

## A few Days Off

The more time I spent away from Coruscant the less I enjoyed it when I returned. Lord Vader informed me we would be on planet for five days and I was to make myself scarce. This had caused me to look at him as though he had sprouted two heads.

“You’re giving me time off?” I asked in surprise as we walked through the Palace halls.

“Yes, I am required by the Imperial Palace Worker’s Council regulations to provide you with personal time.” He told me.

“Since when have you ever cared about IPWC rules?” I asked trotting to keep up with him.

“I don’t but I will not require your annoying efficiency this week as you have already prepared the schedule I requested and the rest of my time on Coruscant is spoken for.” He replied testily. This last bit was Vader speak for *‘The Emperor is being difficult and I need to deal with it.’*

“So... I really have five days off?” I asked just to confirm I had actually heard right.

“That is what I said the first time, girl! However, you are expected to attend tonight’s ceremony to honour the heroes of Derra IV and you are expected to dress appropriately and not disgrace my name. I trust this will not be an issue?”

“No, my lord.” I had contacted Cati as soon as I had found out about how big this medal ceremony would be and ordered a dress made. Since she had my measurements and a pretty good idea of what sort of colours and style I liked I trusted her judgement. I arranged for the dress to be delivered to the palace office.

“I shall expect you to be available should I have need of your services but unless I summon you, you are free to do as you wish.” He said. In other words I was to stay out of his and the Emperor’s way. This was more than fine by me.

“Yes my lord, thank you.” I said and before he could say anything else or change his mind I scurried off to find out if the dress I had ordered had been delivered and then head home before the main event. Time off was an incredible luxury for me, the last time I had taken a holiday was when I had gone home for Boonta Eve and then I had sort of been sneaky about it.

The flat was empty and quiet when I arrived so I took advantage of it by doing what I loved to do best of all, soak in a bath tub full of hot bubbly water. I was still lounging in the bath when Thrawn arrived home. He poked his head in the ‘fresher to tell me if I didn’t get a move on we would be late.

“Especially,” He added, “knowing how long it takes you to get ready for one of these functions.”

I threw the wet sponge at him but he ducked out of the way so it hit the door with a loud splat!

He was sitting waiting in the living-room, perfectly dressed in his dress uniform, switching through the HoloNet when I was almost ready. I had done my hair, my make up and added a touch of perfume in record time but the dress presented some problems.

“Can you help me with this?” I asked walking into the living room, and turning my back on him so that he could fasten the straps.

He sat speechless for a moment and then got up. “The men who helped win the Battle of Derra IV are supposed to be the center of attention, my dear, not you.”

He was right. The dress was stunning. Cati had created a work of art from dramassian silk and true to Cati style it had a very open back along with a fairly revealing décolletage. It was fitted through the bodice but flowed over my hips to my ankles like water, layer over layer of mist fine silk dyed the colours of sky fire. It was held together by two fine straps decorated with what Cati had called Jenn’ai-ice crystals, they had to be hooked, criss-crossed at the back of the dress and I couldn’t do that by myself.

I shrugged. “Cati likes to show off.”

“So do you, apparently.” He said with a wolfish smile.

“Everything that should be covered is covered.” I said defensively.

He traced a finger from the nape of my neck down my spine to where the dress finally caught up with itself. “It’s not what it covers; it is what it leaves to the imagination.” He murmured in my ear. “This dress will get you into trouble.”

I smiled. I could sense his arousal and it made me smug. “That might have been the idea.” I said, leaning back into his body and his touch.

I felt him take a deep breath. The kiss he laid on my shoulder did not match the words he finally found. “We shall be late if we don’t leave now.” He said and I couldn’t argue with that. There would be time enough for play later but I turned around and kissed him anyway. This teasing between us was almost a competitive sport. I grinned as he pulled himself away.

“You are a menace.” He told me, placing the shawl that went with the dress over my shoulders.

I couldn’t argue with that.

We arrived together but as soon as we had entered the grand hall we separated. I was part of the general public and he would be up on the stage as part of the higher ranking military officials, paying honour to the heroes of the day.

“I shall come and find you at the reception and perhaps we can leave earlier rather than later. We do have some unfinished business to take care of, my dear.” He whispered in my ear in Cheunh. I shivered despite the sudden rush of warmth I felt. I blushed and looked away shyly.

“Miss Gabriel, until later.” He said out loud, giving me a smile that made his eyes twinkle. I nodded politely not wanting to add fuel to the gossip fire. With a curt bob of his head he left me to my own devices. I watched for a moment as

he walked away, admiring the view. He was a handsome man in excellent physical shape and he made my knees weak. I drew a deep steadying breath and then I made my way through hall to find a seat next to Ynyth and Bobbyn.

“Wow, you look fabulous!” Bobbyn exclaimed when he saw me.

“Thanks, you two don’t look so bad yourselves. Where’s Shiv?”

“He got called off world at the last minute, some decorating disaster on Coruscant at the retreat. Don’t ask, I don’t know. He should be back by tomorrow. Antygra is here somewhere, but he doesn’t bother with us so much any more, mostly he tends to hang with the HR crowd.” Ynyth said sounding a bit peeved. “His girlfriend works there.”

I nodded and was disappointed. I had been looking forward to seeing Shiv again. Before we could chatter and catch up on the gossip the lights in the hall dimmed and the stage lighting was increased. Everyone stood when the Emperor appeared and the evening’s event began.

The ceremony was long and filled with high praise from the Emperor. There were a lot of speeches I tuned out filled with words like, ‘heroic’, ‘great’ and ‘mighty’. The three men that had been picked out for their bravery and great deeds were given new ranks, and rewards such as land and new commands. I watched Soontir Fel with great interest but he was stoic in his expression and gave neither pleasure nor displeasure away. After what seemed far too long the medals were presented and the ceremony ended with thunderous applause. After the stage had been emptied the rest of us followed to the room where the reception was held.

If the Empire knew how to do anything, it was how to throw a party for its heroes. The reception was very crowded, leaving little room for mingling, let alone the wait staff who were trying to make sure that everyone had access to the potent sparkling wine and the Hors d’oeuvres. I had come in with Ynyth and Bobbyn but we got separated pretty quickly and I was on my own so I scouted the room as best I could for friendly faces. When I couldn’t see anyone I opened myself up a little to the force to find Lord Vader, which was a bad idea. The next thing I knew I was in the presence of the Emperor. I curtsied low and bowed my head and put into practise some of the techniques that Lord Vader had been teaching me to keep my thoughts to myself.

He motioned for me to stand and tucked one finger under my chin to raise my face so that I was allowed to look at him. “Miss Gabriel, what a delight to see you again. I was most pleased to hear from Lord Vader that you would be in attendance this evening. I understand you witnessed the great battle for which we honour our valiant men this evening.”

“Yes, your highness. It was indeed a great battle.” I said as demurely as I could.

He gave me a toothy grin and chuckled. “You disapprove?” he asked.

“No, your highness but I found it... disquieting to watch so many beings die.”

He nodded knowingly. “Yes, I imagine that for one such as yourself that would be a difficult thing to observe first hand.” He said. “You are as compassionate as you are lovely, my dear, but you must learn to temper that, I had rather hoped that your time spent in Lord Vader’s presence would help with that negative little trait of yours.”

I wanted to ask him how it was that he could say that compassion was a negative thing but before I could say anything he had patted my arm and moved away, swallowed up by the crowd, surrounded by his Royal Guard. I shivered involuntarily and grabbed a glass of sparkling wine from the nearest waiter; I finished it and swiped another before the surprised young man had time to blink.

I was half way through my second glass when the leader of Intel, Ysanne Isard came to stand beside me. When her conversation began with, “I understand you are quite close with Admiral Thrawn. He a most intriguing man and I would love to learn a little more about him...” I knew it was going to be a long evening. The party went down hill from there.

After more than an hour of pretending to be cheerful, despite people’s best efforts to really make me cross, I had collected a circle of unwanted admirers. My dress was attracting entirely the wrong sort of attention and I did not know how to politely tell them to bugger off and leave me the hell alone. When the fourth young man tried to make a pass at me I was on my fourth glass of sparkling wine. His face contorted as I caught the hand he had placed on my behind and I pinched the pressure point hard enough to elicit a squeak of pain from him.

If Shiv had been with me he would have dragged me out of there long before it had gotten to this stage but that was not the case. I was bored, on my own, had not eaten anything since breakfast and was quite happy to drink whatever was in the glasses that kept being handed to me by stone faced waiters because that kept me from killing someone. By the time Thrawn made his way through the crowd to join me and had taken stock of the situation I was very giggly and the room was spinning.

“Miss Gabriel, there you are, Lord Vader said I might find you here.” Thrawn said lightly. The tone of his voice did not match the stern look on his face as he took stock of the state I was in. It never ceased to amaze me what a high rank and a scowl could do to a crowd of eager, libidinous, young Imperial officers. I had to bite my tongue to keep from giggling loudly as they all stood smartly to attention. He did not bother to tell them to stand at ease.

“Admiral...” I began but before I had a chance to speak he had removed the glass from my hand and was in the process of ushering me away from the young men who had suddenly discovered someplace else they desperately needed to be.

“A word, if I may.” He said tightly.

I just gave him a dazed look and began to complain that my drink was gone. All of a sudden I found myself in the subtle grip from his strong hand which guided me gently but firmly out of the reception hall. He walked me down the corridors, keeping a tight hold on me because the more I walked the more

unsteady I became on my dainty but perilously high heeled shoes. How he managed to get me into the little speeder and home I had no idea. Even more of a mystery was how I had gotten out of my dress and into a pyjama top and tucked into bed without really remembering that either. All I recalled was wishing the room and the bed would stop spinning. When I woke up sometime in the small hours of the morning with the desperate desire to violently remove everything in my stomach, I wished I was dead and that I could forget about this as well. He popped his head into the fresher to see if I was okay but I force shut the door. I didn't need help and I didn't want him to see me like this either, especially when it was entirely my own fault. When I felt well enough to stand, wash my face, clean my teeth and then stagger back to the bedroom I found Thrawn sitting on the bed waiting with a cup of some sort of strong smelling tea. How he managed to look both sympathetic and smug at the same time was beyond me. I took the cup from his hands. I didn't think I could drink the tea, let alone keep it down. I felt like an idiot.

