlek told me he didn't want me to know about it because he was selfish."

Thrawn nodded. "You adore him and you look up to him. He doesn't want to lose that and that is what he fears, should you actually find out what he has done. I am quite certain of all the people you know in your life he is amongst the deadliest but he does not wish you to know this side of him. What would you do if you found out some terrible dark secret? Remember how you felt after your vision in the Jedi Council chamber. There are some things that should be left alone, some secrets that should be allowed to remain secret."

"I still don't get it."

He smiled. "No, I know you don't. It is, as he said, a selfish reason on his part but he doesn't want to lose you. He doesn't want to lose your love for him and you do love him. It is so plainly written on your face when you are in his presence that even the most stupid of creatures in this galaxy could see it."

I frowned.

He sighed. "Trust me on this. That despite what men say and how most men act, losing the admiration and love of someone they care for is painful and they don't wish to experience this." He smiled a little wistfully. "Men, in general, both enjoy and need the flattery of young women contrary to what they will tell you. I suppose that one could say it is this adoration of daughters, sisters, wives and so on that keep men from becoming utterly stone hearted and colder than the ice on my home world. You are a part of your uncle that reminds him of what is good in this galaxy. No wonder he balks at losing that." He said.

What he said made a sort of sense to me and some where deep down I knew that he was right. I didn't understand it completely but I nodded to show him I accepted his explanation.

"But he's deadly, my uncle?" I asked after a long pause.

Thrawn nodded. "He earned that title, so yes he is. But my dear," he added with a look, "So are you."

"As is Navaari." I continued ignoring his comment about me.

He nodded.

"Is he evil?"

He frowned, steeping his fingers together in thought. "Define evil." The discussion was becoming circular.

"Why is this all so complicated?" I asked ignoring his question because my definition of evil began with the Emperor and that wasn't something I was going

to utter, no matter what language I was speaking, out loud on an Imperial war ship.

He smiled. "Life wouldn't be interesting if it was simple." he said reaching over to stroke my face. "And you have a tendency to make it very complicated. You think far too much about the most curious things."

I sat glumly with my head in my hands. "When you said sharing information this isn't what I had in mind."

That made him laugh. "Would you have told me that story about Fett without the fruit of this information being dangled before you?"

"No." I said, although I wasn't so sure about it. While I had never been sworn to secrecy I knew that Boba Fett wanted the incident at Jabba's kept quiet.

"There you go." He said smugly.

"You tricked me." I said crossly.

"Just a little, after all you did learn something new." He reminded me.

"Why?"

He smiled. "Because, as you so aptly put it, you piqued my curiosity and I wanted to know if I had competition from this Bounty Hunter or not. You appear quite enamoured with him when you speak of him."

I just shook my head and rolled my eyes. He was teasing, at least I that's what I thought. Sometimes with Thrawn it was hard to tell.

"How is the armour coming along?" he asked changing the subject.

"I'm done. It's as close to the images I have seen of Kast as possible." I said.

"I am sure it will be more than suitable for what I have in mind." He said.

"I'd ask what that is but you won't tell me will you?"

He smirked and was about to answer when his comm beeped.

"Yes Captain?" Thrawn asked.

"Sir, The *Hopskip* has just left the planet's atmosphere and will be within range in a few moments. You said you wished to be alerted so you could prepare yourself."

"Yes, Captain. Thank you; you know what needs to be done. I will be waiting for your signal." Thrawn replied standing up.

"Aye aye, Admiral. Niriz out."

Thrawn looked at me and smiled. "Let the games begin. Help me get dressed. That little trick with the joiner straps is fiddly."

I chuckled, gathering up the armour as he picked up the helmet and followed him.

"What amuses you?"

"I was wondering when you would get around to asking me to help you undress."

He turned and looked at me, arching his eyebrow. "I am not asking you to undress me."

"Oh, so you are going to wear the armour over that uniform?"

If he had had discernable pupils I am certain he would have rolled his eyes. "I see your point." He said with a slight twitch at the corners of his mouth. "Well, my dear it wouldn't be the first time and I am sure it won't be the last."

I nodded. "One can only hope." I muttered under my breath.

The transition from Admiral Thrawn to Jodo Kast was fun to watch. It was not the first time I had ever seen him do this, assume a role and become someone else. When I told him he had missed his calling as an actor he had just laughed, replying that he preferred to stay out of the public eye. It occurred to me then that both the roles he had taken on, involved the wearing of masks.

I left him to his guise and his games and made my way back to my quarters. He had assured me that I would find full terminal access provided for me and I could do my work from there. I smiled when I saw that not only did I have a computer terminal to work from but he had also provided me with everything I needed to make my spiced coffee, there were serious advantages to having someone know me really well. I sat and got to work, because there was little else for me to do and Lord Vader would be snarky if I didn't keep up with his schedule.

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Lord Vader strode down the shuttle's ramp, his cloak flowing behind him. I could tell by the way he walked that he was not overly happy. The stormtroopers and officers that were there to greet him all snapped to attention and saluted as he passed. He ignored them. Captain Niriz began to speak but Lord Vader cut him off with a brusque flap of his hand and turned to look at me.

"Good evening Lord Vader." I said handing him the data pad I had been holding. "I trust your flight was a pleasant one?"

He looked at the datapad and growled something unintelligible about bad pilots as he walked to the turbo lift. I had to trot to keep up, as did captain Niriz.

"Have you more to add to this, girl?" he snapped, sensing my thoughts.

"Prince Xizor was really annoyed with your last request for rescheduling the meeting over the possible new ship designs he wishes to discuss with you. He has demanded to speak with you personally. His office refuses to communicate with me any more until you comply."

"You may inform the Prince that if he wishes to speak to me he must make an appointment through you. If he doesn't like that then he will not get to speak with me. What else?"

I sighed. The battle of wills between Lord Vader and Prince Xizor was getting beyond the pointless and stupid stage. "The latest batch of Probe droids will be ready in two days. I asked them to deliver, as per your request, to the *Executor* but they will need to know where to deliver them to."

He nodded as we stepped out of the turbo lift and headed towards the bridge. "Next?"

"Admiral Thrawn will be delayed in meeting with you. He has encountered an unexpected difficulty. There is no ETA as of yet." I said.

He paused and turned to look at me then at Captain Niriz who paled visibly, but before he could do or say anything else I added. "And the Emperor wishes to speak with you, at your earliest convenience."

"Why did you not say that right away!" he snarled and turned on Captain Niriz. "I require privacy!"

The Captain nodded and showed Lord Vader to Thrawn's ready room with a secure HoloNet transmitter. Only after the door closed did the captain turn to me and raise his eyebrows.

"That was a clever trick." He said.

I gave him a small smile. "Distraction works best when delivering news that might annoy him. He'll be more cross that I didn't tell him about the Emperor wishing to speak with him than about anything else but by the time he's finished speaking with his master he will have mostly forgotten about being cross over the bad news."

"What happens when that doesn't work?"

I gave him a slight smile. "You don't really want to know."

He nodded.

"What do you suppose the Admiral is doing down there?" I asked as I walked over to the side view port and looked at the planet of Corellia. It seemed small and fragile from the high orbit the *Admonitor* had taken. I wondered where the *Executor* was. I couldn't see her, but I was sure she was not far away.

Niriz shrugged. "Confusing the devil out of who ever he ends up working with I suspect."

That made me laugh because it was most likely true. Niriz smiled but then stiffened as Lord Vader returned to the bridge. He made a come here gesture with his hand and with a little glance at the Captain I did as he asked.

"You have a secure work station?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Show me." He said grabbing for my arm, I dodged him and we left the bridge together. The walk to the quarters I had been assigned was silent and when we entered the room, it seemed suddenly smaller with Lord Vader in it.

"It would appear that Prince Xizor is unimpressed by your secretarial skills and has complained to the Emperor about my lack of co operation in the matter of meetings." Lord Vader said as he began to punch a code into the HoloNet transmitter. "Go stand out of the transmission range." He ordered and flapped his hand at me in a *get out of my sight* manner.

I did as he asked and sat down in the chair in the corner of the room away from the HoloNet transmitter to watch.

The small holoprojecter flickered to life and the familiar image of Price Xizor's blond female assistant flickered into place.

"Lord Vader, what an unexpected surprise..."

He cut her off. "Dispense with the false pleasantries Guri, where is he?" he snapped.

“If you are referring to Prince Xizor then I am afraid he is unavailable.” She replied coolly.

“He complained to my Master that I was unreachable and now he refuses to speak with me? Is this how he intends to curry my favour?”

Guri drew a deep breath and folded her arms in that all too familiar stance of defiance. “Your female assistant is difficult to deal with.” Guri told him after a few moments. “She is insolent, defiant and ...”

Again Lord Vader cut her off. “Miss Gabriel does as she is instructed. If you are displeased with her performance then you should direct your complaints to me. The Emperor has better things to do than to listen to the whining of the spoiled, wealthy, social elite over misunderstandings with a mere office girl. Get Xizor on line immediately or there will be repercussions!”

She paused just a moment to let Lord Vader know she was not happy at how she was being spoken to and then she nodded. “He is indisposed at this very moment. He will be available in ten minutes.”

“Use this holonet address!” Lord Vader said and terminated the connection.

I watched as he sat back in the too small chair and folded his arms across his chest. “Indisposed!” he snorted. “Lounging in his bathtub more like!”

“I am not going to ask how you know that.” I said.

“Probably for the best that you do not.” He nodded and then as the transmitter peeped for the incoming signal. Lord Vader waved his hand at me to sit still and he accepted the transmission.

“Prince Xizor, how good of you to take time out of your busy schedule to meet with me.” Lord Vader said, the sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable.

“Think nothing of it Lord Vader, how may I assist you?” the prince oozed charm and I shuddered involuntarily.

“It was my understanding that you wished to speak with me, in fact you were so adamant about it you even went to the Emperor to express dismay at my not being available.”

There was a momentary silence and I had to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from giggling. The holo image of the Prince shivered and then realigned.

Prince Xizor inclined his head, his topknot pony tail swinging with his movement. “I merely mentioned to his Excellency how busy you must be, because you were nearly impossible to reach and I had valuable information to impart. The young lady who arranges your calendar is most unhelpful in these matters. I prefer to deal with you directly, after all we are supposed to be working closely on this proposed project...”

I could feel Lord Vader working very hard to maintain his cool. “Get to the point.” He snapped.

Xizor smiled and began to give Lord Vader detailed information on the latest project they were, in theory, working on. It was interesting and long

winded but much to my surprise Lord Vader did not interrupt and when Xizor had finished he was quiet for a moment.

“This is a worthy endeavour. I trust your people are capable of producing these prototypes?”

Xizor nodded. “I guarantee their work.” He said.

Lord Vader leaned in close to the holo projector. “For your sake, Xizor, I hope so.” He growled. “Go behind my back again to complain to the Emperor and you will feel my wrath, do we have an understanding?”

“I believe we do, Lord Vader.” The prince said smoothly.

Vader nodded and terminated the connection, sat back in the chair and tilted his head to one side, looking at me. “What did you sense from him?”

“You mean was he lying?” I asked surprised at his question.

Lord Vader nodded.

“It’s difficult for me to tell especially with holograms and the Prince is always hiding something but I didn’t get the impression that anything he said to you in this message was a direct lie.”

“What do you mean, always hiding something?”

I shrugged. “It is hard to define. You are always angry. When I perceive you using my gifts you come across to me like white noise. The emperor is like smoke. I receive almost nothing from him. With the Prince it is like he is wrapped in mirrors. What you see on the surface is not what is happening underneath. It isn’t that he is lying but he hides behind a facade. Does that make sense?”

He stared at me for a moment then nodded. “Yes, it makes perfect sense.” He got up and started to pace around the room. “He is up to something, I sense it but so far nothing he has done warrants my suspicion. In the last few years he has curried great favour with the Emperor and garnered a place in the high court. I do not understand why my master allows this. ”

“Maybe because he heads Black Sun?” I said tartly. “I am quite sure he is always up to something, perhaps this way the Emperor feels he can keep a closer eye on him.”

“He hides his Black Sun activities behind legitimate businesses. He is clever and difficult to catch, how ever eventually he will slip up and I will have the evidence I need to prove that I am right about his motives for wishing to work so closely within the Royal Court.”

I drew a deep breath. “You spy on each other.”

“Of course we do, you stupid girl. How else would I know what he is doing?” Lord Vader said.

“So, if he knows what you are doing and vice versa then why did he run to the Emperor and complain about me behind your back like a spoiled little school boy?” I said crossly.

I could sense the smile behind Lord Vader's mask, it was slow and nasty. "That was a power play. In doing so he is telling me that he exerts some small influence over the Emperor and I must bend to his wishes." He said thoughtfully.

"Well that's just a waste of time!"

"Yes, it is but Xizor does not see it this way, he sees these small power plays as little victories, undermining my place at the Emperor's side. He is obsequious and he manages to twist words to his advantage. He wheedles his way around the Emperor in a most displeasing manner." Lord Vader said. "And my Master sees fit to allow it, although to what end I don't know." He stopped pacing and looked at me. "However, I am sure that together we can find this out."

"Together?" I asked carefully not liking the sound of that at all.

"You are the daughter of a Jedi with an unusual talent for disseminating truth from lie. I believe you will be present more often than you have been during some of my meetings with the Prince. I take it he does not know of your talents."

I shrugged. "I don't think he knows anything about me, except that I am your annoying office girl. I don't even think he recalls the incident at the Grand Ball from three years ago."

"Incident? Explain."

I sighed, got up and made myself a cup of tea while I told him about the Prince's little trick using pheromones and how Shiv had saved me at the Grand Ball where I had first been presented to the Emperor. I described the sensation of being enthralled and how addled it had made my head feel.

"You should have spoken of this at the time it happened." He said. He was annoyed but there was no real anger in his words.

"I was a bit overwhelmed at the time!" I retorted. "And you were not in the best of moods! Besides since when were you ever interested in my personal life, or the mating rituals of the Falleen?" I asked.

"Your private life does not interest me at all but threats to Imperial security do. You have access to a great deal of personal information about me and my life, as well as sensitive information about Imperial business. I can only imagine what sort of information you would let slip while mating with a creature who possesses the power to addle your brain."

I almost choked on my tea. "Mate!!!?" I shuddered involuntarily. "I would never *mate* with that man!"

"It is my understanding from what you told me that you would have had no choice, he would have beguiled you into doing so."

He was making me cross but he was also right. "Well lucky for me Shiv knew what was going on and saved me from being ...how did you put it, beguiled." I said snarkily.

"I shall remember to thank him the next time I see him." He retorted. "You do seem to attract the scyks and Xizor is one of the worst."

I sighed. "And you want me to be in the same room with this particular scyk?"

"Do you feel you are likely to wish to couple with him?" he inquired.

I gave him my best version of a hard stare. "No, he is repulsive and besides I already have my hands full, and contrary to popular belief I am not promiscuous, one man in my life is enough!"

Lord Vader laughed. Something which always made my skin crawl. It was a truly disturbing sound because the vocal augmentation and his breathing regulator made his laughter something that sounded like a cross between a haurton howler and a baby Krayt dragon. I just made a face.

He stopped pacing and stood at the window with his back to me, then he glanced over his shoulder and looked at me. "I was unaware that he used chemical means to attract females. It would explain why he cannot seem to keep them around."

It was my turn to laugh. "He gets bored of them and then he dumps them often unceremoniously." I said.

Lord Vader nodded. "Of course he does. Where is the challenge in pursuing then maintaining a relationship when it is handed to you on a chemically induced platter?" he asked. "I am quite certain Admiral Thrawn did not pursue you because you were easy prey. It took him three years to finally bed you, did it not?"

I just blinked at him and for a few moments I was utterly speechless. That was Lord Vader, blunt and to the point as always. Tact was not high on his list of things he cared about. While I had been fairly certain that my relationship with Thrawn had never been a big secret from Lord Vader, hearing him discuss it so offhandedly in that manner was disturbing. I sighed.

"Seeing as how he is on your mind, what exactly is the nature of the Admiral's delay?" Lord Vader asked. He was picking up my thoughts.

"He is on my mind because you brought him up." I said crossly. "Stay out of my head!"

"Learn not to broadcast your feelings so openly then."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder!" he growled. "The last thing I need is a love sick assistant, who cannot keep her mind on the job at hand."

It was on the tip of my tongue to snap back, asking him what he knew about it but I managed to bite back my words in time. He knew exactly what I was feeling because he had gone through that with Padmé. During the Clone wars they had been separated more than they had been together. They had also had to sneak around, hiding their relationship, their love, their marriage. I couldn't really argue with him because he was sort of right. I hadn't thought I was that obvious but Lord Vader wasn't stupid and he had been through the same thing. Instead I answered his original question.

“Admiral Thrawn did not state what the delay was caused by, only that he expected the job he was doing to take a few hours more than previously expected.” I said, finishing my drink. “The Emperor will not like you having me spy on the prince.” I added shifting the topic of conversation away from Thrawn.

“Then it would be best if he were not to find out, wouldn’t it.” He asked looking at me.

“I guess you need to teach me to mask my thoughts better, then.” I said with a little shrug.

He continued to stare at me and then gave me a small nod. “That can be arranged now as it appears we have some spare time until Thrawn returns.” He said tartly. “Sit down and I shall try to get some instructions through that stubborn skull of yours! These techniques will require discipline, something you lack a great deal of.”

I nodded and did as he bid, grateful for the time alone to train with him. I knew he had learned to mask his feelings from the Emperor and now I hoped he would teach me this technique. As he paced around the room around me I sat and slowly slipped into the stillness that I found when I meditated. With his words in my ears I began to follow his instructions. I had learned to listen and do as he said. It would be a long session and he was going to work me hard but I expected nothing less and smiled.

As I sat, desert style listening to the cadence of his voice I wondered if he knew how much he had come to mean to me. I was reasonably sure that my birth mother would be turning over in her grave at the thought of her daughter being taught by and admiring one of the most hated men in the galaxy, the man who had once been Anakin Skywalker the betrayer of the Jedi Order. I wondered what the irony in all of this was supposed to teach me. If there was a lesson I couldn’t see it.

“Pay attention!” Lord Vader snapped, cuffing my head with his hand as he sensed my drifting thoughts.

I nodded and did as he asked. Avoiding the Emperor and his probing had become my primary goal, no one was better at this than Lord Vader, despite what the Emperor thought.

My fingertips danced their way around the night table in search of the source of the beeping which was slowly breaking through my sleep. I activated the comm and brushed the hair from my eyes. It seemed as though my head had barely touched the pillow and already I was awake. I wasn’t happy.

“What!” I barked.

“Miss Gabriel?”

“Yes?”

“The Admiral has returned, he wishes to see you in his ready room.” The annoying voice said.

“I’ll be there in a moment.” And shut the comm off before he could say anything else. I rolled out of bed and stumbled to the ‘fresher to wash my face

and clear the sleep from my eyes. I had been dreaming when the comm had gone off. All I could remember now was fragments. The desert, the man my uncle had called Qui Gon Jin and a dreadful sense of sorrow. I was grateful I couldn’t recall any details. When that man showed up in my dreams it was usually a sign of bad things not good. I cleaned my teeth, brushed my hair back and pulled it up into an untidy knot held in place by mismatched Zenji sticks. I threw on a loose dress and grabbed my data pad then made my way to the Admiral’s ready room.

Captain Niriz was just on his way out as I headed in. “Good morning Miss Gabriel.”

“I take it he is in one piece?” I asked, pausing at the door.

Niriz smiled. “It would appear so. Lord Vader was just here, asked me to tell you to wait until he returns.”

“Thanks.” I said as I walked into the ready room.

Thrawn sat back in a chair still wearing the Mandalorian armour, he was drinking mineral water. He looked tired but satisfied.

“How was it?” I asked as the door hissed closed behind me.

He gave me a smile. “Very interesting. Your uncle was right about Thyne and the information he gave me was most valuable. What he didn’t mention was Thyne’s appalling taste in art.”

I raised my eyebrows then. “Unlike you, that’s not really the first thing Zte’sa Vahlek tends to notice.”

Thrawn grinned. “He would have noticed this, trust me.”

“Are you planning to tell me what happened any time soon or will I have to pry it out of you?”

He gave me a short laugh. “I’ll tell you all, I promise, when the time is right.”

“I’ve heard that before.” I told him testily.

“I promise, tekari, when the time is right.” He said gently, he had that look on his face which said *there is more going on than you know about so stop digging*.

I sighed and gave up, switching the topic. “Need help getting out of that armour?”

“Already wishing to undress me? You have a one track mind, my dear.” Thrawn smirked.

“I am quite happy to let you struggle on your own.” I shrugged that *I don’t care* one shoulder shrug.

He looked at me for a moment then smiled. “Very well, you can assist me if you like.” He said getting up.

I was in the middle of helping him shrug off the body armour when the door slid open and Lord Vader walked in. He paused for a moment while Thrawn untangled his arms from the chest pieces and then handed the Admiral a datapad. In typical Vader style he then turned his back on us both and stood, with his arms folded across his chest, to stare out of the window.

I took the armour piece and set it on the table as Thrawn studied the information Lord Vader had given him. “Do you wish me to formulate a strategic plan for this?” He asked as he studied what ever was on the datapad.

“By all means.” Lord Vader replied, “It was your information that has given us this opportunity. I have some ideas but your input would be...welcome.” then he turned to look at me. “I need you to prepare the *Sigiri* for a long haul run.”

“Yes, my lord.” I said with a nod.

He looked back at Thrawn. “Your hand in this battle plan will please the Emperor and your elegant touch will be unmistakable but he will not wish it overtly known that you were instrumental in the planning of this. He has instructed me to request that you be onboard the *Avenger* for the briefing and planning. On the way there you can work on the details. I must return to the *Executor* but will rendezvous with you on board the *Avenger* before the briefing takes place. I take it you have no objections with Miss Gabriel piloting you?”

Thrawn gave me a slight glance. “Not at all, your assistant is a most efficient pilot and I am certain she will enjoy the chance to log more hours in the L-class shuttle.”

Both men stared at me but I said and did nothing. This was unusual, even for Lord Vader and while a shuttle could be piloted by one, usually a crew of minimum three ran it. A high ranking official travelling without a guard compliment was very irregular. I wasn't happy with this situation but there was nothing to say about it. This was not a time to argue with Lord Vader about my likes or dislikes of his orders.

Lord Vader nodded. “We will be expected to join the *Avenger* in seven days from now; they are currently en route to the Derra system but the Emperor does not wish the *Admonitor* to be involved in the conflict. He prefers that you come alone.”

Thrawn nodded. “Yes, I expected as much.”

“The hundred-and- eighty- first will be the fighter group you will be planning for. I have enclosed their information on the data pad and given the *Sigiri's* capabilities you can make it to the *Avenger* in just under a week. This gives you plenty of time to study the pilot records and best determine how to plan for their abilities.” Lord Vader said. “Your return to the Unknown Regions will be delayed.”

Thrawn nodded. “I work for the Empire, Lord Vader. When the Emperor requests my presence I obey.” He said. “The Unknown Regions of space are not going anywhere. When do we depart?”

“As soon as you are ready and your shuttle is prepared.” Lord Vader said turning to look at me.

I nodded. “I'll get right on it. Admiral, I take it I can requisition anything I need from your stores?”

He looked at me. “The quartermaster will see that you are given what you need within reason, of course.”

“Thank you.” I said. “Lord Vader, will there be anything else before you leave?”

“No. Just see that you keep the Admiral in one piece.” He admonished.

“Yes, of course, my lord.” I nodded. “*So I will see you in about a week then?*” I asked him silently.

“Yes.” He sent back then added. “*Behave yourself, especially on board the Avenger. Be discrete and stay out of everyone's way! I will hear of any problems.*”

“Yes, my lord.” I said out loud and then, ignoring the one eyebrow question from Thrawn, I left to go and pack my stuff and ready the *Sigiri*.

The Quartermaster looked at the list I had given him and made a face but before he could say anything negative I told him if he had problems with the items I had requisitioned he could confirm them with the Admiral or Lord Vader. He pursed his lips and nodded.

“I will see what I can do but it will take at least an hour to get all these things together. I am also not certain about the food stores but will do the best I can. Do you wish to be apprised of substitutions?”

I nodded. “That would be very considerate of you.”

He sighed and nodded. “Very well, Miss Gabriel, will there be anything else?”

“No. I have to do some minor repairs but I will speak with the deck officer about the ship parts I might need, although if you have a spare set of coveralls or a flight suit that I can get dirty in I'd appreciate that, I wasn't planning on playing mechanic this trip so I didn't bring mine.”

“You are a certified mechanic as well?” he was surprised.

I grinned. “Yes. I am.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “Come with me, I'll kit you out. I am not sure we have one that will fit you properly, you are a little on the small side for regulation Imperial clothing.”

I laughed as I walked beside him to the ship's stores room, where he dug through his supplies until he found a fabric flight suit which was small enough that I would not swim in it. I thanked him and made my way back to the flight deck to get to work on the shuttle. I took a walk around the *Sigiri*. I never tired of looking at her, she was a pretty ship. I guess I was not alone because I had to shoo a very persistent maintenance droid away from her. The droids were usually assigned to hull scrubbing and minor repairs but I generally didn't want their help. Once he left me alone I did a quick outside check and then went inside to check the engines.

The engines were located under the passenger compartment. There was a maintenance hatch located midship's behind the exit ramp. There was enough room to move about and who ever had designed this ship and her engine room

had done a bang up job. I went through the airlock and the EV suits to check that everything was in good shape and then I went to work on the engine. I was in the middle of checking the hyperdrive fluid levels when the supplies started to arrive. By the time everything was on board and stowed away, I had pretty much finished what I was doing and was satisfied that we would not blow up half way there.