"Do you know, I don't recall ever seeing you that drunk before, especially at an official function." He said calmly. "What possessed you to drink so much of that terrible wine they were serving?"

I shook my head and then wished I hadn't. "No idea." But that was a lie. Thrawn knew this, gave me that stare which said *you don't get away that easily, so tell me what I want to know or suffer the consequences* and waited.

I sighed. "Okay I was cross and bored." I told him. "Well mostly cross."

He waited some more. Leaning back against the headboard of the bed, his legs stretched out, one ankle folded over the other and his arms folded across his bare chest, a hint of a grin playing across his lips.

"Well first the Emperor cornered me and that was just unpleasant, then I had a run in with Ysanne Isard who was being particularly nasty, she kept asking questions about things I couldn't and wouldn't answer, mostly about you, oddly enough. After that I spoke with Antygra, who had also had too much to drink and was in an even worse mood and was ranting about on about something to do with how the Empire works and how one of his family was killed at Derra IV. Then I overheard someone say some very unpleasant and untrue things about you and then someone said some very inappropriate things about Lord Vader and then someone else said some incredibly inappropriate things about me. After that I suppose because I was on my own, the Empire's finest and randiest felt I was easy prey and that's when I kind of took matters into my own hands, because it was either hold a glass and drink or kick someone's butt." I told him. "I just didn't think showing off some of my newly acquired Noghri put-you-on-your-ass moves would go down well at this reception." I took a deep breath. "I really hate these stupid functions! I hate having to play nice and be all smiles and sweetness listening to stupid men talk about their stupid conquests and it's even worse when they get all grabby, with hands on places they should not put their hands or when other women get all bitchy and sarcastic, claws and teeth, and I

can't hurt them! I really, really hate being back on this stupid, single sun, freezing cold, filled to the brim with snivelling sycophants planet!"

He stroked my hair and tried very hard not to laugh.

I sat back against the pillows and shuddered. I looked at the cup of what ever it was he had given me and made a face. My stomach was making rebellious type motions.

"Drink it, it will help." He said.

I did as he asked and was surprised to feel a little better. "What is this stuff?"

He gave me a grin. "Ancient Dantassi remedy for those who indulge a little too much the night after a successful hunt. I'd tell you what was in it but then I would have to kill you. I am sworn to secrecy."

I sighed. "Was I complete idiot?" I asked wearily.

"Not as much as you could have been but I dare say there are a few broken hearts wandering around tonight. You are actually delightfully charming when you let your guard down, even when you are cross. Perhaps I should ply you with cheap sparkling wine more often."

I made a face. "I'd be forever grateful if you wouldn't mention that stuff to me right now."

He caressed my face and ran his fingers through my hair. "Welcome back to Coruscant." He said, leaning over to plant a kiss on my head. "Now get some rest. While this tea is good, I am certain you will not be feeling so well when you get up for work tomorrow."

"Lucky me then, I have the next five days off."

"Vader gave you time off?" he asked, surprised. "What did you do, annoy him to death?"

I stuck my tongue out at him and snuggled back under the covers. The last thing I remembered was the caress of Thrawn's fingertips through my hair. I woke up alone the next day with a headache strong enough to kill a bantha. Bleary eyed I got out of bed slowly, moving hurt. After a lengthy stay under the shower and an analgesic patch at the base of my neck I began to feel more human, less sarlacc victim. It should not have surprised me that it was nearly one in the afternoon, but it did. I made a mental note never to drink anything fizzy or alcoholic or both ever again.

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The note on the kitchen counter which waited for me along with a thermal pot of secret Dantassi hang over cure was short and neatly written. It made me smile.

*Sj'iu tekari,*

*Drink at least two cups, I promise it will help. I shall be quite late this evening, I am afraid, as I have some lengthy meetings and strategic planning sessions to deal with. I hope that you enjoy your day. Do something fun and relax. Don't be too alarmed if Rukh sneaks up on you, he was quite put out*

*when I told him he could not accompany me as a bodyguard to the palace. I assigned him to keep an eye on you, should you leave the flat. I imagine this task will either keep him incredibly busy or bore him to death, depending on what you decide to do with your day. Either way, he is occupied.*

*Oh and Cati left you a message asking about confirming the appointment you made while en route to the planet. I told her I appreciated her work and her reply was most amusing.*

*A'mera,  
Za'ar*

Since I had nothing better to do, I did as his note had told me to and I drank the strange tea. It worked well enough that I could actually stomach some toast for breakfast. After an hour of sitting quietly, reading I felt mostly human again and decided it was time to get out and go shopping. I confirmed the appointment with Cati and made a mental list of all my favourite places to browse. I needed new lingerie, new casual clothes and new fancy dresses, which also meant new shoes and probably some make up. As I got ready to leave I wondered when I had turned into the girl who cared about these things because on Tatooine that had not ever been the case. I almost never wore make up, my clothes were usually loose and practical and often covered with machine grease and hyper-drive fluid, my nails were always a mess and my hair more often than not resembled something that rats frequently nested in it. So what had changed I wondered. I came to the conclusion that probably I shouldn't ask that question as chances were I would not like the answer. I decided to stop off at the Imperial Palace first to see if Shiv had returned but the office secretary droid told me he wasn't back yet and she didn't know when he was due in. As I was on my way out I bumped into Antygra who surprised me by apologising for being rude the night before.

"It was just that I had some bad news, well, I guess I told you that." He explained. "I should have stayed at home but my girlfriend insisted I go with her. I was not really in a celebratory mood and I took it out on you."

"I remember, you said that a relative had died in the battle? I'm really sorry to...." I started.

He held up his hand. "It's okay, I was being an ass, I'm the one who is sorry. You know how I get about all this pomp and ceremony over war. I think it is a big waste of money." He said with a shrug. "Are you going out, or just coming in to work?" he asked.

"On my way out, I have some time off so I am going shopping, want to tag along?"

He shook his head. "Can't, gotta work." He said. "Any place in particular?"

"CoCo town and then Cati's." I said.

"She's the designer who made your dress from last night?" he asked.

"Yes." I said a bit surprised that he knew this, Cati was not a well known designer, despite her amazing talent.

"Shiv's mentioned her name a few times. Do you think she'd do something for Terisse, my girlfriend?" he asked.

"I am sure she would." I said. "Her studio and store is on the south concourse, next to that pastry shop Shiv loves so much."

He nodded. "Okay, yeah I know where it is, thanks. Terisse loved your dress and wanted to know where you got it, so I said I'd ask."

I nodded, and then asked. "Say if Shiv gets in before six can you get him to comm me? I'd love to meet up for stimcaf and cake."

He gave me a smile. "Will do, he's due back around three-ish I think." He said and we parted ways. So I was on my own. I drove the small speeder to the CoCo district, determined to enjoy what was left of my day.

I parked in the multiplex and decided to walk through the main shopping concourses and walkways. It had been a while since I had had my feet on a planet and it was nice to get out. I wandered in and out of the boutiques that Shiv had me hooked on, and made the mistake of popping into Bam's hair salon before my appointment with Cati. I had wanted to buy some of the wonderful conditioner he sold and instead I ended up being forced to listen to Bam's exclamations of horror at the state of my hair. This led to me being unable to argue with him and finding myself sitting in the studio being fussed over by Bam himself. Ever since the first time I had been placed under his capable hands, I was considered a 'special case.' I was never quite certain how to take this but when I saw the results Bam got, I couldn't complain. Forty minutes later my hair looked like someone else's and I had a bag full of hair-care products, enough to last at least six months. I left the hair salon promising to come back the next time I was on planet. I looked at my chrono, I still had an hour before I needed to be at Cati's so I decided to take a little detour and visit my favourite bookshop.

Bevin's Books was owned and run by a burly man called Bevin Glack. He specialised in antiques, imports, hard to find titles as well as the standard faire of current Holo-novels. I loved his shop; it was chaotic and had a musty bookish smell that always reminded me of good things. The store was just on the quiet side of a small walkway which was not well used. Bevin didn't go out of his way to encourage customers; he was quite particular about who he sold books too, which of course made him incredibly popular. I knew from experience that it took me five minutes to get from his shop to Cati's using a short cut if I hurried, so a few minutes of browsing would be well worth it.

I spent far too long gazing through shelves of books and bought far too many. I was going to be late if I didn't hurry. I walked quickly to the short cut. I was about half way there when that weird nagging sense of something wasn't quiet right started up. I stopped and looked around but saw no one following me. I reached out with my force sense but couldn't really tell anything other than someone was near. It was probably Rukh, his ability to be invisible never ceased to amaze me and despite my best efforts to find him by using the force I often failed. That was not one of my strongest gifts and it was such hard work that I

rarely applied it. Thrawn had told me he had sent Rukh after me so I shrugged it off. I sighed, if it was him there wasn't much I could do about it. He was like a ghost, hard to see, impossible to catch and if I had to be brutally honest, I didn't actually mind. I decided that if Rukh wanted to waste his time trying to follow me while I was shopping that was his business and I continued on my way, turning the corner to the small ally that led to Cati's. I was about halfway there when I was jumped.

Two men. One large and powerful grabbed me from behind and held my arms behind my back in a vice like grip that hurt. The other facing me, clamped a hand over my mouth and smiled. My heart thumped painfully in my chest as I recognised my attacker.

"Hullo Mouse." Said Jyrki calmly.

I just stared at him.

"Can we talk without a fuss, I don't want to hurt yer?" he asked.