I commed Thrawn to tell him the shuttle was ready when ever he was and then headed back to my quarters to shower and change for the trip. As usual, I took the long way up, along the stairs and gantries. I was almost out of the docking bay when I caught sight of Lord Vader sweeping in. I stood on the high gantry and watched as he stood with Thrawn talking to an alien the likes of which I had never seen before. He was small of stature and had grey skin. There was not an ounce of fat on him, bipedal and muscular, I knew without a doubt that this was a creature honed for the hunt. I stared at him until Lord Vader, sensing my presence looked up, the alien's gaze followed. He wasn't pretty and I suppressed the urge to shiver. Lord Vader sent me a wave of displeasure at my hesitation. I was wasting time, something he despised. I sighed and quickly left the hanger bay. The sooner I was ready to get on the go the soon this job would be done and I could get back to my regular chaotic life.

By the time I was ready, Lord Vader and the alien had gone from the hanger and Thrawn was speaking with his deck officer. I glanced at him and he gave me a slight nod of acknowledgement. I was anxious to get on the go. I dumped my belongings in the crew room, did a quick walk through the ship to make sure that everything which should be safely stowed away was. I was sitting in the cockpit going through my pre flight check when Thrawn joined me. His hand warm on my shoulder as he let me know he was there.

"You all set?" I asked putting the headset on.

He slid into the co-pilot's seat and strapped in. "Yes. I take it you found everything you needed?"

I nodded and began departure procedure. The ship's engines hummed and flight control gave me the okay to go. The *Sigiri* slid out of the hanger, through the force field and into space. I was happy with the little tune up I had given her. She sounded a lot smoother than when I had flown her here.

Corellia danced beneath us and I smiled. We would have to get away from the gravity well of the planet before we could go into hyperspace but to see a planet whole and beautiful, hanging in the inkiness of space always took my breath away. I began to punch in the co ordinates and routes into the nav-computer to meet up with the *Avenger* in the Derra system. Once we were clear of the planet's gravity the hyperdrive kicked in, stars elongated and we slid smoothly into the hyperspace lane.

Ten minutes after our jump into hyperspace Thrawn sighed as he looked up from the datapad he had been studying. "So, my dear, how long will the first jump take?"

"Seven hours." I told him as I set the auto pilot.

He got up and patted my shoulder. "I have not had a chance to rest since my return from Corellia, will you be alright up here on your own?"

"Yes." I told him. "When do you want me to wake you?"

"In six hours, unless there is a problem."

I nodded, getting up. "Okay, what cabin did you take?"

He told me as we left the cockpit.

"Okay." I said following him as far as the small galley. It was late morning now and I was hungry. I hadn't had the chance to grab breakfast so now was as good a time as any. He stopped and looked at me as I set the kettle on the small heater.

"Maybe you'll make some spiced coffee for me later?" He asked.

"If you're lucky."

"I could make it worth your while..." he teased.

It had the opposite effect it was supposed to. I sighed. "Why am I here?" I asked him suddenly. "You should have a proper pilot and a gaggle of stormtroopers watching after you. This is highly irregular."

"A gaggle?"

I gave him a look, rubbed my forehead with my fingertips. I was tired and in no mood for games.

He gave me a slight smile "Lord Vader seems to think we work well together. The Emperor wants my involvement in the project kept quiet and both men know that I work better alone without an entourage. You are a good pilot and trust me, we are in no danger. Or would you rather be surrounded by the Emperor's finest?"

I sighed. "Just wondering about this arrangement, it seems awfully convenient."

"Are you complaining about being alone with me?"

I shook my head. "No, but it feels a bit like a set up or something."

He grinned. "The *Sigiri* is not full of spy and surveillance equipment, no one is watching us flirt."

"How would you know?"

"The reason you were assigned this shuttle is because she is not set up for that. She is used for milk runs with lesser dignitaries. She flies under the radar, so to speak." He said. "My crew did an internal and external sweep after you and your uncle disembarked. She's clean."

I drew a deep breath and nodded. "If you say so."

He frowned. "What's bothering you?"

"I should not be your pilot and you should be travelling with a full crew. This is just not right on so many levels I cannot even begin to list them. Is this a game to you and Lord Vader? You think this is fun to keep putting me in a situation like this?"

“What situation is this like?” he asked coolly. I could hear the crossness in his voice now and knew that the conversation would start to go downhill, unless I got to the point. He was tired.

“Don’t you find this improper?”

“No.” he said then with a sigh added. “A’mysk’a, Vader knows what you are capable of, he trusts you to do your job and he knows that I will do mine. The job comes first for both of us. I know what you are thinking but that simply isn’t the case. I discovered something while I was on Corellia, a smuggler ship with a shipment of arms for the rebellion. No one and I mean no one but you, myself, Lord Vader and, I suspect, the Emperor knows of this information. Vader is making certain it stays that way. No matter how many precautions we take there are breeches in security, lately, far too many of these leaks for my tastes. We wished to make it difficult for the spies who seem so prevalent among us.” He paused, when I didn’t say anything he continued.

“The more people on board this shuttle the greater the chance this information that we have will be leaked, the greater the chance that someone will warn the rebels that we know. We will only get one shot at this. That is why it is just you and me. Vader knows just how good you are and he knows you have what it takes to get me there in one piece. He trusts that I will do my job and come up with a way to stop these people from delivering this arms shipment and what ever else they may have planned.” He stopped and looked at me for a moment. “Did you think this was some sort of punishment? That Vader has you here with me because he likes to watch you suffer? He could care less what relationship you and I have as long as we get the jobs we are assigned to do done.” He shook his head. “You need to start looking at the larger picture. You stopped being just his office girl a long time ago, when will you wake up and see this?”

It was my turn to sigh. “You both make my life so damned complicated!”

He came to me then, cupped my face in both his hands. “Complications keep it interesting.” He said. His eyes staring into mine, studying my expression trying to read my thoughts, trying to make his understood. I closed my eyes as I slid my arms around his waist and held him to me tightly. I didn’t speak, I didn’t look up and I didn’t let go. With my head against his chest, I could hear his heart beat. He kissed the top of my head as he wrapped his arms around me. I felt him relax as he sensed the tension I had been holding slowly unwind. He drew a deep breath and separated himself from me. I just rested my forehead against his chest.

“Not everything is one of the Emperor’s games and not everything that happens is about you, either.” He spoke gently. A curled finger lifted my chin upward so I looked him in the face. “Vader trusts you; you have an unbelievable position in his life which no one understands or dares to question. I think that you need to learn to trust his judgement. You would not be here if he did not

think you were more than capable. If you can’t trust him, will you at least trust me?”

I just stared at him then, after a moment, nodded.

He smiled slightly. “I know you are tired, wound up and that the last few days have not been easy but try to relax a little. We have time to be together before we reach the Avenger and there is nothing else going on. No one except Vader knows our destination, you checked out the ship from stem to stern so there is nothing to worry about. When I’ve rested I’ll cook for you if you like and over dinner I’ll tell you about my time as Kast and what happened on Corellia.”

“Okay.” I said, accepting his peace offering. “You should go and rest, you look exhausted.”

He kissed me lightly on the lips, more an affectionate afterthought than a sign of passion and then went to his cabin. I sighed as I made myself a sandwich and poured a generous cup of tea then headed back up to the cockpit. I had a half finished book to read in my satchel and there was no place else I needed to be but as I tried to read I found I just couldn’t concentrate. No matter how much I wanted to believe everything Thrawn had told me a small part of me could not help but feel uneasy. I ate my sandwich absently, stared out into the eerie light of the hyperspace lane and tried to put my worries aside. He was right I was over tired and stressed, never a good combination. It had a tendency to make me jumpy and paranoid. I put my feet up on the consol and picked up my book again, determined to get beyond my own case of nerves.

I knew from my past experiences when flying longer hauls with Thrawn that we generally abandoned the traditional watch system in favour for what worked for us. We took turns on watch and mostly worked with as well as around each other. He could go for longer periods without sleep than I could but I found it easier to doze or take little naps, something he didn’t do. I enjoyed sitting in the cockpit reading, studying the star charts and ship’s database or just staring out into space but I fidgeted a lot. He would get annoyed with that and leave, often going to some quiet out of the way space to meditate or read. We travelled well together despite the differences.

I set up my own routines. I walked through the ship once an hour give or take, spent time with the engine, and mostly read a lot. No matter what people said, long haul space travel was dull for the most part. I was very happy with dull.

With Thrawn resting, the ship was very peaceful. Unlike my own ship, the lambda class shuttle’s engines were very quiet by comparison. The ride was smooth and easy. As I walked through the *Sigiri*, checking everything was in order I thought about my uncle’s question as to why I had not chosen a career as a pilot. Certainly I was never happier than when I was flying. It made me smile as I navigated my way through the ship under blue light which the Imperial Navy favoured over red.

Space was dark unless one travelled too close to a star. Having standard lighting was useful but for a pilot going from normal white light to the dark cockpit it was annoying. It took time for my eyes to adjust, okay, not much but enough to make a difference should something go wrong. I insisted that the ship go to dark when I flew. Thrawn didn't mind, he had exceptionally good night vision anyway and the blue watch light didn't bother him at all. I liked the quiet atmosphere it gave the ship. Somehow it made the trip seem less hectic and calmer. The Sigiri was easy to navigate around. It hadn't taken me long to get to know her and be able to get about without worrying about bashing my feet, or knocking my knees into something.

The six hours Thrawn had wanted to rest passed by quickly and uneventfully. I had managed to nap, catching up a little on my sleep, as well as spend time studying the star charts for the system we were headed to. Ten minutes before he had asked me to wake him I got up and made spiced coffee.

Spiced coffee was a Tatooine drink, locally known as mek'kefa. I don't know who had first created it although the myths often said it was the Sand people. I doubted this was actually true since the beans that made the coffee were not locally grown and expensive to come by. I suspected it was actually something the Hutts had brought with them. They had a liking for exotic things but since no one ever wanted to admit to liking something the Hutts liked a whole story had been woven up around the drink and like most things that made their way to Tatooine the recipe had been adapted to the planet over the years.

I liked my spiced coffee the way my uncle made it, so after much wheedling and pleading he had finally; under pain of death should I ever tell anyone else, given me his recipe. I was pretty certain he was teasing about the pain of death threat but sometimes one could never tell with him. You could get premixed, ready to go spiced coffee but I always found it tasted awful so I always made it from scratch. I had dark roasted beans that were finely ground to a powder then added the spices and the honey. The specially designed carafe allowed the mixture to boil without overflowing, you had to watch it and nurse it a bit and it took longer than using one of the automatic machines that could be found around but it was worth it. I liked the procedure, there was a sort of peace in it, and I suppose it reminded me of home. The scent of the spices mixed with the dark roasted grounds always reminded me of sun, warmth and my uncle's kitchen.

Thrawn had not enjoyed the drink the first time he had tried it. I had expected this, it was an acquired taste. The drink, which was usually served in small glasses without handles, was thick and strong and there were always grounds at the bottom of the glass. The first taste on the tongue is very bitter, but the aftertaste of the honey is delicious and it is easy to become addicted to it. I had not expected him to come around because he wasn't overly fond of things that were bitter so when he developed a taste for it I was surprised. I smiled as I

poured a glass for him. Sometimes I would wake him up with a cup in the mornings if I had gotten up first when we had been living together.

He had chosen the state room down at the end of the short corridor. It was quiet and relatively spacious. I wandered down the darkened hall humming to myself. The scent of the drink I carried wafting through the air. There was a specific way of holding the glass so that one didn't burn one's fingers, but it was a tenuous grip to say the least. I hit the door button and stepped through into the room. The door hissed shut behind me and the room was almost pitch black. For a second I stood to get my bearings and let my eyes adjust to the darkness. I knew where he was, I didn't need to see him, I could sense him through the force. I stepped towards the bed, smiling in anticipation of his reaction.

He had told me once that the open affection between us was a rare and precious thing, that he treasured it deeply. The Chiss were not generally known for their ability to be affectionate. He had said that I allowed him this. I had not thought that I would have anything to give back but he had remarked that this could not be further from the truth. I could still hear his voice telling me in the quiet of the night that I was as much as gift to him as he was to me and that while maybe I complicated his life, he would not have it any other way. The memory of that night and what had followed after he had said this to me caused me to blush, if there had been time I would have been grateful for the dark but instead at that moment something, someone grabbed my arms from behind, the glass in my hand fell to the floor and smashed, as I began to yell a powerful hand clamped over my mouth and the second hand that held me moved to clamp around my throat. I could not move. I flinched when the room was suddenly flooded with light and blinked the sudden tears away as my eyes watered in protest. The hand at my mouth moved to hold me from struggling. I twisted my head around to see who it was that was holding me, trying to choke the life out of me and then I yelped in fright.

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A billion thoughts crashed through my head in the space of the time it took Thrawn to switch on the lights, get out of bed and assess the situation. Most of them had to do with my seeming inability to defend myself. I had been trained in the Bunduki arts, I was a force user and had been taught to fight by some of the best and the most brutal teachers this galaxy had to offer, so why was it that the moment some creature with a grip of dura-steel grabbed me I panicked or at least froze. The first thing I did was try to get my heart rate and breathing back down to a sane level. The creature that held me could break my bones as easily as Lord Vader could force choke a room full of idiots. There wasn't much use in struggling further.

"Release her." Thrawn spoke quietly but there was such ice, such command in his voice that I wasn't certain who I should be more afraid of, him or the alien who held me in the death grip from hell.

"Now." Thrawn insisted calmly. "I shall not ask you again."

The creature did as he was asked and Thrawn pulled me towards him to shield me with his body.

“Are you alright?” he asked. He looked at my throat and I suspected from the dull pain that I would have bruises there. For once, I thought, they could not be blamed on Lord Vader.

I nodded and swallowed. My knees were still shaky but that would pass. “Who...what is this?” I asked.

Thrawn drew a deep breath. “This is Rukh.” He said coolly. He was angry, angrier than I had seen him in some time. “Rukh is a Noghri warrior assigned by Lord Vader to protect me.”

I looked at the Noghri called Rukh, who simply stared at me and then I looked back at Thrawn. He was naked. “You should get dressed and put shoes on; there are glass shards on the floor.” I said. Before either of them could say anything else I left the cabin.

The adrenaline that had flooded through my system receded and left me cold with anger. Thrawn had not seemed in the least bit surprised by the Noghri’s presence which led me to believe he had known the creature was on board my ship and he had not told me. I stopped at the galley, filled up a large cup with the rest of the spiced coffee then I made my way calmly to the cockpit, closed the door and locked it. I needed some time to calm down and think and this was the one place that was mine and mine alone. I sat for a very long time just staring out of the window cradling the warm cup in my cold hands, trying to sort through this latest incident and my seeming inability to defend myself. It was depressing. For over three years I had been training and I still could not seem to get it right when someone grabbed me. I doubted that, given the strength I had felt from the Noghri I would have been able to break free from his grip even if I had tried but that didn’t change how ineffectual I felt now.

A knock at the door broke my thoughts. I ignored it.

“A’myshk’a...?” Thrawn asked.

My answer, in his language, was very rude.

I could sense his frustration mixed with concern. “Open the door, please.” He tried again.

I repeated my previous statement. There was a lengthy silence and I thought that maybe he’d actually done as I had told him for once. Maybe he would leave me in peace to calm down but no, that was not the case. Instead he had used his official override code and unlocked the cockpit door. Opened it, walked in then closed it again. I could feel him stand directly behind me but I didn’t turn to look at him.

“Get out.” I wondered if the tone of my voice matched the icy fury in my veins.

“I need to know that you are unharmed.” He said quietly.

“I’m fine. Go away!”

“I know you are angry with me but I am not responsible for this.” He said maintaining the same calm quiet tone.

I drew a deep steadying breath and had to relax the grip of death I was inflicting on my cup. I heard him move to come and crouch down at the side of the chair. The nav computer peeped letting me know we would be coming out of hyperspace soon.

“Tekari, look at me.” He said. When my jaw clenched and I did not move he added, “Please?”

So I did as he asked. “Where is your *friend*?” I growled.

“Back aft.” He said.

I nodded and went back to staring out of the window. “Keep him the hell away from me.”

He reached out to touch my face but I pulled away from him. “You should have told me he was on board.” I said coldly.

“I did not know he was on the ship. I was under the impression he had remained on board the *Admonitor*. If I had known so would you.” Thrawn spoke to me the way Navaari had, in that steady calm voice which soothed timid creatures and fractious children.

“How is that possible?” I asked angrily. “You know everything! Prepared for every, any and all eventualities! How could you not know this?” I was being nasty but I didn’t really care.

He sighed and got up to sit in the co pilot’s chair across from me. “Lord Vader was pleased with the work that I accomplished on Corellia, as part of a reward if you like, he has given me command of the Noghri, a race of beings most efficient in the warrior arts and quite deadly as commandos. He introduced me to Rukh earlier, before we left this morning.” He paused to look at me, I ignored this. “I agreed to take Rukh on as a bodyguard and I thought I had made it clear that he was to remain on board the *Admonitor*. I was obviously mistaken. I am sorry.”

“Since when do you need a body guard?” I asked.

“I don’t believe I do, but these Noghri believe in a form of life debt and they apparently feel they owe it to the Empire, especially to Lord Vader who convinced them this passes on to me. You know as well as I do that respect for other cultures is tantamount to maintaining law and order. It would have been imprudent to dismiss their beliefs and their service.”

“Well your body guard just tried to kill me.” I said coldly.

“He was doing his job. You entered the room without turning on the lights. He thought you were going to assassinate me.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him. “Maybe next time I’ll try that instead of bringing you spiced coffee!”

He sighed. “How many times shall I apologise for this before you back down?”

I shook my head. “Just go away.”

“A’myshk’a...” He drew a deep breath and I could feel him struggle to keep his own temper in check.

“Blast it all to Corellia’s nine hells and back! I don’t need this crap when I am piloting. I do not need this stress because travelling with you is stressful enough! That... that... Noghri tried to kill me. He is not welcome on my ship so get him off it!”

“And just how am I supposed to do that? Toss him out the nearest air lock?” Thrawn’s tone had gone from concerned to cold.

“That would be one way.” I replied. I watched as we slid out of hyperspace into normal space. The next jump would be a lot longer and follow a standard shipping lane, but we would have to fly for half an hour to get to the right hyper point. I set the co-ordinates into the nav computer and engaged the autopilot.

“You are not being reasonable.” He said crossly.

“Reasonable? Some alien I have never seen before in my life, that I did not even know was on board my shuttle just tried to strangle me for bringing you a glass of spice coffee and you tell me I am not being reasonable? Get him off my ship, confine him to the cargo hold, or tie him up with pipe tape for all I care! Do what ever it is you need to do to keep him away from me, because if he comes at me again I will chop his head off with my lightsaber or die trying! Am I making myself clear?” I asked getting up. I knew he was right but I was just too angry to want to see reason.

I brushed passed him but he caught my arm with a steel grip that bordered on painful. Whatever he had to say next he was making sure I would not just hear it but listen as well.

“If I had known he was on board I would have told you.” He said very calmly. He was now angry with me rather than anything else. “I would have made it perfectly clear to him that you are not out to kill me and that if I am under his protection then so are you. Do you really think I would have withheld this information from you?”

I glared at him. “I don’t know! With you I never know!” I said. “Damn it I have enough complications in my life as it without you and your new pet adding to them! Now will you get the hell out of my cockpit?!”

“Merlyn, please...” he started. He never called me by my first name unless he was being formal or he was annoyed with me. In this case the latter was the reason. I was testing his patience to the bitter end.

I stamped my foot down hard on the floor. “NO! NO! NO! This is not acceptable, no! I want that ...that...bodyguard-warrior-Noghri-creature-whatever off my...”

I never got to finish my sentence because suddenly there was a huge BOOM as an explosion blasted the port side of the ship, rocking the shuttle violently. Alarms and lights started going off and flashing madly. If Thrawn had not been holding my arm I would have been flung backwards. I grabbed hold of his chair as he let go of my arm to scan the instrument panel.

I scrambled back into my chair and strapped in. “Now what!” I hissed crossly. “Did we hit something?”

“No, that was blaster fire.” He told me. He activated the shields and I said a silent prayer that what ever had hit us hadn’t hit anything vital.

“Blaster fire??” If I hadn’t been angry before now I was. I scanned the systems readout but nothing serious had been hit or compromised. We had been lucky.

The shuttle was rocked by a second volley of fire.

“Affirmative. Blasts hit us port-side aft, nothing significant was damaged. Shields are holding.” Thrawn told me. He was setting up tactical even before I had to ask, transferring the gun controls to his consol.

“Someone is shooting at us? There is nothing registering, no proximity alert nothing on the scans....Who...what the hell is shooting at us?”

A third blast shook the ship and I heard the engines whine, just a little, from the power drain of the shields.

“Whoever it is is still attacking us port side aft. Shields are now at ninety percent. They have better guns.” He said as dryly as if he were commenting on a news net article.

“You strapped in?” I asked taking us off auto pilot.

“Yes what did you...?”

“Hang on!” I yanked hard as I could on the throttle and sent us into a wide arcing loop. The shuttle’s engines protested but I knew what she was capable of. “Find whatever it is that is shooting at us! I take it you know how to work the guns on this thing?”

“Yes.”

The gravity plating and inertial dampers compensated for the sudden motion but not quite fast enough to offset the sense of spin. I hated sudden rotation like this it always made me queasy which was why I would never have made a good fighter pilot. I gritted my teeth and hoped for the best. The shuttle wasn’t designed to be flung about like a TIE fighter or an X-Wing.

“Well?” I asked as a volley of laser fire sliced past the nose of the shuttle by millimetres.

“Nothing, according to the scans we are completely alone.”

“Okay well your aloneness is trying to kill us.” I sent us barrel rolling to the starboard, shutting my eyes tightly as we did so.

“I know you are cross with me right now, but I need you to take orders from me and not be stubborn or argumentative, can you do that?”

“Will it make them stop shooting at us?” I asked as I began to compensate for the next spin.

“Yes.”

“Then you are in charge, Admiral.”

“Bank hard to port on my command.” He said. I glanced at him and wondered what he had in mind. “Now!”

I pulled to port hard and Thrawn fired a series of shots that arced as we banked. The last shot hit something.”

“Hard to starboard now.” He said. I marvelled at his calm. My heart was in my throat. I did as he said and my stomach lurched. The engines whined and the ship shuddered. He shot again and again the last set of laser bolts hit something. I watched in amazement as out of the nothingness a ship began to decloak then was suddenly invisible again.

“On my mark pull up hard, loop wide then hard roll to starboard.”

“Aye.”

“Mark.”

I did as he asked and watched as he fired the aft canon but before I could express my elation that we had maybe won we were once again hit by a volley of fire and the shields fluttered.

“What ever is shooting at us will take out our shields if they keep hitting us like that!” I told him.

“Micro jump.” He said. “We need to get out of here now!”

“What? Are you out of your mind? You can’t micro jump in this thing!!!” I yelled at him. I had never actually done a micro jump, they were almost unheard of.

“Give my full control now!” He ordered. Another blast hit us starboard side and the shields dropped to forty percent. The shield generator couldn’t get enough power fast enough to regenerate the shields to full.

I did as he asked then watched as he manually set the spatial co ordinates and then punched the hyperdrive. The stars elongated and twisted in a way I had never seen before and then suddenly we were back in normal space. A blow out showered sparks from the main control panel and alarms shrilled out in protest of the treatment of the shuttle. I clapped a hand over my mouth and forced my lunch to stay put.

“Wow!” I said when I found my voice. “You so need to teach me that trick.”

“Next time, I’ll talk you through it.” He replied tersely.

“Bloody better not be a next time!” I started running through a systems check and looked over at Thrawn who frowned. “What? You have that look on your face.”

“Did you recognise that ship?” he asked me.

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t get a good look at her. Was she really cloaked? How is that possible? I thought cloaking technology on anything smaller than a dreadnought was a myth.”

He drew a deep breath. “Yes, she was cloaked and she is small and manoeuvrable. She was also, I believe, Imperial in design.”

“What?!” I almost exploded.

“What’s our status?” He ignored my question.

I blinked at him for a few seconds but he just gave me that one eyebrow higher than the other ‘*answer my question*’ stare. So I answered him. “Shields

need time to regenerate and apart from some blown fuses we are actually in good shape. The *Sigiri* may be a milk run shuttle but she’s got teeth and a hard shell. How the hell did they find us, who the hell are they and why the hell were they shooting at us if they were Imperial?”

“Those are the questions aren’t they? Guess I will need to go for a little walk to find out.” he said getting up.

“What?”

“Do you recall the tracker we found on the *Ahnkeli Su’udelma*?”

“How could I forget?” I asked undoing the buckles and following him out of the cockpit and through the ship as he made his way aft.

“We will need to do a hull inspection. I think that someone has pulled the same trick on us.”

I sighed this explained why he had not gone into a longer hyperspace jump. If we had a homing device on our hull who ever it was would find us again no matter where we jumped to. “Then I guess it isn’t you going for a space walk it’s me.”

“A’myshk’a...” he started.

I put my hand on his arm. “You are far, far better at tactical than I ever could be. It’s not something I was ever trained for. If something goes wrong you can still get to the Derra System. I do the space walk; you stay here and keep me alive, that’s the deal.” I told him.

He made a face. “Do you even know what you are looking for?” he asked.

“Yes and the scanner I swiped...er... I mean borrowed, from the *Admonitor* will tell me how to find it.” I said. I could feel him about to protest but I stopped him. “You are the more valuable of the two of us so you stay on board. Unless you got word from Lord Vader to say otherwise I am still the pilot which sort of makes me the captain and since I am not actually in the navy you don’t get to outrank me which means I get final say. I walk, you stay here.”

“Your logic is a little flawed, tekari.” His voice was soft as he caressed my face.

“You know I am right.” I said. “How long do you think we have?”

“Not long, the jump was incredibly short but if this is what I think it is they cannot go into hyperspace with the cloak and if they are using some sort of transport ship to carry them into hyperspace she won’t be able to micro jump. They’ll have to find us sublight which means I bought us two maybe three hours at the most, depending on how fast the transports sublight engines are.”

“Okay, then that will have to do.” I nodded.

“You checked the suits and air before we left?” There was genuine concern in his eyes.

“Yes. I always do that.”

“Make sure you tether twice.”

I stopped and turned to look at him. “You know, while I have never done a micro jump before, I have done this. Trust me, I know how to handle myself EV.”