I nodded and he removed his hand from my mouth. I drew a deep breath. I should have been terrified but I wasn't, instead I was about as angry as a person could get. I didn't fight against the grip that the man holding me had. I had learned a thing or two so instead of screaming or struggling or succumbing to the fear that had frozen me when Rukh had grabbed me and that was now edging its way into my gut I concentrated on my breathing and relaxed, taking stock of what I was up against.

"That's better. Yer looking good, I take it the Empire is treating yer well."

He said. He glanced at the shopping bags that had dropped by my feet.

I arched an eyebrow and didn't dignify it with an answer. "Who's your new friend?" I asked.

"Teldahn is insurance. Yer know how to fight, a little muscle doesn't hurt when it comes to ensuring yer do as yer told." He said coolly. "I seem to recall yer were never too good at that."

"How did you know here to find me?"

"Yer easy enough to track." He shrugged. "I have my ways."

"What do you want?" I asked.

He stepped back a pace from me and studied me carefully. "I want yer to get away from here. Come with me and be safe." He said.

"Be safe from what?" I asked. "I think we have established the Empire isn't going to hurt me, you on the other hand..." I tensed a little as I spoke and I felt Teldahn's grip increase. He wasn't taking any chances with me. I shifted my senses slightly to the touch the force but he was not force sensitive, his strength was purely physical.

"Yer left me no choice, Mouse." Jyrki smiled. I had forgotten how beautiful that smile could be, but behind it there was something not so pleasant. His ice blue eyes remained cold and humourless. It was as if part of his soul had died somewhere along the line.

"So you risked everything to come and find me again?" I asked, trying to find the logic in what he was telling me and failing. Nothing Jyrki did made sense to me any more.

"Yes. Thanks to yer I am a wanted felon. I believe there is even a decent price on my head now." He said softly. "But I can get past the security easily enough."

"Why are you really here?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"There are events set into motion that will lead to the downfall of the Empire. It will be too dangerous for yer here."

"What events?" I asked narrowing my eyes.

"Doesn't matter, yer just need to come with me, things are going to get hot for the Empire soon enough and we have plans for yer talents." He spoke with a serene calm that I found unnerving.

"I don't think so, Jyrki."

He sighed. "That is what I figured." When he withdrew something from his belt that looked a lot like a very slender stiletto knife, I frowned.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Just something to make yer more docile, last time we tried this yer were not exactly compliant until we doped yer." He said as he approached me with a smile that made me shudder. If I hadn't felt fear before, I did now.

I sighed and decided I had had enough. Time to see if all the training I had been given and the time spent with Rukh had done any good. I waited until Jyrki was close enough for me to do maximum damage to and then I moved swiftly. I pushed back using Teldahn as a brace and kicked out with both legs at the same time catching them both by surprise. I kicked Jyrki directly in the chest and sent him sprawling backwards to the ground, trying to catch his breath. The thug who held me made the mistake of leaning forward to try and hold me tighter and I smashed my head backwards as hard as I could catching him squarely on both his chin and nose. I heard him grunt in pain and I was certain the entire planet heard the crack as his nose broke and his head snapped backwards, hitting the wall. As I had hoped, the pain loosened his grip. I used two of the anzati moves I had learned from my uncle and watched in satisfaction as the man who had grabbed me slithered unconscious to the ground. He'd stay that way for hours and wake up with the worst headache of his life. For a split second I considered killing him but I had other problems to deal with.

I whipped around to see Jyrki stagger to his feet. There was a brilliant anger in his eyes. One hand clutched at his chest, the other held the knife in a tight grip.

"Nice little trick, Mouse." He acknowledged, still catching his breath. "Why don't yer ever listen and come easy?" he asked. "I only want what's best for yer."

"Ktah!" I swore. "Why don't you just get the hint and leave me the hell alone? I don't want your help. I don't want you in my life!" I told him, watching

his eyes carefully. “You don’t know what is best for me! You are the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

He moved much faster than I had suspected he would. His moves were elegant, even with the slight limp he still had and the fight between us began. I did the best I could to avoid the knife thing he held. We were well matched. I remembered that from the fight on Rothana, he remembered as well but we had also both learned new tricks since then. Fighting with him was like fighting my own past. I was a bit surprised that no one had seen us in the small alleyway and called the local law enforcement but we were remarkably quiet and it was possible that the surveillance equipment that had been installed all over the city didn’t cover the smaller alley ways. I could not remember being so angry and had to work to contain it.

This worked until he got in a lucky shot that slapped my face and set me off. I gathered my fury and channelled it into the force which augmented my strength, just as Lord Vader had often taught me. I ducked Jyrki’s next blow and dropped low, catching him off guard with my foot, smashing the same knee I had the last time we had seriously faced off. It was a weak spot for him. He hissed in pain, but the knee didn’t break and I wondered if he had some sort of cybernetic implant because it had felt harder than I remember bone feeling. Still, it had hurt him. He snarled at me and lunged forward. I stepped backwards to avoid him but stumbled slightly over the arm of the unconscious man on the ground. Jyrki was faster than I could recover from tripping and before I could get away and he drove the knife deep into my left shoulder. I was so angry I didn’t feel it at first. I struck out using the heel of my hand to violently connect with his face. The brutal punch sent him staggering backwards, leaving the knife still embedded in my flesh. A burning flash of pain made me look at it. At first I didn’t understand what it was then I yanked it out, suddenly realising that the left side of my face and my left arm were starting to tingle. I held the knife in my hand and stared at him. He was struggling to get back up, his knee was hurting him and his nose and lips were bleeding. I took a grim satisfaction in watching him wince as he stood.

“You bastard!” I spat at him as the world was starting to slither around me in a very bad way. “I hate you.” And as I said those words out loud I realised they were absolutely true. A blackness swirled around my soul and all I wanted, in that single moment, was for him to die, horribly.

He started towards me, his face distorted in a mixture of anger, pain and something else I was scared to name. A shadow moved out of the corner of my eye. I turned to look at it.

“Lady Merlyn.” A sandpapery voice said near my side.

Jyrki turned to look and saw Rukh standing there. He looked at me then back again at the approaching Noghri and decided that leaving was a better idea than trying to fight the latest addition to the party. As he slipped away I heard him say. “This isn’t over Mouse.”

“Rukh, follow him, catch him.” I tried to say but my words were slurring. It hurt to breathe.

“You are hurt.” Rukh said ignoring my commands.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine, you need to catch him!” I couldn’t feel my legs any more and just sort of crumpled to the ground. I looked up into Rukh’s face and sighed. I stared at the knife I was holding and realised that at the tip of the blade was a tiny needle. This was a kind of assassin’s blade and he had pumped me full of some sort of sedative. The knife slid out of my hand to the ground because I couldn’t hold onto it any more. I couldn’t feel my fingers. I looked at my shoulder which was bleeding and wondered how I was going to stop the blood because I couldn’t really move my arms. I tried to swear but the words tangled on my tongue. The last thing I remember was thinking before the world went dark that Cati was going to be very cross I had not made the appointment on time.

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The world swam back into place painfully. My eyelids were pried open and a very bright light was shone into my eyes, I tried unsuccessfully to bat the light away. Slowly the blur came into focus. The medical droid ignored my attempts to hinder its examination of me. When I tried to sit up I was firmly pushed back down by someone’s hand.

“Lie still!” Commanded a voice I knew all too well.

I lay back, turned my head and looked up into the red eyes which stared into mine. “Not my fault, I swear.” I mumbled. I knew exactly what he was thinking by the look on his face. He was not happy. He drew a very deep, long breath and turned to the med-droid who had been hovering next to me.

“Well?” He asked.

“She will recover, Admiral. The knife wound was a deep puncture but did not hit anything vital, I cleaned it out thoroughly. The sedative the assailant used should pass through her system in twenty-four hours and the bacta injection should prevent further problems. As far as I can discern it was not life threatening but there may be some undesirable side effects such as vomiting or headaches. She has some severe bruising and is quite dehydrated but she can go home as long as she rests and drinks plenty of fluids.” The medical droid gave me one more cursory exam and then left.

Now that the droid had finished his exam, I decided to try and get up again, this time more slowly. The world was still incredibly unstable but considering the hang over I had had earlier, I thought this was liveable. Thrawn offered his hand which I took gratefully and used his strength to help steady myself. My knees felt like rubber, my shoulder ached dully and the rest of me felt as though it had been run over by a herd of angry banthas.

“Where am I?” I asked, not recognising the room I was in as anything other than a med-lab.

“CoCo district emergency clinic. I thought it best you get treatment quickly.” He said.

“Oh.”

“Can you walk?” he asked.

“I think so.”

“Good. Let’s go.” He said coolly.

“Where is Rukh?” I asked, looking around.

“Hunting.” He said between clenched teeth.

I could only imagine who he was hunting. I stood up and swore as the world swam about me. Whatever Jyrki had shoved into my system was a lot more potent than I had thought. My knees buckled but before I reached the ground Thrawn had scooped me up and carried me out of the clinic to the speeder he had waiting. He didn’t wait to ask if I could stand when we reached home, he just repeated the procedure and carried me into the flat to dump me on the couch.

He sat beside me and said in a voice laced with dura-steel. “So, now I need you to tell me *exactly* what happened, *exactly* what you did after you left the flat this afternoon, every single tiny detail.”

The look on his face and the set of his jaw told me he was in no mood for messing around. I told him everything as well as I could remember it with as many details as possible. He listened with a quiet fury I found even more frightening than my encounter with Jyrki and said nothing long after I was done telling him about the attack.

“Did they find the other one?” I asked, breaking the awful silence. “The brute Jyrki called Teldahn?”

He nodded. “He’s been taken for questioning but whatever you did to him was enough to knock him out cold, never mind the jaw and the nose. It will be a while before he’s able to be of any use. Intel has assured me they will take care of the interrogation personally.”

I shuddered at the thought. “They’re planning something.” I said. “Jyrki kept hinting they were going to do something terrible, some sort of attack, maybe. He wanted to get me away. I got the impression that he meant away from the palace, away from Coruscant. He wasn’t very specific but he wasn’t lying either.”