“Then why do you look like you are going to your death?”

“EVA sometimes makes me sick but there’s no time to find an antiemetic.” I said tersely. “Help me get into the suit; it’s good to have a second set of eyes check it. And keep your body guard away from me. I don’t think he’ll like it if I throw up on him.”

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The passageway was silent but I had the distinct impression I was being watched.

“Okay, you can come out now!” I yelled. Thrawn looked at me with a raised eyebrow. I just glared back at him. “Rukh, get out here right now! No hide and hunt games on my ship!”

There was a moment’s breath then the Noghri slipped silently out from where he had been hiding almost directly beside me. He was sneaky and silent. Now that my fright had subsided I got a good look at him. He was shorter than I was but he was powerfully built. His skin was a grey colour and he was, by human standards, pretty ugly. He had a short snub nose, sharp, needle like teeth and dark eyes that held far more intelligence in them than one might first believe. We just stared at each other for a moment until Thrawn broke the silence.

“Rukh, this is Merlyn Gabriel she is Lord Vader’s personal assistant. She is never to be harmed by you or your kind. You will treat her life with the same importance you would Lord Vader’s. Am I understood?”

“I understand.” He said in a gravely voice. He then took my hand and sniffed at it. I didn’t fight him. His clawed hands were cool to the touch. He let my hand go and stood back.

I just nodded, took the EV suit that Thrawn was handing me and began to get into it. I had to fight the sudden sense of claustrophobia that swept through me. I steadied my breathing and nodded to Thrawn who handed me the helmet. I hated suiting up, the feeling of being constricted, the sense of being confined and the strange metallic scent the oxygen always had.

With everything in place, I locked the helmet down and the flow of O<sub>2</sub> started with a dry hiss. Thrawn went over the suit carefully, checking that everything was okay.

“You’re good to go.” He mouthed opening the maintenance hatch that led under the passenger compartments.

“Scanner’s in that box there, needs a lanyard on it.” I said, my voice sounding tinny from the helmet comm. Thrawn nodded and grabbed it. He clipped the end of the lanyard to the utility belt and handed the scanner to me. I slipped it in the large pocket on my right thigh.

“Admiral, I need you in the cockpit.” I said. “You,” I said pointing at Rukh, “go find some quiet place to sit and stay out of trouble.”

He looked at Thrawn who gave him a slight nod. “Yes, Lady Merlyn.” he said dutifully and stayed exactly where he was.

“Okay I’m going out for a walk, see you both in a bit.” And then I began to make my way down the ladder to the underbelly of the ship, to the external airlock. I grabbed the tether lines, clipped one end to the safety hook on the back of the suit.

The maintenance area was small and dimly lit. I walked carefully to the airlock. Opened the inner doors, watched them shut then began decompression. It took seconds, a warning light flashed and I knew that Thrawn was in the cockpit watching because my comm double clicked.

“I’m fine, just heading out now. Watch for invisible bad guys. I don’t feel like getting shot to day.” I told him as I began my little space walk.

“Be careful.”

“Copy that.” I answered then concentrated on walking with the magnetic boots out and under the hull of the ship.

Space is huge. Never endingly, overwhelmingly huge but most of the time when we are safe and sound in our space ships we never see how vast it is. We are surrounded by alloys and metals, engines and all the comforts of home and we don’t generally go tromping around outside because outside is not a nice place to be, even in a really good EV suit. The thing about space is probably the hardest to get used to is the lack of gravity, the lack of up and down. While the inside of the ship has artificial gravity or gravity plating and inertial dampers to offset spin and so on, outside there is none of that and were it not for the magnetic soles on the boots I was wearing with the suit I’d be free floating, grabbing hold of the hand grabs that were placed all over the hull of the ship. No gravity meant my insides had no idea what was up or down, it was a really disconcerting sensation and incredibly disorienting.

Most commercial or private pilots avoided EV like the plague and almost never went through any sort of formal training for it. Unlike the Imperial Navy, which had simulators for this sort of thing, the only experience we ever got with zero G and space walks was when we actually had to go extra vehicular to fix something in order to get to a space port to fix the rest.

My father had made certain I had some experience with this and had taken me EV for basic training three times. The very first time I had gone EV I had thrown up in the suit. It had been a very short, very unpleasant trip and a very long lasting memory. After that I usually made sure I took an antiemetic before I went EV, then again usually time allowed for it.

I tried not to look at the stars which spun slowly, even though we had stopped engines the ship still moved and that movement was making me sick. I took deep, slow and steady breaths and concentrated on the job at hand. With the scanner active I began to walk across the underbelly of the shuttle. My stomach rolled and I gritted my teeth as a wave of nausea washed through me making my whole body cold with sweat. I fought it because throwing up in an EV suit really was terrible. It had happened to me only once but that was more than

enough to know I never wanted to experience that again. My insides just didn't like zero G at all.

"Za'ar, you there?" my voice was shaky. I walked slowly from port to starboard and back in a slight zigzag, but the scanner showed nothing.

"Are you okay?"

"Just needed to hear your voice." I said.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You mean apart from the fact that I'm walking outside of my perfectly good space ship to find a tracking device that is allowing some invisible enemy to shoot at us and that the galaxy won't stay still, then nothing at all is wrong. Just talk to me, okay?" I said. "I am trying to remember where it was my father had found the tracker the last time we had had this problem."

"I cannot help you there, tekari I was onboard at the time your father discovered it." He said.

"Maybe one of your famous best guesses then?"

I could sense Thrawn smile as he answered me. "Try near the port side wing." He said. "Internal scanners show nothing but that was the side of the ship least visible in the docking bay."

I nodded although he could not see me. "Copy that." I said starting my way back over to the port side. It was slow business. I concentrated on staring at the ship's hull and not the slow spinning stars all around me. Port-side had also been where I had to shoo away the maintenance droid. I didn't think that was a coincidence.

"So, talk to me." I prompted again.

"What do you want to hear?" he asked. His warm voice in my ear was a welcome distraction.

"Tell me about your trip as Kast." I said.

"Well I suppose now is as good a time as ever." He replied and then he began to describe in detail his adventure on Corellia while posing as a bounty hunter. His voice was soothing and it made it easier to concentrate on the job at hand and not throwing up but it was slow going. I sighed and scanned the hull. It wasn't often I got to see a ship from this perspective, looking down on it not craning to look up or worse crawling under it. Walking across a ship's hull in space with mag boots and tethers was tiring and tedious, when you are under a severe time restriction due to the threat of some invisible unknown enemy ship attacking you; well that just makes it even more fun. Searching for this tiny tracking device was like looking for a specific grain of sand in the desert.

"So, let me get this straight, the CorSec guys were father and son but they lied about it?"

"Yes. They did not trust me. I suppose they did not want that particular bond known publicly but if one looked close enough the resemblance was easy to see." He said.

I sighed, wondering why people made things so complicated. "Go on." I nudged as I trudged across the ship's hull. There was significant carbon scoring across parts of it. It was a small wonder the ship that had attacked us had not done more damage.

I smiled As Thrawn continued his story about his time posing as Jodo Kast. I laughed at some of the things he was telling me and shook my head in disbelief at others.

"Did this Corran guy tell you how he knew about Chassu's works?" I interrupted in the middle of a description of Corran Horn's conversation about this artist's works.

"Sort of, although I am not so sure he was actually telling me the truth." He replied, "There was just something about him which gave me the impression he was a little better educated than most and he knew a lot more about the topic than he was letting on. Of course I am quite sure he was very surprised at my own interest in the art field."

"You sound like a match made in heaven." I commented dryly.

"Hardly." He said and continued with his story. He was half way through a description of Thyne's terrible taste in art when the scanner lit up. Right under the start of the wing join, there it sat. It was almost exactly where the maintenance droid had been fiddling with things. I would have to look into that when we got back or at least alert Thrawn to the possibility of a droid that wasn't what it seemed onboard his ship. I stood for a moment and stared at the tracking device. It was tiny and I knew I would have some issues trying to pry it off with the bulky gloves. I bent close to it and studied it for a second and then figured that the best way to get this thing off the ship's hull was not with my hands.

"I found it." I said.

"Good, try to get it off intact and get yourself back on board, the chrono is counting down."

"Copy that, now I need you to not speak for a few minutes."

My comm clicked twice and I grinned at how well he took orders from me sometimes. I squatted down as best I could in the EV suit and concentrated on my breathing, finding my center. I found that thread of the force which wound its way around everything, with that in mind I pictured the little tracking device lifting up and moving towards me. When it was safely in my glove I slipped it into one of the flap pockets on my leg. I tucked the scanner back in the other pocket and began the trip back to the airlock.

"Got it, am on my way back now." I said. I was hurrying as much as was possible in the bulky suit. That nasty sensation of all the hair on the back of my neck suddenly standing up on end was starting to worry me. I was almost at the airlock when a blast rocked the ship. If I hadn't been tethered, even with the magnetic soles of the boots I might have come off, as it was I managed to grab a hold of one of the hand bars.

"What the hell was that?" I yelled.

“Get inside now!”

“I’m trying, it’s not like I can actually run in mag boots!”

“Hurry up!” he pressed.

“Not helping!” I yelled into the comm.

“I need to know the second you are in and the airlock is sealed so we can make another jump.”

I rolled my eyes but hurried anyway. Another blast hit the ship and she rolled like a pregnant bantha. I swore and gritted my teeth as the galaxy around me spun violently. The airlock opened up, I unclipped the tether from the ship and I scooted inside the hatch as fast as I could, slamming the close door button hard.

“Is it cloaked as well, I couldn’t see where the shots were coming from?” I asked as the small airlock re-pressurised. Another blast hit the ship.

“Cut the chatter and get inside now!” Thrawn said crossly.

“I’m in. Go!” I told him as I slipped through the inside door and shut it. The ship rocked and the engines whined. I felt *Sigiri* shudder as the hyperdrive engaged. The ship lurched forward and so did my stomach. I scrambled up the ladder to the main bay. The Noghri was waiting for me and grabbed my arm as I struggled with the last steps and hauled me up easily.

“You are safe, lady Merlyn.” He said.

I nodded, afraid to open my mouth. I ripped off the helmet as fast as I could, clapped a hand over my mouth and then ran to the head, the helmet clattered on the deck as I dropped it. I made it just in time to throw up in the toilet and not all over the floor. I hated going EV. When there was nothing left in my stomach I just knelt on the floor with my head resting on my arms, listening as the toilet vac-flushed, remembering to breathe and willing my head to stop spinning. Zero-G was a lot like being very drunk without having the fun of drinking.

“Are you okay?” Thrawn asked as he offered me a cup of water.

I nodded and rinsed my mouth out with the water. “Going EV always, always makes me sick.” I told him. “Usually I take something against it but that wasn’t possible in this situation.”

He helped me up. “Come on, we have some time. I’ll make some tea, that should help settle your stomach.”

I got to my feet and pulled off the gloves, dug around the little pocket on my thigh and pulled out the little tracker device. He took it from my still shaking fingers and frowned. While he studied it, I washed my face and cleaned my teeth.

“The same design as the other one?” I asked struggling out of the suit when we were in the passage way and out of the tiny ‘fresher.

He nodded then helped me with my battle against the EV suit and turned to head back to the main passenger area. I followed him with the suit slung over my arm. When he reached the small galley he filled the kettle with water and put it on the small stove.

“Where’s Rukh?”

“I am here, Lady Merlyn.” the Noghri said from the shadows of the tiny dining area, his gravely voice making me jump in surprise. I had not even seen him.

“Do you ever not sneak up on people?” I asked. Thrawn, watching this exchange, just sniggered quietly to himself making me want to shoot him.

“I am trained in stealth.” Rukh answered.

“Well, maybe you could go and be stealthy someplace else?” I asked crossly, sitting down.

He just stepped back into the shadows.

“How long did you put us in hyperspace for?” I asked.

“Long enough to test a theory.” Thrawn answered. He made tea, poured a cup into which he put a lot of sugar and handed it to me. “Drink.” He said.

While I drank the tea gratefully, I watched as he played with the tracking device in his hand.

“You know who is doing this don’t you?” I asked.

“I have some ideas.” He replied. There was an edge to his voice that I had never heard before. I didn’t like it.

I sighed. “Why is there no peace and quiet when I am with you?” I asked.

“We do have our moments.” He said with a slight smile.

I just made a face and finished my tea.

“Feeling any better?”

I nodded.

“Right let’s get back to work, shall we?” He said getting up.

“That thing still active?” I asked nodding at the little device in his hand.

“Yes.”

“So, who ever is after us will find us the moment we come out of hyperspace?”

“Yes.” He said.

“And they’ll shoot at us again?”

“That’s the idea.”

I nodded. “I see.” I said. “And you have a plan that won’t get us killed?”

“I do.”

I gave him that look that said ‘*uh huh*’.

He gave me that smile which said. ‘*A little trust, Miss Gabriel.*’

I rolled my eyes. “Lord Vader will not be happy if I bang up the shuttle, you know, he just had the paint touched up.”

He gave me a tight smile that never quite reached his eyes. “Let’s hope we will have a shuttle to bang up after this.” He said.