“What about the knife?”

“I have that and will pass it over to the investigation team.” He said. Then he added crossly, “Didn’t you get the feeling someone was following you? Doesn’t this force talent of yours give you some sort of sense of danger?”

“Yes, sometimes but it isn’t my strongest talent and, to be honest, I thought it was Rukh so I didn’t give it much thought. It didn’t occur to me that Jyrki would actually be stupid enough to try a stunt like that in the CoCo district in broad daylight. He must have been following me but how he knew I was back

on this planet, and how he knew where I was today...well that’s the real question and it worries the sandjiggers out of me.” I said with a frown.

Thrawn sighed and got up. “I have to return to work. Rukh’s message caught me in the middle of something I very much have to deal with. I don’t know how long it will take. Will you be alright on your own?”

“Yes.” I lied, sounding a whole lot braver than I now felt. I started to shiver as the anger and sedative wore off replaced by shock and a frustration I could not seem to define. I fought back the tears in favour of the anger that still lingered.

“Really?” he asked, concern edging into his voice, replacing the earlier fury.

“Yes, really. I don’t think he’d try twice in one day and I am sure he has no idea about this place. Even if he did....” I said. I was still lying but he didn’t need to know that. He picked up the blanket from the adjacent chair and put it around my shoulders.

“I don’t know what it is about you that attracts all the trouble you do but I want you to promise me you will stay on the flat until I return.” he ordered.

I nodded. Not trusting myself to open my mouth as my stomach rolled, just a little.

“Say it.” He insisted. “If I come home and find you not here, you will have so much more to worry about than Jyrki Andando.”

“I promise I will stay put.” It was an easy promise to keep. I felt like hell, so much for a nice quiet afternoon of shopping.

He nodded, satisfied. “There needs to be an official report made and you’ll have to come in and speak with whatever Intel agent is in charge of this case.” He said thoughtfully. “Vader won’t be pleased to hear this man has not yet been caught.”

“Lord Vader is never pleased.” I answered automatically.

He sighed and gave me a look which said *I don’t like leaving you here alone but I don’t know what to do about it.*

“I’ll be fine. Stop fussing.” I told him. I gave him a small slight grin, masking how I really felt.

He smiled slightly but it never reached his eyes. “I have told Rukh to return here when he was completed his search but I have no idea when that will be, I am quite certain he will scour the entire planet given half a chance to find this pash’kja’anta. Get some rest.” He told me, planted a kiss on my head and then left.

The flat was quiet and even though I knew he had locked the doors upon leaving I double checked anyway, then went into the kitchen to make tea to try and sooth my queasy stomach. Once I had done that I reached Cati, explained the reason for missing the appointment. She had not seemed too surprised, commenting that I seemed to have a knack for trouble and that she would send over a datachip with the new designs for me to look at.

Then I contacted my uncle. I watched as his holo image appeared. Before he could speak I said.

“Zte’sa, if you don’t do something about Jyrki Andando, I’ll find someone who will.”

There was a second of silence and then he said. “Tell me what happened.”

I took a deep breath mainly to try and quell the ever growing unquiet in my stomach and began to tell him about the attack. When I was done there was another moment of silence.

“You said he used a knife to sedate you?” my uncle asked still trying to put together all the information I had told him in my somewhat jumbled manner.

I nodded. “It had a very long and slender blade with some sort of needle on it.” I said. “I don’t understand why he didn’t use a hypo-spray like everyone else would. Now I have a hole in my shoulder and it hurts like hell!”

The expression on my uncle’s face changed from concerned to dark and angry. “How are you feeling now?” he asked.

“Not so wonderful but the EmDee droid said I should be okay.” I told him. Wondering, as a flush of cold sweat swept down my neck and back, just how true that was.

My uncle looked sceptical but didn’t say anything else.

“I need to know what to do, Zte’sa, I am getting really tired of this stuff.” I said. “How does he always find me?”

My uncle shook his head. “I don’t know.” He sounded incredibly sad.

“I mean we only arrived on planet yesterday, there was a huge reception last night but that’s it. How did he know exactly where I would be today, this afternoon?”

“Who else knew where you were going?”

I shook my head. “No one.” I said and then frowned. “Well, I told Tygs but that was like maybe an hour or two before the attack.

“Who is this Tygs, friend of yours?”

I sighed. “Antygra Zyllendel, he’s one of Shiv’s friends. I bumped him when I was at the palace earlier looking for my friend, Shiv. We chatted and I told him I was heading into CoCo town to go shopping. But he’s the only person I spoke to, well him and Shiv’s secretary droid.” I shrugged. “Maybe the hallway was bugged or something.” I sighed and closed my eyes for a moment as the room decided to spin and my stomach lurched threateningly. I clapped a hand over my mouth and fought the wave of sudden nausea that washed through me.

“Is everything okay, Lei’lei?” my uncle asked.

I shook my head. “Not really, the EmDee droid from the ER said there would be some side effects of the sedative and I guess I’m feeling them now. I think I have to go, Zte’sa, I think I am going to be very sick.”

“Did someone recover the knife?” my uncle asked quickly.

I nodded. “The Admiral has it, I think.” I nodded fighting against the rising swell of nausea. I clapped a hand over my mouth again, this time was for real.

My uncle frowned and started to say something else but I didn’t hear him. Without saying goodbye or disconnecting I ran to the ‘fresher, getting there just in time. For the second time in what seemed as many hours I found myself head over the toilet emptying my stomach violently. This was not a good thing. Many hours later it was still not a good thing only I was too sick and too out of it to care. I sat in a small pathetic huddle on the ‘fresher floor, shivering so much my teeth chattered. I was freezing, my head was pounding and my stomach, despite the fact there was absolutely nothing left in it, refused to stop trying to empty itself further. Every time I had tried to stand up waves of dizziness and nausea had swept through me, spots danced in front of my eyes and I relived that awful sensation of losing consciousness. The floor was the best place to be, next to the toilet was even better. I lost track of time because I kept slipping in and out of a feverish doze. On top of it all the stab wound had begun to burn and itch. If I hadn’t been so out of it I might have worried more about that. Instead I just stayed put and concentrated on not retching every time I moved my head.

What seemed to be hours later, I heard Thrawn come home and walk through the flat calling my name. It was dark and I hadn’t turned any lights on before my mad dash to the ‘fresher because it had still been daytime. I could hear the anger and annoyance, mixed with a hint of fear, rising in his voice with each room he explored and didn’t find me in. I knew he’d eventually come into the main bathroom off the bedroom because he always showered after work. My voice was too hoarse from all the vomiting to shout for him and I felt too awful to care. The bathroom light flicked on and it hurt to open my eyes. Finally he had found me, stopping mid yell, and was at my side in a flash. His hands felt like ice against my skin and I know he was asking me questions but I couldn’t follow them.

“It burns.” I croaked, trying to point at my shoulder.

I felt him undo my top and lift off the bandage. I heard him suck in a breath and hiss it back out again as though just looking at the wound somehow hurt him.

“Your shoulder is incredibly inflamed and you are burning up with fever. I need to get you to the Palace medical facility right now.” He said.

I tried to focus on his face but he was all wobbly. “I’m so cold.” I told him. “Every time I move I get sick...” My voice was rough and my throat ached.

He vanished for a moment and returned with the thick Dantassi blanket. He wrapped that around me and then picked me up. I just closed my eyes. Time passed the way the city outside the speeder passed, in a big blur of unrecognizable motion.

Thrawn brought me to the same facility that I had been taken to after the Rite of Tet’ fight. My guess was that he had gotten the doctor, the same one who had treated me before, out of bed because at first the man had not seemed too impressed but when he saw me his annoyance turned to concern.

While his aid got me undressed and into a gown, Thrawn gave the doctor the run down on what had happened. After the doctor had finished with his physical exam of me he looked even more concerned. Blood was taken, my temperature was taken and someone began to poke about in the knife wound which was about as swollen, red and ugly looking as it was possible to get. It was incredibly painful and I yelped when they touched my arm.

"The EmDee from the ER clinic cleared her this afternoon. Claimed the sedative she'd been injected with was harmless." Thrawn said.

The doctor glanced up at him. "Probably it was and I will read the report filed for further information but this has all the earmarks of a very powerful poison. Do you still have the weapon that did this?"

"Yes, it is currently with security."

"It would be best if I could study it, there may be a chance to find out what poison, if any was used, without knowing that I can't administer the right antidote."

"Just how serious is this?" Thrawn asked quietly.

The doctor took a deep breath. "She needs to go into a bacta tank. From what you have told me the knife wound was cleaned and the bacta injection administered earlier should have prevented any infection but it didn't. As far as I can tell from the preliminary exam and your information the infection is spreading very rapidly. Her fever is dangerously high and she is very dehydrated. The look of the knife wound reminds me very much of what happens when someone is stung by a venomous insect or creature, but I can't say for sure until I get the blood analysis back. We have a number of things we can try but without knowing exactly what it is we are dealing with it is difficult to know exactly what to use against it. Sometimes the cures are worse than the actual illness, especially in the case of a poison or venom. The way her fever is spiking right now and from the look of that wound, if the bacta doesn't slow down what is happening..." He didn't finish his sentence, he didn't have to. There was a needle prick and I felt the rush of warmth spider its way up the vein in my arm. I tried to make sense of the jumbled thoughts in my head, reaching out I caught the sleeve of Thrawn's arm and gripped at it. "He knew where I was going." I said. The latest drug in my system was beginning to make my head swim even more than it already was.

"Who knew?" Thrawn asked.

"He knew...Uncle Vahlek..." I shook my head trying to organise my words, my thoughts but it just wasn't going to happen.

"Merlyn, you are not making any sense." Thrawn said.

The doctor sighed and looked at Thrawn. "She's delirious. We've given her a sedative and something to control the fever to slow things down a bit and buy her some time. You might want to notify Lord Vader and her family that she is here."

Thrawn stared at me briefly then nodded. "Do what you can for her, doctor."

The doctor looked at him. "We are Admiral. Get me that weapon or a sample of what was injected into her."

I knew this was bad and I should have been more worried about it but the part of me that cared was very far away. I watched with an eerie detachment as they began to prepare me for immersion into the bacta tank. Thrawn stood at my side, out of their way. I couldn't read the expression on his face but I knew from his body's subtle language that he was worried.

"He knew ..." I said. I wanted to say more but the words wouldn't cooperate.

He nodded. "I know, we'll find him."

I shook my head, he didn't understand what I was trying to tell him. Someone tried unclasping my pendant but I grabbed it and would not let go. I didn't want to take that off.

"No jewellery in the tank." One of the aides told me, struggling with my fingers.

"Let me." Thrawn told them and gently he pried the necklace from my hand. "I'll keep it safe until you are well enough to wear it again, I promise."

I nodded then and let it go feeling as though I were letting go of a whole lot more than just a little pendant.

Thrawn took my face between his hands and made me look at him. He spoke quietly but fiercely in Cheunh. "Fight this thing, fight it and stay alive. That is an order!" He said and then he left.

Voices and faces blurred around me. I felt as though I were freezing to death and burning in hell all at the same time. When I was tank ready someone tried to put a mask on my face so that I could breathe but I fought against them. I did not want to go into the bacta tank. I had bad memories of this procedure. Eventually they won and I lost consciousness, which was probably a good thing.

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Bacta is a disgusting, viscous substance that combines alazhi and kavam bacterial particles mixed in ambori, the fluid one is dumped into when one is submerged in a bacta tank. It is like being submerged in a thin, gelatinous clear soup which closely resembles erskj, a favourite side dish of the Hutts. No one is certain why this combination of ambori and the two bacterial agents holds such astounding healing properties but one thing is for certain the galaxy would be a whole different place without it.

Until I had fought and nearly lost the Rite of Tet', a challenge to the death combat match, I had never been in a tank before. I had never needed to be treated for anything that severe. The worst that had happened to me as a kid was some hefty scrapes and bruises, a seriously broken heart and a bad bout with Tourning's fever. After my first experience with the full immersion into a tank I swore I'd never ever allow myself to be put in one again. It was a disgusting, fairly humiliating and on the whole unpleasant procedure. Disgusting because

bacta smells like rotting sugar fruits on a hot day and the smell clings to your skin for days sometimes weeks afterwards. It's humiliating because you hang in this clear tank mostly naked and you look like a dying bloated Hutt, and disgusting because the stuff gets everywhere, and I do mean everywhere, plus once you are taken out of the tank they scrape and siphon the excess bacta off your body so that it can be run through a cleaning agent and recycled. Bacta was a precious commodity and very expensive.

I had heard some spacers say that when one was in a full immersion tank one dreamed strange and amazing dreams. For me, at least with my first tank experience, that was not the case. I had been a difficult patient when it came to this particular treatment and for most of the time they had to keep me sedated or else I tried with every ounce of strength I had to fight my way out of the tank. The sensation of drowning, despite the air mask, was just too much for me to deal.

This time was a little different. This time I knew I wouldn't drown and the level of sedation was kept light, just enough to ward off that look of panic I would get in my eyes when I woke up in the tank every now and then. I was aware of what was going on, to a certain extent. I was aware of the people in the room, I could see movement but I could not make out any detail if I opened my eyes. It was like trying to peer through fog for the most part. Unless someone spoke directly into the comm-link to the tank I was in I could not hear anyone or anything. Sometimes people would talk to me via the comm but I couldn't answer them and no one expected me to. On the whole it was mostly about hanging, suspended in a stinky, sticky, gooey fluid until what ever was wrong was healed. I should have been grateful to sleep through most of it, and I would have felt this way had it not been for the terrible, haunting dreams.

I was only half awake when they took me out, cleaned off most of the goo and put me back into some sort of real clothing that didn't resemble the galaxy's ugliest underwear. I remember voices whispering and some pain but mostly I seemed to hover somewhere between total unconsciousness and being awake. I had vague recollections of Thrawn sitting by my side, his gentle fingers fastening my pendant around my neck, but these memories had a surreal dream like quality to them. When I finally did surface for real I felt as though I had been asleep for years.

I opened my eyes slowly and took stock of my surroundings. It took me a few moments to realise I was not in the medical clinic anymore. The first thing I thing I realised was that I was home. The second thing I noticed was the painting that hung on the wall in the place where the Isonne Medeglia Tatooine piece used to be was incredibly beautiful and unlike anything I had ever seen before. Sunlight poured through the bedroom window and I could hear someone moving around in the kitchen. A glance at the small chrono on Thrawn's side of the bed told me it was late in the afternoon. I got up slowly because while I felt fine, my

legs still wobbled a little. I grabbed my favourite robe and wrapped it around me, then went into the kitchen.

"Lei'lei, you're up. How do you feel?" asked my uncle when he saw me.

"Zte'sa, what are you doing here?" I asked, completely taken by surprise.

He was the very last person I had been expecting to see.

"Making tea, do you feel up to drinking some?"

I nodded and watched with bewilderment as he pottered around Thrawn's kitchen as though he had lived in the flat his entire life. When he was done and had tea things on a tray he carried them, with me in tow, to the living room. I sat curled up on the couch and took the cup of tea he handed me and sipped it gratefully.

"How do you feel?" he asked me again.

"A little shaky, but otherwise surprisingly okay. What happened?" I asked.

"Where's Thrawn? Why are *you* here?"

"Well, firstly, the Admiral was called off world yesterday. He should be back late tomorrow evening. I am here to look after you and as for what happened..." He drew a deep breath, "well that might take a few moments."

"Well, I guess I am not going anywhere." I said.

He smiled. "No, you are grounded until the Admiral gets back." He said.

"How long was I out for?" I asked.

"You spent close to twenty hours in the bacta tank, then about six hours at the clinic under observation and the rest of the time you were here, sleeping."

"It feels like weeks." I told him frowning.

He nodded. "Yes, well tank immersion has a habit of twisting time perception. Once the Doctor had the antidote to the poison you were dosed with your recovery was rapid."

"Poison? I thought the sedative Jyrki used was harmless?"

He nodded. "It was, but the blade he used to deliver the sedative was not so harmless." He said. "He used an Anzat assassin's blade called a Scha'ad'uk. These weapons are ancient, not used all that often any more so I am at a loss as to why he would have chosen it. The only thing I can think of was that he had to act fast and that it was perhaps something he had on hand. The problem was not the sedative he had chosen, it was the residue left in the blade's reservoir from a previous use."

I sighed. "You're telling me that all of this was an accident?"

"He was trying to abduct you not kill you, lei'lei. If that had been the case he would not be trying to secure you with sedatives and hired help."

"What was the poison then?"

"It was a very powerful venom found in the Uspa snakes on Anzat." He said. "Once the Doctor and his team figured this out they were able to give you an antidote that worked and the turn around in your condition was amazing. The bacta healed the secondary infection in your shoulder and helped to speed up the recovery. You slept through most of it; I suspect your own body was doing a lot

of its own healing, something that might be attributed to your ability to use the Force. You have a very strong will to live, although it was touch and go for a couple of hours.”

I sat back against the couch and huddled with my knees tucked to my chest. My uncle refilled the cup of tea and for a moment we were silent.

“So, what are you doing here? Does papa know what happened?” I asked.

My uncle smiled at my questions. “As soon as you described the knife to me and that you were feeling so sick I suspected there might be more at stake than just a reaction to sedatives. You didn’t look so well and I have seen Uspa venom at work before. I hired a ship and came straight to Coruscant; en route I got in touch with the Admiral to tell him my own suspicions. He confirmed them via comm and I was able to give them more information on the actual venom and exactly what anti toxin to use. By the time I arrived they had already sorted most of it out. After they got you out of the bacta tank, Thrawn suggested that you might be happier recovering at home since there was nothing more that could be done at the clinic other than wait for you to wake up, which you did. After six hours of observation he brought you here. He asked that I remain to look after you because he was called off world for work shortly after bring you back and he didn’t want to leave you in the care of someone he did not trust.” He said. “I spoke to Kit this morning to tell him you’d be fine. He wasn’t too impressed with what happened I can tell you. Thrawn had him notified of the situation when they put you in the bacta tank and he would have been here as soon as he could have but I told him to wait.”

“Why?”

Uncle Vahlek gave me a smile. “Your father has some outstanding violations with Coruscant Customs. Setting foot on the planet would have been a bad idea for him. Had your condition not improved so dramatically I would have found a way to get him on planet, but as it was ...” I sensed a hint of something not quite true about this statement but let it slide. I didn’t really want to consider the possibility of my father being arrested by the Empire. “He was worried sick though, so you might want to message him when you feel up to it.” He continued. “I understood from the Admiral that you were on holiday when this all began. He asked me to tell you that he requested a few additional days off for you from Vader.”

“Not much of a holiday.” I said with a frown.

He nodded. “No, I suppose not.”

“Did they catch Jyrki?” I asked after a long silence.

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. “Not yet.”

I just sighed and huddled into myself even more and sipped my tea.

Unspoken questions and issues hung in the air heavily. Jyrki was not a good subject of conversation for either of us and I was in no real mood to pursue it.

“Are you hungry?” My uncle asked after a moment.

“A little.”

“Good, I’ll make some food. You need to eat.”

“How long will that take?” I asked.

“Depends, why?”

“I want a bath, I still stink of bacta.” I told him wrinkling my nose.

“Yes, you do. I have something that will help with that.” He said getting up and vanishing down the hall to the spare room. When he returned he handed me a small bottle of a violent green looking liquid.

“A few drops in the bath water and it will take away the bacta residue and smell. It’s nei’tka algae from Zabrak. It works very well.”