I sighed as the ship came out of hyperspace and we slowed to a quarter speed with shields up. I glanced at Thrawn and checked over the instruments while he looked at the little tracker in his hand and drew a deep breath. I hoped he knew what he was doing.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“Now we wait.” He said.

“Great.” I muttered.

He just gave me a grin.

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According to the star chart we were not that far away from where the second attack had taken place. Thrawn’s ability to make these mini and micro jumps amazed me. They were often a topic for hated debate amongst pilots as a theoretical possibility and I had been involved in many such discussions but always the general consensus was that it was far too dangerous to attempt. The forces of going into and coming out of hyperspace in such tiny increments of time were thought to do more damage than was worth it. While the two micro jumps he had made had put great stress on the hull so far I saw no real damage of any sort showing up on the sensor’s and the *Sigiri* had very good sensors. Micro jumps were thought to be improbable yet he managed to do it with the shuttle effortlessly.

The attack came at us from the starboard side. Laser blasts flashed brilliant in the darkness and for a moment it was all I saw. The ship rocked but the shields held. I scanned the instruments but nothing showed up on the screens.

“Swing around to port.” Thrawn said. I did as he asked, wondering what he was up to since the fire had come from the Starboard side.

“What are you doing?” I asked, watching him recalibrate something in the external sensors.

“Testing a hypothesis.” He told me. “If this is what I think it is then certain trace elements and residue will be emitted from the cloak, while we can’t see the ship the sensors will find this residue, exhaust if you like.”

The shuttle rocked violently as the cloaked ship fired on us.

“Evasive manoeuvres.” Thrawn said.

“Okay but do you mind telling me how I evade something I can’t see?” I asked as I swung the shuttle hard about.

“Do your best to not get us killed while I make these calibrations.” He said calmly with a hint of a smile.

I made a face. “If you say so.”

“The proper response to a command from a superior officer would be ‘yes sir’.” He teased.

“Oh... well in that case...Yes sir.” I said banking us hard to starboard and looping us around in a tight circle.

“There is hope for you yet!” he told me with a smile.

“How can you be so calm at a time like this?” I asked as the last of the latest volley of fire hit us. The shields strained and the engine whined. Thrawn fired a wide strafe of fire but nothing happened.

“Is there a reason to not be calm?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know maybe because some invisible ship is trying to blow us to tiny bits and we have no way to find them? I’d say that was reason enough to not be calm.”

He glanced at me and smiled. “Well then, my dear, allow me to give you something to sooth your concerns.” He flipped some switches and suddenly there was a blip on my screen.

“You can see it on the read out now?” He asked.

“Yes on the display, but not when I look out the window.” I told him. I banked us hard around to avoid the latest blasts to come out of nowhere. “How did you...?”

“Follow the instruments and ignore what you don’t see outside.” He said without giving me any explanations.

So I did what he said and followed the blip I was not what was out side, or rather not out side. Thrawn gave instructions and when we were close enough he fired on the invisible ship. I watched as the cloak began to fail and the ship slowly appeared. Thrawn fired again specifically at the engines and the ship twisted and lost power.

“That looks like a lot like some sort of weird TIE phantom copy.” I said.

Thrawn nodded. “The design is similar.”

The ship rocked and slowly stopped moving. I scanned her. “I read one life sign but her engines are not functional. She’s dead in space.”

“Hail her.” He ordered.

I did as he asked but shook my head. “Who ever they are, they are not answering. There is a power spike in the hyperdrive.”

“Ktah!” Thrawn swore. “Get us away from her, she’s set to self destruct.”

I powered the *Sigiri* away from the strange ship, watching the read out on the small screen the massive energy spike which would destroy the ship which had tried to destroy us. When she blew the explosion was surprisingly violent. The *Sigiri* rocked with the shock wave but the shields held as we were showered with debris that was much smaller than I would have expected. We waited in silence, watching as the debris scattered and slowed and everything returned to being quiet.

“That’s it?” I asked after what seemed forever.

“There would have been only one ship. They would not have wasted two.” Thrawn said coldly. When I looked at him I could see he was angry but I wasn’t sure of the exact reason behind it.

“You care to explain this?” I asked him starting to get annoyed.

He swivelled the chair to look at me, then looked at the small tracking device in his hand. He unstrapped the harness and got up. “Get us into hyperspace; we have a rendezvous to meet.” He said and left the cockpit as abruptly as he had spoken to me.

“Yes, Admiral.” I answered biting my tongue from saying what was really on my mind. He was obviously furious and I didn’t need to or want to provoke

him further. I was reasonably sure he'd tell me in time what had just happened and more importantly why it had happened. I took a good look around the debris field. There was nothing but unrecognizable, tiny pieces of metal. The ship had definitely had an Imperial design but it had not been like any ship I had ever seen, and I was pretty sure I'd seen them all. I set the coordinates into our nav-computer and then began a very thorough ship wide diagnostic. While the vessel that had fired on us had not done any visible damage I wanted to be sure. I didn't really fancy the idea of blowing up in hyperspace. Once I was certain we'd be fine and we'd reached the jump point we slipped into hyperspace. If all went well we'd be in this route for the next sixteen or so hours. I watched the rippling and shifting of light that formed the hyperspace lane for a while then set the ship on auto pilot. I was tired, I was hungry and I needed to shut my eyes for a while. Angry or not it was Thrawn's turn to stand watch and keep an eye on my ship.

I found him sitting in the dark of the galley. He had disassembled the tiny tracker and was toying with the pieces in his hands. I switched on the small blue light over the stove, then put the kettle on for tea and sat down across from him. For a long moment there was a thick silence between us then he looked at me, his eyes glowing with that eerie light they had of their own.

"You look tired." He said sounding just as weary as I felt.

I nodded. "That would be because I am." I told him.

He went back to looking at the pieces of the tracker. "I find it difficult to comprehend that someone working for the Empire would go to this much trouble to eliminate one being simply because they are alien." He said after another lengthy silence. There was a bitterness in his voice which I had not heard before. It made me sad.

"You know who it is, don't you? I mean, you know exactly who it is, not just some vague guess." I asked, getting up to make tea.

He drew a long, slow deep breath. "I believe I do." He said, "And it disgusts me."

I poured two cups of white Chaya leaf tea and sat back down. "How did you know how to find the ship?"

"I am involved in a project dealing with cloaking devices." He said. "What you saw was a prototype but it was not the same one that I have been involved in fitting with a cloaking device." He took the cup of tea gratefully and sipped at it slowly. "Cloak technology is a tricky business and we have not yet managed to get it quite right. I knew how to track the ship because I knew exactly what to look for."

"I don't understand. Why did this happen?"

"I believe that I am a threat to someone high up in the Imperial echelon. One or perhaps several members of the Emperor's elite think he is wrong to keep me in such a high position of power but their complaints about me have fallen on deaf ears as far as he is concerned. I had hoped the public disgrace we arranged would quell this but it would appear that not everyone believed it as we had

hoped. I have experienced great amounts of prejudice for being non human, which was part of the reason for arranging the fall from grace. It is impossible for me to accomplish my work, my goals when I must deal with the day to day xenophobia which seems to run rampant in this galaxy."

I sighed because I did not know what to say to this. I felt guilty just by association.

Thrawn must have seen this on my face because he said. "It is not just humans that act this way, tekari, my own people are also the same, fearing that which they do not know or understand. It is most counterproductive, but what happened here was a complete waste of Imperial resources over petty jealousy and hate based on prejudice and ambition." He sounded so angry but underneath his words I sensed a hurt that I was not sure I fully understood and there was nothing I could do to ease it.

"All these incidents are connected aren't they? The first tracker, the spice cake, now this..."

He nodded slowly. "It would appear that someone is trying to sabotage my career in the Imperial navy. At first they tried subtle means with the poisoned cake, hoping that by eliminating you while under my care I would feel Vader's wrath, then the first tracking device which I now believe did have something to do with that pirate we ran into. Only, as luck would have it, you knew something about him the people who hired him did not, which was sloppy on their part but I suspect that when the incident with the spice cake failed they had to work fast. You are a lot tougher to kill than they thought and Doctor Thracar was much better at his job than the average ship's doctor." He paused to take a thoughtful sip of tea. "What this tells me is that someone on my own ship, of my own crew set these incidents up, now again it has to be someone on the *Admonitor*. That I cannot even trust those working on my own ship..." He shook his head in disgust. "You, my dear, are unfortunately caught in the middle of this and for that I am truly sorry."

"Who is it?"

He shook his head. "While I have my suspicions I'd rather not voice them just yet, not because I don't want to tell you but because it is better, safer for you if you don't know. When I am certain I will address this issue but I beg your patience until such time. We are investigating this but covertly, while I am sure you know more than the average person does, it is better that you be kept out of it. I don't want you becoming any more of a target than you already have been." He spoke quietly and I knew then that it wasn't just the attacks on him that had angered him but that I had also been in the line of fire. "I expect the rest of this trip will be quiet, unless the ship was damaged and you need to repair something." He pinched the bridge of his nose and then looked at me.

"The diagnostic showed all clear. I expect there are some serious blast burns on the hull but apart from that I could not find anything that requires

repair or attention. The hull's integrity wasn't compromised, she's a tough little ship this. I suspect Lord Vader knew that when he assigned her for my use."

Thrawn smiled. "So you won't be spending anytime hanging upside down in the engine room?" He was teasing me.

"Not if I can help it, besides *Sigiri's* engine room is better set up than the hwk's." I told him stifling a yawn. "I really do need to sleep." I said.

"I told Rukh to take the crew cabin." He informed me.

I frowned. "My stuff was in that cabin."

He nodded. "I know. I had it moved to the one I was in. I thought that it made more sense, less work for the cleaning crew on the *Avenger*. And don't worry, the broken glass has been dealt with."

"So you assume that I want to share your bed?" I asked with a little smile.

"I don't assume, s'iu tekari, I know." He said smugly. "Besides you'll have it all to yourself because I will be on watch."

I sighed and although I felt oddly disappointed by his statement I just nodded. I really was tired. "Okay." I said getting up. "Wake me up in four hours or so?"

"As you wish, although you can sleep longer if you need it. There will be no more such attacks and especially not while we are in hyperspace."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself there."

"I am."

I stared at him for a moment then nodded. I was too wrung out to even contemplate trying to argue or get into a discussion with him about how and why he was so certain.

The stateroom he had chosen was the largest of all the rooms and was the most comfortable. The crew cabin had four single bunk beds. I could see why he'd prefer this room to that one. I readied for bed and when I was done I slipped in between the covers. His scent lingered on the pillow and I found that comforting. Surprisingly enough I did not toss and turn with thoughts of the past couple of day's events racing through my mind. Sleep came swiftly and was welcome.

After the second time Thrawn and I were parted from each other and from Coruscant I would dream of him often. I would slowly surface from sleep with the essence of his touch on my body and his voice in my mind. Always upon waking fully, only to realise that it was just a dream and he was not really there, I experienced a terrible sense of sorrow. Now, as sleep receded and I began to wake up, I found myself once again caught in this reoccurring dream. It was so real it made me ache with longing that was painful and I fought against opening my eyes until I realised I wasn't dreaming, that the touch of fingertips on my skin was very real. I rolled over to find him lying on top of the blankets beside me, his head propped up on his arm. He was smiling.

He brushed tangled hair from my face. "And she who dances as light upon snow finally awakens."

"Finally? How long did you let me sleep for?" I mumbled, ignoring his strange poetic manner of calling me by my Dantassi name.

"It's been almost eight hours." He said. "You needed it. The last thing I want is my pilot exhausted." I frowned but before I could protest that I had only needed four hours of sleep, he added, "Especially since I plan on working her hard."

"The ship okay?" I asked wondering if we now had some sort of engine trouble I needed to deal with.

He nodded. "Everything is fine. Rukh is keeping busy practicing being stealthy, the ship is working within normal parameters and we are on schedule."

I yawned and stretched. "So... now what, you mentioned work?"

His fingertips brushed down my bare arm and then followed the curve of my waist to my hip. "I thought we could spend some time catching up." He said with a lazy smile.

Goosebumps prickled along my skin and there was a sudden flash of heat that danced through me, making me momentarily dizzy. "Catch up on what?" I was trying to think of what work he could mean. The only job I had been given was getting him to the rendezvous with the *Avenger* on time. As far as I knew I was on schedule with everything else. I was still waking up and therefore a bit slow on the uptake. He smiled at the sleepy confusion on my face then he pulled me closer to him. He shifted to lie over me, covering me, nudging my knees with his own so that I made a place to accommodate his body.

"Our covert conversational practice. We are a little behind on that." He whispered in my ear.

"Oh." I said finally getting it.

"Too much sleep makes you slow." He chuckled softly and then before I could make a sound of protest he shut me up with the easiest, fastest and most delightful method he knew. I didn't complain, I just followed his lead and wrapped myself around him. I had missed him, missed this physical contact. He took his time showing me just how effective his lips could be at expressing themselves without uttering a single word. We were in no hurry. It wasn't as if there was any place we could go and there was nothing in particular we needed to do.