“Thanks.” I said.

“I’ll have food ready in about forty five minutes if that’s enough time?”

I nodded and got up to head to the ‘fresher off the master bedroom but before I did I turned to look at my uncle. For a moment our eyes met and a million things I wanted to say to him flashed through my brain. Instead of blurting them all out I said, “I’m glad you’re here.” Which was the truth.

Before he could answer I turned away and left the living room to run my bath. I still had so many questions about what had happened but they could wait. For the moment I was content just to be home, safe and not heaving my guts up.

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My uncle, despite his fierce and scary reputation, was good company. As a child I had adored him and despite our recent ups and downs that hadn’t changed much. While I had made a good recovery from the snake venom I was still fairly wrung out. I read, or watched the Holonet or played Zabracki chess with him. There were questions I desperately wanted to ask him but I held back. Last time I had pestered him with personal questions it had gotten a little unpleasant and I wasn’t up to fighting with him now. We talked about safe topics, mostly and steered clear of the subjects that caused friction, like what he really did for a living and Jyrki, as well as what his connection with Navaari was and where he had learned to understand if not speak Cheunh. He stayed away from giving me a hard time about what I did for a living and the older man I had become seriously involved with. I didn’t think he really disapproved of Thrawn, in fact I had the distinct impression that my uncle thought quite highly of the Admiral, but I didn’t much want to discuss that part of my life with him. So we kept our conversations light and the day passed easily enough.

Thrawn came home very late. I was already in bed and asleep but the sound of his voice from the living room was enough to bring me to the surface and become aware of his presence. Sometime afterwards my uncle slipped into the bedroom and kissed me on the cheek.

“I’m heading back to Tatooine now, lei’lei. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

I know I mumbled something but I was still too asleep to make sense. I was a little more aware when Thrawn came to bed some time later and spooned himself around me. I snuggled into his warmth and went back to sleep in the

security of his presence. When I woke up next morning it was already light and Thrawn was up making breakfast.

"When did you get back?" I asked stifling a yawn, stumbling into the brightly lit kitchen.

"Around four this morning local time. How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Good, going a bit space crazy. When can I go back to work?"

"In a hurry to get away from me?" He teased handing me a plate of sweet rolls and pouring me a cup of stimcaf.

"I want off this wretched planet." I told him. "It was safer in space."

That earned me a raised eyebrow. "As I recall the last time we were in space someone was shooting at us."

"They were shooting at you, I just happened to be there at the same time." I corrected him.

He smiled. "There is a shuttle due out tomorrow morning at ten to meet with the *Executor*. Vader requested that if you were fit enough he'd like you to be on it."

"Where is he at the moment anyway, do you know?"

"He returned to the *Executor* and is currently Mid Rim, I believe." He said, looking at me as though there was more on his mind.

"What?" I asked as he continued to stare at me.

"How well did you know Antygra Zyllendel?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Well enough to hang around with at functions and the occasional night out with the gang but we weren't really close friends or anything. I mostly know him because of Shiv, why?"

"He was arrested this morning for treason."

I nearly choked on the sip of stimcaf. "What?"

"You had no idea did you?" Thrawn asked.

"No idea about what?"

"Antygra was part of a rebel cell that was based on Coruscant in the Imperial Palace. They are very small in number but they have been slipping information to the Rebellion for some time now."

"Tygs is a rebel?" I could not quite take all this in.

Thrawn nodded. "Intel has been watching several people for sometime now but he wasn't on that list until this latest incident with Jyrki Andando."

"What does Jyrki have to do with Tygs?" I asked.

"They're related."

I narrowed my eyes. "If you tell me they're long lost twins separated at birth I'll have to hurt you."

He smiled. "Nothing quite so dramatic, they are cousins. It would seem that while Jyrki was an only child, he has a very large extended family. His mother's sister has several children, Antygra being one of them."

"How did you figure all this out?" I asked. "I thought all trace of Jyrki's family had been deleted from any records when he was admitted into the Jedi Temple."

"I didn't figure it out, Vahlek did with your help." He said.

"With my help? I am clueless." I told him.

"You told him Antygra's full name which he recognised. Zyllendel was Jyrki's mother's maiden name but no one knew that, except your uncle who had known her before she was married. He thought that you being attacked by Jyrki so soon after running into Antygra was just too much of a coincidence. Turns out he was right to follow the hunch. He told me about the connection and I informed Intel immediately. It turns out that Antygra Zyllendel was not even being looked at as a possible rebel but he was the missing link. Once they started to investigate him a great many things fell into place." Thrawn said. "He has been feeding Jyrki Andando information about you for a long time now. No wonder Jyrki's timing was always so perfect. He knew exactly where you were because his information was up to date."

"I knew Tygs was unhappy about some of the things the Emperor and the Empire have been doing, but that he turned rebel?" I should not have been surprised but I was. I could not even express what I felt that Tygs would help Jyrki do what he did to me. "Please tell me Shiv isn't involved in this somehow as well."

"He isn't. He had no idea. Intel cleared him."

"I guess I don't want to know how Intel determined that." I buried my head in my hands and let the breath I had been holding out. I didn't think I would have dealt very well with the knowledge that Shiv had done something to betray me or the Empire.

"I'm sorry, tekari." Thrawn said gently.

I glanced up at him. "How did Tygs and Jyrki figure out that they were related? How did they meet? I mean Jyrki didn't really know much about his parents."

"Vahlek told him about his family and helped him to get in touch with them, but this was quite some time ago, long before you were part of the picture as I understand it. There's a connection between Jyrki and your uncle I haven't quite figured that out yet and Vahlek wasn't particularly forthcoming." Thrawn said. "It seems that after Jyrki found out you were working for Vader, he got in touch with his cousin. Antygra has been passing Jyrki information about you ever since. We are not sure if that is when Antygra joined or maybe even helped to form the small rebel cell in the palace but certainly it is all connected together."

I shook my head. "This doesn't make any sense at all. Why would Tygs hate the Empire so much?"

Thrawn shrugged slightly. "I don't really know yet, Intel wasn't giving that information out and even I am not privy to everything. I suspect it has been an

accumulation of things over many years. People feel they are treated unfairly by the Empire, they do not like the rules and restrictions imposed upon them.” He shook his head. “What we do know now is that Antygra’s younger brother was one of the rebel pilots killed at Derra IV.”

I shuddered. Intel had some very unpleasant ways to extract information. I knew that first hand. Part of me felt sorry for Tygs but part of me was furious. He was the reason Jyrki had been able to find me. He was also the reason that Jyrki had been able to slip in and out of the Palace so easily. Tygs’s position had allowed him a lot of freedom in the Palace and access to many areas that were usually off limits. I was shocked. It would never have occurred to me that he would do anything to hurt me or anyone else. Now he had been arrested as a traitor. The implications were enormous and left me wondering just who I could really trust.

I sighed. “Do you know what the rebels were planning?” I asked. “Jyrki said the reason he wanted me off world was because they were planning something big here. What about the man Jyrki was with?”

Thrawn nodded. “Intel is investigating that and questioning Teldahn.” His answer was cagey and something in his voice made me look at him carefully.

“You’re not going tell me anything else, are you?”

“I am under orders not to.” He said. “Please don’t push.”

I nodded, “But whatever it was, they found it?”

He gave me an almost imperceptible nod but said “I am not at liberty to reveal anything in conjunction with the on going investigation.”

I sighed and my body language told him I would accept that for now. “What about Antygra’s uncle?” I asked. How does he feel about this?”

Thrawn gave me a blank look.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know that Admiral Harkov is Antygra’s uncle.” I was really surprised.

“I did not but most assuredly Intel does and is keeping the relationship quiet.” Thrawn said thoughtfully. “That information is not on any official records.”

“How is *that* possible?” I asked, wondering why such information would be kept hidden.

“How did *you* know?” He countered.

“Shiv told me, he said that it wasn’t something Tygs wanted everyone to know because he was worried people would think he got his job at the Palace through nepotism.” I said. “But I didn’t think it was that big of a secret.” I frowned trying to recall the conversations that had been about this topic.

Thrawn sighed. “Well, I am quite sure that Intel is aware of this and you should never mention it out loud to anyone else, even as idle palace gossip.”

I nodded. “How deep does this all go?”

Thrawn was quiet for a moment. “Deep enough to be of concern, but now, thanks to you and Vahlek there was a major break in the investigation. I expect

sorting the rest out will not be so difficult. Your friend Antygra was very clever. He covered his tracks extremely well but Intel has a way of getting information. Ysanne Isard has been instrumental in finding and exposing small rebel cells, but this one eluded her and her team. She was impressed by your fortitude, her words not mine, when I explained the situation that led to this discovery.”

I was quiet for a moment sipping my drink. “Well,” I said, “I guess I am glad some good came out of this mess. Maybe now Jyrki will leave me alone.”

“I wouldn’t count on that, tekari.” Thrawn said softly.

I looked up at him glumly. “Me either.” I agreed unhappily.

He reached across the breakfast counter and caressed my face. “Well, he can’t get to you here.”

I nodded and sighed. “I hope not. I am so tired of this. I am so tired of bacta tanks and med-lab clinic beds, doctors fussing and the stink of disinfectants.” I said. “I don’t remember much after talking with my uncle via the ‘Net, just bits and pieces. I do remember you sitting by the med-lab bed for a while. It was funny because all I could think of was ‘hadn’t we done this before?’ It was a very odd sensation.” I absently touched the pendant at my throat.

“Indeed, watching you recover in a hospital bed is getting to be a bad habit, one I am hoping we will grow out of.” He said dryly.

I gave him a slight smile. “I just wanted to go shopping.” I said. “I needed to see Cati.”

He grinned. “Speaking of Cati, she sent a small datalogue of designs over. I took the liberty of browsing through it.” He said as he went to fetch it. “I am rather partial to design number seventeen.” He said as he handed me the datalogue. There was a hint of teasing in his voice.

I glanced at him as I skimmed through the designs to the one he had pointed out. “Oh!” was all I could think to say when the image popped up. “I don’t think I could safely wear that in public.” I told him. “That dress is more likely to cause bad accidents than fetch me compliments.” I told him.

His eyebrow shot up. “Who said anything about you wearing it in public?”

I glanced at the dress which was more a collection of delicate fabric scraps strategically and prettily placed than an actual dress and then changed the subject because I could feel the blush creep up my neck to my face. “So what is your plan for the day?”

He studied me for a moment, grinned then shrugged. “I have work to do but I can deal with it from here so I’ll be tied up for most of the morning in my study but once that’s done, I am all yours.”

“All mine?”

He didn’t answer but his smile did.

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“Absolutely not!” Thrawn said for the second time.

“What is your problem with this? Shiv wants to take me out for lunch, you have to work and I am going stir crazy. You can’t keep me locked up here all day!” I countered as Thrawn and I faced off on what was starting to build into a giant argument.

Shiv had messaged shortly after breakfast asking if I felt well enough to go out for lunch and catch up. When I had told Thrawn of my plans he had not been pleased and the discussion had rapidly gone down hill from there. Stubbornness was a trait we both had in common. I knew this was going to be a fight when he folded his arms across his chest and drew a deep breath. I had my hands on my hips and was fighting the urge to stamp my foot and scream at him.

“What my problem is with this is that there is a mad man running around out there trying to abduct you. Every time you have a run in with him something bad happens to you. Every time something bad happens to you I worry. I dislike that greatly because worrying about you interferes with my work. So today you stay put where I can keep an eye on you.” He said. He spoke calmly but the hardness in his voice that told me he meant every single word.

I sighed. “This was supposed to be my time off and I spent most of it, through no fault of my own I might add, in the med-lab. Jyrki won’t attack me now and I need to get out of this flat before I go mad. Shiv is not a threat, he’s one of my best friends and I haven’t seen him in ages. You are not my prison guard, please don’t act like one. If you are that concerned you can send Rukh out with me. I know you worry but you can’t save me by keeping me locked up here.” I said calmly hoping to appeal to his softer side. I actually didn’t know where Rukh was, I had not seen him since he had intervened in the fight between Jyrki and me but I assumed Thrawn knew his whereabouts.

He pursed his lips and frowned. “If I order you to stay here you’ll just sneak out anyway, won’t you.”

“Yes.” I told him honestly. “Look, it’s just lunch, I’ll be with Shiv and we’ll go someplace very public.” I gave him my best baby-jax eyes look and knew I’d won by the disgusted look on his face which was accompanied by a deep sigh which said *why me?*.

“Okay but I want you back here by three pm no later or else I will have Siavaan’s ....”

He didn’t get the chance to say whatever it was he wanted to say because I shut him up with a kiss. I was so relieved we were not going to fight over this and so happy to be able to get out of the house. By the time he had untangled himself from me but before he could utter another word I’d bounced off to get in touch with Shiv and tell him to come and get me, then shower and get dressed.

Shiv arrived shortly before noon. I watched from the kitchen window as he parked his speeder on the landing deck. Then ran to the entrance and had the door open before he could knock.

“So this is where you have been hiding.” He grinned as he engulfed me in a hug huge and held on tightly. “When I heard what had happened, I was worried sick.” He said as he pushed me back to look at me.

“I’m fine, really.” I told him. “Come in.” I dragged him inside and closed the door behind him.

“Admiral Thrawn, it is good to see you again, sir.” Shiv said as Thrawn walked into the living room. He approached Thrawn and shook the offered hand.

Thrawn gave him a genuine smile. “Likewise, Siavaan.” He said. “When did you get back?”

“Yesterday evening, much later than I had hoped. There was more to deal with on Naboo at the retreat than I had anticipated. I just heard about Merlyn’s accident when I returned, they told me when I went to see her in the Med-lab that you had taken her home.” He said glancing at me.

Thrawn nodded. “She made a remarkable recovery. Fortunately there was only a trace amount of the venom left in the weapon used or else things might have been quite different.”

There was a moment’s silence all around and then Shiv broke it. “You have a beautiful home.” He said, looking around him. I had forgotten he had never been here before.

“That’s because I didn’t decorate it.” I told him before Thrawn could answer.

Shiv grinned. “I can see that.” He told me. “The Admiral has exquisite taste.”

Thrawn smiled and inclined his head accepting the compliment gracefully.

“And I don’t?” I asked.

“When it comes to decorating, not really, no.” he told me with a grin, ruffling my hair as he did so.

Thrawn watched us in amusement.

I shrugged. “My talents lie elsewhere.” I told him loftily. “Can we go now?”

“Where will you be going?” Thrawn asked.

“I made reservations at *B’schu’le’s*.” Shiv said told him. “It’s busy and very public.”

“Excellent choice.” Thrawn said, then after a moment’s pause added.

“Please, bring her home in one piece. I am getting weary of visiting med-labs.”

Shiv nodded. “I can understand that, it must be quite tiresome.” He said.

“She does have a knack for landing herself in difficult situations.”

“Your talent for understatement is almost as brilliant as your eye for colour, Siavaan.” Thrawn said dryly.

“Hey!” I yelled. “I’m standing right here!” Both men turned to look at me and both of them raised their left eyebrow at exactly the same time. I had to bite back a giggle.

“Well, you really are more trouble than you know!” Shiv said. Thrawn nodded in silent agreement.

I looked from one to the other. “Maybe you’d like to take each other out to lunch?”

Thrawn gave me a slight grin. “Perhaps another time, I have much work to do.”

I pulled my wrap across my shoulders and tugged at Shiv’s sleeve. “We’re leaving now!” I said giving Thrawn a look.

Shiv grinned. “Best not be late, they won’t hold the reservations.”

“Be careful.” Thrawn said, all signs of his earlier teasing gone.

Shiv looked him in the eye and nodded. “You can count on that Admiral.” He said and with that we left the flat to go and have lunch.

*B’schu’le’s* was a popular diner style restaurant off the main strip in the middle of CoCo town. It had begun its life as a small diner that recreated the look and feel of a Tatooine cantina but had grown to look like an explosion of various planetary cultures. It was known for its excellent food, which was plentiful and tasty without being too fancy or expensive and it’s rather peculiar drinks menu, which changed weekly.

We were seated at a small table tucked out of the way by a window in a part of the restaurant that looked like Nubian Swamp meets Tatooine desert. It was weird and fun all at the same time. Shiv ordered drinks while we looked at the menu. Once we had ordered and the drinks arrived we got down to the business of catching up.

The first thing on Shiv’s mind was Jyrki’s latest attack and Antygra’s arrest. He was quiet and thoughtful as I told him all that I could remember. When I was done he sat back and played with his glass. The look on his face told me nothing but I could feel how angry he was.

“You have to help me out here, kiddo, why does he do this?” He asked me after a silence that was too long.

I shrugged. “I don’t really know. My uncle says it is because he loves me....”

“Love!?” Shiv exclaimed before I could finish my sentence. “Love?” He shook his head in disbelief. “That man, you know the one with the exquisite taste in everything, the one who did not want to let you out of his sight today, he loves you. I’d bet my life on that.” He said firmly. “For the record, so do I, but I wouldn’t know what to call the emotions that drive this Jyrki Andando. Obsession, perhaps, I don’t really know nor do I care, but what your uncle tells you is wrong. It’s not love and you shouldn’t believe that.” He said. “If it was love, he wouldn’t be trying to hurt you, even in the name of trying to protect you.”

I sighed. I was certain that Shiv was right about Jyrki, though and whatever it was that was driving him was not love, not any more. Again we were silent for a few moments and I was grateful when the food arrived.

While we ate, we spoke about Antygra.

He shook his head. “I knew he was unhappy but I had no idea he was part of the rebel cell. That was as much a surprise to me as it was to you.” He said.

“Intel hauled all of us in for questioning but neither Bobbyn nor Ynyth knew either. It was a big shock to us all, let me tell you. I heard that Intel now believes he was spying for several years. Bobbyn told me this morning that Antygra lost a brother in the recent battle that took place, but he was fighting for the rebel side.” He looked at me. “What would make them go against the Empire that way?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t also don’t what life was like before the Emperor came to power and my father doesn’t talk a lot about those days, not like it mattered much on a planet like Tatooine. I’ve read some of the history books and reviewed some of the data that’s available but all I can gather from that is that even before the Clone Wars the senate was a mess. The senators were bought off or pushed aside but corporations and alliances between wealthy factions. The whole reason the Clone wars even started was because a group of peoples wanted to separate from the Republic. It doesn’t sound like good old times to me and at least now the system in place is stable. I know people will say that the Republic didn’t enslave people but you know what, I don’t see how that matters. Slavery existed anyway, even during the Republic’s rule. Slavery was always huge on Tatooine and on many other planets. How does the Emperor ruling make that worse?”

Shiv shook his head. “I don’t know.” He said.

I played with the last of my lunch thoughtfully. “What would happen if these rebels actually were able to overthrow the government?” I asked.

“We’d be out of work.” He said with a slight grin. “But I don’t see how that can happen. The Empire’s army is vast and incredibly well trained. It isn’t as if these rebels are a huge army or even that well organised.” He sighed. “What does the Admiral say to all of this?”

I sighed. “He says that we should never underestimate the underdog.” I told him. “Vader feels the same way. He believes that the Emperor should take this Rebellion threat more seriously than he does.”

“But we won at Derra IV, didn’t we?” Shiv asked. “I thought that was a serious victory for the Empire, that it put a major dent in the arms supplies that the rebels were hoping for.”

I nodded. “It was a pretty brutal defeat for the other side, but Thrawn said something like this will only strengthen their resolve. They will make heroes and martyrs out of the pilots who died and that they wouldn’t make the same mistake again.”

“You sound worried.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not that I am worried, more like I am just trying to understand it all. I don’t know what motivates them.” I glanced out of the window, watching the constant movement of people and traffic.