Rediscovering the wonder of what his touch, his kiss could do to me was as much fun as my exploration of his beautiful body. He had once told me that seduction was an art form but so was this and I delighted in the lessons given and learned. We came together, pieces of a puzzle that fit perfectly, one within the other and despite the lingering shyness I still sometimes felt there was no hesitation. He slipped me out of the night clothes I had slept in and I undressed him the way I might have unwrapped a Boonta Eve gift, carefully, with utter delight and expectation of all good things. I was not disappointed.

"I hope you locked the door." I breathed in his ear as he nibbled that place on my neck which always made me crazy.

“Why?” he asked, taking delight as I shivered under his caress of fingertips that were exploring possibilities.

“I would hate for Rukh to think someone was being murdered in here.” I told him. “And come bursting in at an inopportune moment.”

His expression was one of amusement. “Yes, I locked the door. Yes, the ship’s auto warning systems are all on and no, Rukh will not think anyone is being murdered. Now before I have to take drastic measures to keep your oh-so inquisitive mind occupied are there any more questions?”

I grinned as my fingers traced that fine line of blue-black hair which ran from his navel to his groin. “Yes.”

His smile was slow and hungry as his body responded to my touch. He couldn’t find his voice so he arched his eyebrow in that *get to the point before I devour you* sort of way.

“Can we do this more than once?” I asked as sweetly as I could.

His smile widened. “I think that could be arranged, tekari, given enough time. Though if you keep that up...” he said catching my hand in his. “I can’t be held responsible for the consequences...” His voice was all warm and husky, his breath brushing against my skin. I pulled my hand free from his.

“Good, because you did say that we have some serious catching up to do!” I told him poking his chest with my finger.

“And now you understand why I wished you to be well rested.” He said.

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I sat at the small table in the galley drinking tea and reading. Thrawn had sequestered himself in the cockpit to work on his current project, asking to be left alone so that he could meditate on the work at hand. He had said it was easier for him to think where he could see the stars and I had just smiled because I understood this. I had made him tea then left him to his thoughts. We were still at least forty-eight hours away from the *Avenger* and while he had worked on his plan for dealing with the Rebels and the arms smuggling that was going on, he wanted to be certain that he had all possibilities and permeations thought out. He would not speak of what he was working on and I did not ask. I was pretty certain that sooner or later I would learn of the results of this plan anyway. I didn’t want to know details.

I didn’t hear anyone moving around me but when all the hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood on end I knew I wasn’t alone any more.

“I know you’re there.” I told the air and a second later Rukh stepped out of whatever shadow he had been hiding in to stand beside me.

“Can’t you just walk around like most normal beings, what is with all the sneaking about?” I asked without looking up at him.

“We are trained to be silent.” His gravely voice was soft.

“Well, if you keep this up you will give me a heart attack.” I told him. That wasn’t

strictly true since I had sensed him but I didn’t really want to spend the rest of the trip wondering when he’d suddenly pop up, giving me the fright of my life.

“That is not my wish.” He said. “Admiral Thrawn specifically said you were to be protected and not harmed.”

“Then I suggest you sneak louder.” I said crossly.

“That will be difficult but I will try.”

“I’d appreciate it and so would the Admiral, he’s getting tired of me complaining about you scaring the sandjiggers out of me.”

“May I ask you something, lady Merlyn?” Rukh asked after a moment.

I nodded. I had given up asking him to stop calling me lady Merlyn; he just did what he wanted to do no matter what I said or asked.

“You are the Admiral’s bond mate.” He said. It wasn’t really a question.

I raised both my eyebrows in question and I was about to say something not so polite about him minding his own business but then managed to squash that impulse. In the end, considering the obvious fact that sharing a small shuttle space left no room for secrets and Rukh was not stupid, I didn’t see the point in trying to fabricate some huge story or explanation. “Well, I suppose that is one way of calling what we have, although I am not sure what I’d call it myself.” I answered. Truth of the matter was I had no idea what to label the relationship I had with Thrawn.

“Do you have offspring?”

“Uh... no.” I made a face.

“But you are his mate.” He pressed. “You will bear him offspring, yes?”

“Uhm... not right now, no” I said and then seeing the frown on his face added. “It’s complicated.” I told him. “The Empire isn’t exactly happy about our uhm... relationship. Why do you ask?” I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation with an alien assassin who had nearly throttled me not so long ago, but then again considering my life in general it wasn’t weirdest thing to have ever happened either.

“He protects you.” Rukh said. “He has asked I protect you as well. He has said he is bound to you. He said...”

I interrupted him. “I get the idea, Rukh. Why are you asking this?”

“If there were offspring they too would be under my protection but for that I would need to know where they are.”

“Well, there are none so you don’t have to worry about that. Is that why you have been following me around like a love sick bantha, because the Admiral told you to protect me?”

“Yes, lady Merlyn.”

“Rukh, we’re in a shuttle in hyperspace. No one is getting onboard any time soon to do anybody any harm. You can relax.” I told him. “I don’t need you to bodyguard me here, so for the love of the great and almighty Sarlacc will you knock it off?”

“You did not know I was onboard and I can do great harm.” He pointed out.

“Yes well, unless there are more of you hidden away that I don’t know about, I think we are all safe for now. You can stop shadowing me, it’s unnerving.”

“I am to protect you at all costs.”

“Admiral Thrawn told you this? In those exact words?”

The Noghri nodded.

“Well you can stop with the ‘at all costs’ bit, for now we are all safe and once we get to where we are going I don’t think lord Vader would be pleased if I brought you back home with me.”

Frowning, Rukh thought about what I had said and decided there was a failure to communicate somewhere and gave up pressing the matter. I guessed that when it came down to whose word had more weight; it wasn’t mine that had priority. Whatever Thrawn had told the Noghri warrior about our relationship I didn’t want to hear it. I was already confused enough by some of the things done and said by this man who was still a mystery to me in so many ways. I was still mulling over in my head what exactly had happened on Hjal at the unmasking ceremony. Of course, I really wasn’t sure I wanted to know that either, so I hadn’t pushed for answers.

Now I began to wonder if perhaps I should, especially considering his words to me our last night together on Coruscant. “*I am already bound to you,*” he had said. “*You do not need to mark me as yours.*” I hadn’t given that much thought at the time but as his words suddenly echoed in my head, resonating with Rukh’s I wondered if perhaps I might want to bring this up with him and find out exactly what he had meant. I was beginning to suspect that there had been great significance in the Dantassi ceremony, especially the part that no one had explained to me, that I had blindly said yes to but for the moment I was mostly content with the whole ignorance is bliss idea. I was brought out of my thoughts when Rukh moved slightly.

“You know, you can sit.” I told him. It was a little unnerving to have him stand stone still all the time. He was very good at standing very still.

“I do not enjoy to sit.” He told me.

I looked up at him then. “What do you enjoy?”

The Noghri was silent for a few moments then said. “I enjoy the Hunt.” He said. “It is what I am trained for.”

“How long have you been training?”

“From birth the Noghri warriors are taught the ways of battle. We train and practice daily for many hours.”

“Sounds like fun.” I muttered. “Well, you are really good at it and you scare the sandjiggers out of me.” I told him. “Maybe I should train with you.” I half joked.

“You have warrior skills?” he asked, sounding very sceptical.

I might have been insulted except I had been on the receiving end of his skill and knew exactly how good I was not. “I’m starting to wonder about that but Lord Vader sometimes teaches me in his ways of combat and I have been trained in the Bunduki arts and.”

“We do not use the ways of the followers of Palawa. I would be happy to teach you but the Noghri ways are not easy.”

“Nothing ever is.” I told him. “But you jumped me like I was a brainless patch-piece doll and there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I’d like to be better prepared.”

The Noghri gave me what I hoped was a smile and said in that rough voice of his, “Few ever see the Noghri coming, fewer are prepared to fight us.” He nodded.

“Right.” I looked at him, then asked. “Are you hungry?”

“I have already had nourishment.” He said and then before I could say or ask anything else he slipped into the dimly lit corridor and effectively vanished. I guessed the conversation was over.

I sighed and refilled my tea then spent the next hour mulling over the whole bond-mate, belonging to someone, having offspring conversation. At some point I was going to have to talk to Thrawn about this but not yet. For the moment I was just content to share his bed and bits of his life.

The rest of the trip passed easily enough, especially since no one else decided to shoot at us. When Thrawn wasn’t locked away somewhere working out his brilliant plan for saving the Empire and I was not checking on the ship or learning some pretty interesting, but according to Rukh very simple and basic Noghri combat techniques, we spent our time together. Both of us knew it was limited and precious, so we made the most of it. Only when we were a couple of hours away from our rendezvous with the *Avenger* did the distance of duty and work slink back in between us. That side of him which I suspected few ever got to know, which was warm, tender and often funny, receded behind his mask of cold, calculating logic.

Thrawn withdrew to the galley and buried his thoughts in the datapad he had with him, both studying his plans and finalizing them. He had spent a great deal of time working out his battle plans for Derra IV and he needed to be sure they would work. A lot was riding on this going well. I knew better than to distract him when he was working so I left him alone.

My retreat was to the cockpit where I sat reading or watching the hyper-space lane. The last hour of the journey was filled with the usual last minute preparations and tidying. While a cleaning crew would come on board and magically make the ship spotless, I never liked it when pilots left their ship looking like a garbage scow just because someone else would do the dirty work. I also didn’t want more rumours starting up so I stripped two beds in the crew cabin and the one in the stateroom we had been using.

Our arrival on the *Avenger* was quiet. There was no large honour guard waiting to meet Thrawn just the captain, a slender, nervous looking man called Loth Needa, two young looking officers and two stormtroopers. They looked a little more worried when Rukh shadowed behind the Admiral but he waved their concerns off with a brusque flap of his hand. Thrawn and the captain spoke briefly, there was a flurry of saluting and then the captain ordered the young officers and the two troopers to escort Thrawn and Rukh to quarters. I watched all this from the top of the ramp and I was the last to leave the shuttle. The Captain looked at me as I walked down the ramp with a mixture of distaste and amusement.

“Miss Gabriel, I presume.” He said with that polite yet frosty manner all Imperial men seemed to have been trained to use when meeting someone they have to be respectful to despite their dislike.

“Captain Needa, it is a pleasure to meet you in person.” I said cheerfully.

“Like wise, welcome on board *Avenger*.” He said but he didn't mean it.

“Lord Vader has sent word that he will be joining us in a day from now and that you were to be afforded every courtesy.”

“Lord Vader is most considerate.” I said knowing this would really confuse the captain because that description didn't do my boss any justice at all. “I take it you have accommodations for me?”

“Yes. Lord Vader requested that you be quartered close to him.”

“Thank you.” I said with a smile. “I have to finish the paperwork for the journey here, maybe you can send someone to show me to my room in, say, half an hour?” I was letting him off the hook; he was very uncomfortable in my presence.

He smiled. “That will be arranged.” He told me then handed me a datachip. “Lord Vader's instructions were to give you this upon arrival.”

“Thank you, Captain.” I said taking the chip from his hand. He gave me a curt nod then turned and left the hanger. I watched him leave, looked at the datachip in my hand, sighed then went back inside the shuttle to sort out the last bit of my work as pilot and get my things together. I was looking forward to a hot bath and some decent food. When the young aide came to fetch me I was more than ready.

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Darth Vader stood with his back to me, arms folded across his broad chest, staring out of the window. I stood at his side and watched with him. The battle of Derra IV raged about us and every now and then a small shockwave rocked the *Avenger* as a blast struck its shields. This battle was no contest, Thrawn's strategies were flawless. I had watched unseen, from the back of the briefing room, as Lord Vader had outlined the battle plans to the men who would carry the battle out on the front line. Thrawn had also been present at the briefing, but had remained silent. While it was his idea, no one was supposed to know that, so under the Emperor's orders Lord Vader was the one tasked with presenting it.

Once the briefing had been given, the training for the mission began and after several weeks of serious drills and hard work, I guessed it had all paid off.

It had not been my original intent to remain on board the *Avenger* but Lord Vader had insisted. I wasn't about to question him. I was happy to be near Thrawn, who had been asked to continue to give his expertise on the battle tactics, behind the scenes. It didn't stop me from complaining about it though.

“Perhaps he fears you will get lost on board of the *Executor* and that would be embarrassing.” He had teased one evening as we sat in the quiet of his quarters playing Dejarik.

“Ha very ha.” I had said crossly as he beat me at the game for the fifth time in a row. I wasn't much of an opponent. I think he just enjoyed playing against me for the smart ass running commentary or maybe it was that I teased him in between moves in way that made him lose his concentration. He accused me of using unfair tactics until I pointed out he was winning anyway.

Like mine and Lord Vader's, his quarters were in the VIP and coincidentally the most secure and quiet part of the ship. Thrawn and I were the outsiders and we both knew it. He hid behind that mask of alien cool and I hid behind Lord Vader and the work I did for him. Under orders from Lord Vader, I stayed out of the way and mostly out of sight. The VIP area of the ship was complete with a comfortable lounge and dining area with small kitchen. My days were busy, filled with work and my free time was spent on my own or with Thrawn when he had time.

My work for Lord Vader, who was busy chasing down rebels and other Imperial problems that just didn't seem to want to go away, kept me busy. He had begun to complain a lot lately about the *Millennium Falcon*, Han Solo's ship. The last thing I had heard about Solo was his fairly dramatic escape from the docking back on Tatooine and some rumours that he had joined forces with the Rebellion. I wasn't sure what to make of that, when I had known him, Solo wasn't the most charitable guy in the galaxy. So when Lord Vader began to request information on the smuggler I was surprised to say the least, especially when I needed to read the reports of Solo's actions with regards to the Rebellion's attacks. I had never figured him for the good cause kind of man and I often wondered what it was that had made him change his mind.

The days on board the *Avenger* were mostly routine until the moment came to put Thrawn's plan into action. The ship went into battle alert and outside all hell broke loose. The *Avenger* was the ISD flagged to lead the assault and there was nothing else to do but watch. For the rebels it was a slaughter and I was grateful that I could not see details, just flashes of brilliant orange light as the ships were destroyed. I had been briefing Lord Vader on some details about a planned meeting with Prince Xizor when the battle alert alarms had sounded. Lord Vader had stormed off, presumably to watch and co ordinate from the bridge and I had been left to my own devices, deciding it was better to just stay in the small, private ready room I had been using as a makeshift office. At least

here I could make tea and eat the sandwiches that had been prepared for my lunch. A couple of hours after he had vanished Lord Vader had returned. I suppose he had wanted to continue where we had left off but instead he stood beside me as I stared at the carnage going on outside. We did not speak, we didn't have to. I was both in awe and sickened at what I saw. I could feel death surround us and it wasn't a pleasant sensation. *All living things were connected in the Force*, I had once read in the small journal my birth mother had left for me. I supposed that if that were the case then when a living thing's life ended violently it left some sort of a mark, some sort of a ripple in the force. It wasn't pleasant. In fact it felt as though someone was pinching little bits of my soul apart. I didn't think it prudent to bring this up with Lord Vader though and worked hard to just breathe.

At some point nearing the end of battle, Thrawn joined us and along with Lord Vader and me, waited for confirmation of what we already knew the outcome to be.

I wondered if Jyrki was among the rebels in this battle. I could not sense his life force but it would have been like him to join in something deemed impossible. A part of me hoped he was not amongst the casualties. Despite all he had done to me over the past few years I didn't want him to die.

When a comm signal eventually came through to inform Lord Vader that the battle had been successful the sense of relief in the room was palpable but there was no discernable celebration, I supposed that would be left up to the fighters who had put their lives on the line. I didn't think there was much to celebrate though, but I didn't voice this opinion out loud.

"Your plan was well conceived, Admiral." Lord Vader said to Thrawn after a lengthy silence. "This was a great victory for the Empire and it has put a severe dent in the Rebellion's numbers and weapons. Thank you for your work on this matter." It was probably the only thanks Thrawn would receive.

Thrawn gave Lord Vader a curt nod. "It is my duty to serve the Empire in every way I can." He said.

Lord Vader inclined his head slightly. Both men knew that Thrawn would never be given credit for the plan he had come up with but that did not seem to bother him too much. He had told me while we were still en route to the *Avenger* that sometimes the acknowledgment of achievement was not in his best interest. Considering the great lengths someone was going to to have him eliminated I wasn't about to argue with him. Still, a part of me felt it wasn't quite fair that he do all the work and receive none of the recognition.

"I expect we shall be recalled to Coruscant. The Emperor will wish to personally congratulate the men who have fought here today." Lord Vader said absently. "Admiral, I am sure you will wish to observe the debriefing when it occurs?" Vader said to Thrawn who nodded. Lord Vader continued. "I must communicate with my Master about how events here have transpired." He told

Thrawn and then turned to me. "You may do as you please with your time until I have our orders." And then he left.

"So what did you think?" Thrawn asked me once we were alone in the small ready room.

"It was like watching some bizarre ballet done with space ships." I told him. "A lot of people died out there. It was difficult to watch and even harder to experience."

Thrawn looked at me, his eyebrow cocked in question.

I shrugged without looking at him. "I can't explain it, I expect it has something to do with the force but every time someone was killed it was as if I could feel it, like ripples through time and space, as if the universe were a lesser place. It was just painful. I have never been so close to anything quite like this before."

He nodded. "Battle should always be painful." He said coolly. "The moment we can watch a slaughter such as was done here today without feeling something, sorrow, remorse, or even some sort of regret for the loss of life then we become our own worst enemy."

"Your plan worked well though." I said looking up at him. His expression was hard and he remained distant from me, closed off and shrouded in the calculating air of 'otherness' he often wore.

He nodded. "The rebels are quite intelligent but they are not the military machine that is the Empire. Their pilots are often more lucky than they are skilled or well trained. A lot of people lost their lives due to inexperience." He said and then added. "However, they will most likely not make the same mistakes again."

"Doesn't it bother you that no one will know it was you who came up with this plan?" I asked.

For the first time since he had entered the room the hardness of his expression broke and he smiled at me. "Sj'iu tekari, you of all people should know me well enough to know by now glory and reward are not high on my list of priorities. I was asked to do a job, it is done. I see that the fruits of my labours are successful and I learned much about how these rebels fight by watching the battle at hand. What do I care if the Emperor tells the galaxy it was me who formulated the plans and decides to give me a medal for it? What use does a worthless piece of metal pinned to my chest have? It would change nothing." He stared out of the window and sighed. The salvage crews were already out in the debris field collecting what ever they felt was of use to the Empire. "I did find it interesting to note that during the briefing one of the pilots realised it was I who came up with the plan for the battle and not Lord Vader. About a quarter of the way through Vader's speech he stared at me as though some brilliant idea had suddenly gone off in his head. You could watch him put two and two together. I'd like you to find out more about him. I believe his name is Fel." He continued.

“Can’t you just look up his records in the database?” I asked.

He smiled. “Of course I can and I will but you have a way of finding out things about people that are not in any official database so I am asking you to discover a bit about what sort of a man he is, not just what his service record says about him.”

“So you want me to spy.” I said a little crossly, folding my arms across my chest. This spying thing was becoming a bad habit the men in my life kept asking me to do.

He chuckled. “Not at all, I want you to help me understand why it was he who recognised that the plan was not Vader’s and whether or not I should take a personal interest in this man. There are very few Imperials who think outside of their own little world, or past their own personal glory, I am now quite curious about this Fel. I know that your methods of extracting information are far more subtle and kinder than anything the Empire could come up with so will you do as I ask?”

I made a face.

“If I say ‘please’?”

I could not help the smile but added an eye roll for emphasis to tell him I wasn’t happy about doing this for him. “Okay. I will see what I can learn, but I am not making any promises.”

He reached out and caressed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers. “Thank you.”

I nodded and we both returned to watching the salvage crew until my comm beeped and broke the silence.

“Lord Vader.” I said.

He nodded absently. “Best not keep him waiting, my dear.”

I left the small ready room and made my way through the halls to meet with Lord Vader as per his request. I eventually found him in his personal chambers pacing a hole in the floor. The Emperor had recalled the *Avenger* along with himself and Admiral Thrawn to return to the Core. There would be a ceremony to honour the heroes of the day, to show the might of the Empire and how it rewards those who serve it. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him how Thrawn would be rewarded for his work but I bit the comment back. Interfering where I wasn’t wanted would not do anyone any good, least of all me or the Admiral.

“Are we to stay on board or return to the *Executor*?” I asked.

“We will remain with the *Avenger* for the time being and return to *Executor* after the ceremony. Why? Do you not wish to return to the Core world and see our heroes rewarded for their hard work?” there was a hint of threat in his voice.

“Yes, my lord I do, it’s just that I am running out of clothes to wear.” I told him also a little crossly.

He laughed. I shuddered. “The *Avenger* is equipped with laundry facilities. You have permission to make use of them.” He said smugly. “You can replenish your wardrobe on Coruscant.” He added sarcastically.

I sighed. I knew all about the ship’s laundry facilities and used them but was getting tired of some of my clothes being mangled and ruined as well as going missing, particularly some of my favourite pieces of lingerie. I never liked the idea of complete strangers handling my clothes, especially my underwear. I wasn’t sure what happened to my missing clothes but with a crew of several thousand people, mostly male, I wasn’t about to ask. I had taken to washing my undies in the sink in my quarters instead. I was also running out of dress clothes as well. Dining with the Captain was a practice that had become more common than I would have liked. I refused citing headaches, work and other ailments as often as I could respectfully get away with but that only worked so many times.

“You will be joining the Captain’s table for dinner tonight, by the way. A few of the pilots have been invited to dine with the Captain and Admiral Thrawn felt you would be a welcome addition.” Lord Vader broke into my thoughts.

I smiled grimly and thought ‘*I’m going to have to hurt him*’ because I could guess who was among the pilots I’d be eating with and why Thrawn had made this suggestion. What I actually said was, “Yes, my lord, as you wish.”

Lord Vader nodded, satisfied I was being obedient and non argumentative. There was a lengthy pause as I waited to see if there was anything else. He broke it by barking at me. “Don’t you have work to do, girl?” he asked. This was Vader speak for *you can stop annoying me and go away now*.

“Yes, my lord I do.” And with a brusque wave of his hand, I was dismissed.

As I had suspected the dinner was a fairly stiff affair and although the food was very good, I picked at it. While I had been conveniently seated next to Sootir Fel it was my other seat mate who tried to monopolise my attention. Eventually, I had given him a hefty force suggestion that I was dull and he would rather speak to the person seated across from him more than me. It was relief that the force persuasion had worked because I was getting tired of him staring at my cleavage the entire time he spoke to me. Sometimes being the only female at these functions was a real pain. I then turned my attention to the pilot who had peaked Thrawn’s interest. He was a handsome, tall, broad shouldered man who radiated confidence and I was struck by his deep and quiet intelligence. Here was a man who was like swallow-sand, unfathomable and probably quite dangerous if stirred up enough.

I learned that he had come from an agro-combine on Corellia and had spent most of his life flying. It was the one thing that lit up his eyes when he spoke of it and when he found out that I was also a pilot and mechanic we had our common ground. We spent the rest of the dinner quietly speaking of the passion of flying and the roots which had brought us into the Empire’s service. I also learned that he was married to the famous Wynssa Starflare, a very well known Holo Drama actress. This was the second thing that lit up his eyes when

he spoke of it. I asked him if he found it difficult to be apart from her, to balance work with a relationship. He had shrugged and replied that she was what helped him to keep going. She inspired him and reminded him of all that was good and bright in the galaxy. When I had smiled at those words he had thought that I was making fun of him. He seemed surprised when I told him 'quite the contrary'. That I had smiled because someone had once described me in much the same way. I knew he had been slightly curious and had we known each other better he might have asked for more details but as it was he let the topic slide back to more neutral ground, flying and ships.

As I listened to him talk about the battle he had most recently been engaged in I realised that this was a man who was fiercely loyal but something behind his words hinted that he was beginning to question how certain things were done in the Empire. It wasn't anything I could put my finger on and no one else in the room would have picked up on it, but I was using all my senses to read him and something underneath what he was saying rippled. Behind his veneer of the perfect pilot he was not altogether happy. I wondered if even he knew this, because it was very faint. As I watched him and listened to him I became aware that he was incredibly sensitive to subtlety. He watched people and understood the finer points of how they worked. It was an interesting talent to observe.

I had been incredibly grateful when the dinner ended and I could politely make my excuses and leave. There had been enough testosterone in that one room to run an entire ISD for months and I had felt very out-numbered. Thrawn, who had been seated at the far end of the table from me, had made a point of ignoring me all evening. Lord Vader, as was to be expected, had not been present. The facts that he could not eat without removing his mask and that his presence in general tended to put a huge damper on any social gathering were strong reasons for keeping him away. While he never said it out loud I was certain that he loathed these functions almost as much as I did and was glad of the excuse to concentrate on his own work rather than be bored to death sitting at a table full of pompous men who loved to talk about how wonderful they all were, or argue about politics, and discuss women, among other things.

The *Avenger* was well on her way to the Core and in less than a day we would be back on Coruscant for a short while. I should have gone straight to bed when I returned to my quarters but I was neither tired nor calm. Instead I was surprisingly cross but I couldn't put my finger on why. I changed into work out clothes and found one of the smaller exercise rooms. I should not have been surprised when Rukh slipped in behind me and made me jump with fright.

"Are you still following me everywhere I go?" I asked him as I closed the door.

He gave me that scary Noghri smile which gave me goose bumps but not in any good way and replied. "Admiral Thrawn felt you might wish to relieve some aggression."

"He did, did he?" I hissed through gritted teeth. That man's uncanny ability to read my mind was beginning to annoy me, but he had been right.

"We can continue to practice the Noghri ways; this would be a good opportunity, would it not?" Rukh asked.

I nodded. What could I say? He was right. "So...where do we start this time? I asked and before I could even think about saying anything else I found myself flat on my back on the floor with a nasty looking knife blade at my throat. He had moved so fast I had not even sensed it, never mind seen it.

I looked up at him and grinned. "Okay, that's where we start. Teach me how to at least see you coming." And my lessons in how a Noghri could best a human at every turn began. It was going to be a long, probably painful night and I couldn't wait because anything was better than sitting alone waiting to get back to Coruscant, the Emperor and all that dreadful palace intrigue. Learning to spar with a Noghri wasn't any less painful but it was a whole lot more fun.