“People are unhappy.” He said. “Particularly the non human races. I hear a lot of things from the courtesans and people that work for me, as well as from the owners of the businesses, Like Bam’s for example, that we deal with. It all looks

shiny and peaceful on the surface but underneath....” He shrugged. “Taxes are high, there are a lot of restrictions on personal freedoms and if you are not human then life is even harder especially here on Coruscant. You and I don’t feel any of this because we have a place of privilege and prestige in the Empire but for a lot of other people things don’t seem so great. Not that I am recommending you do this, but were you to go down into the lower levels of this city you’d be shocked at the poverty and the crime. In some of the alien sectors there is serious over crowding and infrastructure issues. After a while there is desire for change but how organizing a violent rebellion is going to help matters, well I don’t know.”

“Do you think they actually have a chance to doing serious damage to the government?”

“Oh, I doubt this Rebellion could bring down something as mighty as the Empire.” Shiv said. “But they are costing the Empire money and man power.”

I toyed with my drink. “On Tatooine we have a saying. *The smallest grain of sand can bring the mightiest engine to a halt.* I think it is a mistake to underestimate desperate people. I can’t see them winning but I have to tell you, when I see how persistent Jyrki is, see how sneaky and clever Antygra was....” I shrugged. “I have to wonder if perhaps these threats should be considered serious. A tiny part of me worries more than maybe it should, and that’s not good.”

“I hope that you are wrong.” He said quietly. “But when people I thought I knew and trusted turn out to be rebel sympathisers and spies, well I start to question things as well.”

I nodded. It was one thing for this rebellion to involve people we did not know or have much of a personal connection to but when people we considered friends switched sides and betrayed us, well that was a whole other game. We were quiet for a moment while the waitress removed the empty plates took the desert order.

“So, what about you? Are you are okay now?” Shiv asked switching the topic back to me.

I nodded. “Yeah, still a little tired but I’m fine. Like the Admiral said, it was just a trace amount of venom and the antidote worked quickly. I return to the Executor tomorrow and I am glad, truth be told. I feel a whole lot safer working in close proximity to Lord Vader than I do down here on this planet.” I absently touched my shoulder where I had been stabbed. “The bright side is that I don’t even have a scar this time.”

Shiv shook his head. “You have the worst luck.”

“You think so? I’d say the exact opposite was true.” I told him. “I think I am incredibly lucky to still be alive.”

He gave me a smile but his eyes told me something else was on his mind. Dessert arrived and so did my tea. He sighed and fiddled with his glass.

“What’s bugging you, Shiv?” I asked. “You’re fidgety and you only get like that when you want to tell me something you don’t think I want to hear, so out with it.” I was half expecting a lecture about my living with Thrawn, or maybe the birth control lecture, or worse the ‘you don’t write enough’ lecture... even though we’d been over these topics a few times already.

He toyed with his fork for a moment and sighed. “I have some information for you. Actually it’s the reason I was late getting back from Naboo, but it’s really going to tick you off.”

“Oh?”

“I found out who was behind the attempt to kill you when you were on board the Vengeance. Who it was that actually planned the whole glow spice laced cake and you are not going to be happy when I tell you who it was.” He said quietly. “And you really won’t be happy when I tell you why it was done.”

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I waved to Shiv and watched as he drove off. It was much later than three but I didn’t think that Thrawn would really mind. The flat was quiet when I went inside and the door to Thrawn’s study was closed. I knew he was working so I didn’t disturb him even though part of me desperately wanted to. Instead I went into the master ‘fresher and ran a bath. I poured the most expensive bubble bath I had into it and then went into the kitchen to get a glass of wine.

As I undressed I could not help think about but what Shiv had told me but I didn’t know how to react. It was overwhelming and it made me unbelievably angry but it also made me incredibly sad.

The water was a tad hotter than was comfortable and I slid slowly into the sea of foamy bubbles with a great deal of care. Usually the bathtub was one of the few places I felt safe and relaxed but at this moment it didn’t make me feel better it just enhanced the sorrow that was already overwhelming me. I took a big gulp of my wine and hiccupped.

The last few days had been stressful and unpleasant. I was getting fed up of this treatment at the hands of a man I had once looked up to and loved. I was getting tired of being hunted, of being hurt. Now I had learned that it was not just Jyrki trying to do me harm but someone who I knew fairly well, someone who I should have at least been able to trust not to do me serious harm. As the information Shiv had passed on to me slowly sank in I realised that no matter where I was it seemed that there would always be someone wishing to hurt me, even within the upper echelon of the Empire. I sat, my knees drawn tight to my chest, my forehead resting on my arms and allowed the tears I had been holding at bay to finally escape. For the first time since Jyrki’s latest attack I wept silently and this was how Thrawn found me.

“A’myshk’a?” he asked as he knocked once on the door and came in.

The late afternoon’s light was slowly fading into dusk and at first he didn’t see the tears on my face. When I did not look at him he crouched by the side of

the bath tub and reached over, tucking two fingers under my chin, to bring my head up to look at him.

“What is wrong?” He asked.

I pulled my head away from him, shook my head and gulped back the desire to just burst into more tears. I had had enough of crying, especially around him.

He frowned. “I didn’t hear you come in. Why didn’t you come to me and tell me you were home?” He asked. When I didn’t answer him, he pressed. “Sj’iu tekari, what is the matter?”

I wiped the tears from my face angrily and with a deep breath to steady my voice I replied. “Your door was closed.” I told him looking up at him. “I didn’t want to disturb you while you were working.”

He sighed. One of those deep sighs that seems to come from the bottom of a person’s soul, as though he carried a huge weight and I had just made it heavier. “A’myshk’a, I know you think there is this gap, this distance between us, and that you have to respect my privacy but I am not certain why. You need to know that for you my door is always open, no matter what.”

I just looked up at Thrawn; his eyes glowed softly in the fading light.

“Did something happen at lunch with Siavaan?” he asked when I didn’t say anything. “Talk to me.”

I sighed, rested my chin on my knees. “You know, the last few days have not exactly been the greatest holiday I have ever had. I got cornered and ambushed at the medal event, so I drank too much, got a dreadful hang-over and was as sick as a drunken dewback, then when I finally felt well enough to go shopping I was attacked, stabbed, sedated by some guy I once called the love of my life. I was then dragged through hell and back due to being inadvertently poisoned by the deadliest snake venom the Anzati assassins can use, dumped in a bacta tank for over twenty hours and subjected to all the embarrassment that entails. Now, I just went out to lunch with my best friend only to find out that the man who has been trying to get me into his bed for the past two years is the same man who tried to murder me in order to disgrace you. So not only do I have to worry about Jyrki trying his best to do his worst but I also have to watch my back against the very people with whom I am supposed to work with and for, as well as trust.” The last words hiccupped as I fought against the shake in my voice.

Thrawn stroked the damp hair from my face and said nothing but the hiss breath he let out from between clenched teeth told me a lot.

“You knew, didn’t you?” I said quietly. He stayed very quiet. “Were you ever going to discuss this with me?” I asked. “You maybe want to tell me why Demetrius Zaarin tried to kill me? You want to tell me what he has against you?” I asked.

“I don’t think that this is a very good time to do so, tekari.”

I frowned at him. “Why not?”

His head cocked to one side. “Because you are sitting in the bath, naked and crying. You have me at a distinct disadvantage.” He said gently. “Even if I wanted to I could not concentrate properly on the discussion at hand, you in this state is most unsettling. I think if we are to talk about this it will not be in this room with me crouching uncomfortably on the floor beside the bathtub and you should be wearing some clothes not barely covered by bubbles. That alone is distraction enough, never mind the tears which despite my best attempts to ignore still illicit a very disturbing need to comfort you and make everything better.” He said standing up and fetching me a towel.

He waited in the living room while I dried off and dressed. I slipped into my favourite pyjama top and robe and went to join him on the couch.

He curled his arm around me and pulled me close, kissing me on the forehead. “How did you find out?”

“Shiv told me.” I said.

He nodded. “How did he learn of this?”

“One of his courtesans spoke to him about it. She was Zaarin’s favoured companion and apparently he was drunk and boasted about it after the medal ceremony. Shiv told me that apparently, according to the courtesan, Zaarin had said you were the bane of his existence and he would stop at nothing to rid the galaxy of the alien spawn that has fooled everyone into thinking he is better than everyone else, including the Emperor.”

Thrawn’s jaw tightened and he sighed. “I suspected he might have had a hand in the glow spice laced cake but I did not know for certain. He covers his tracks amazingly well. I knew that he was behind the most recent attack on me because he was the only one who would have access to that technology. He is in charge of the cloaking technology project but I have a great deal of input into it.” He said tiredly. “He is very intelligent, in some areas even more so than me and he is jealous that I have a say in some of his work. While for the most part he has masked his dislike of me and the fact that I am not human well in public, in private he has spoken vehemently against me. The fact that I have the Emperor’s ear bothers him greatly. He desires power and feels I stand in his way.”

I made a face. “I guess lord Vader would get tetchy if I killed Zaarin.” I said.

Thrawn looked at me. “I would get tetchy, as you say, if you did that.” He said sternly. “I would prefer you leave that nasty little job up to someone else and trust me, my dear, when the time is right that will happen but first we must allow Zaarin enough rope to hang himself by.”

It was my turn to look at him in question.

He continued. “Zaarin is power hungry and he believes that the Emperor is not the right person to rule this galaxy. The man is just biding his time before he does something rash. While he is very intelligent he does not always see the implications of his actions and he does not always think or plan ahead. He will eventually over step his bounds and then we can act without fearing the wrath of

the other Grand Admirals or making Zaarin into some sort of martyr. I would be very grateful if you would stay out of his way and never give an inkling of what you know to him. Should he suspect that you are aware of his part in what has happened he will no doubt try to rid himself of you. I would prefer that did not happen, I am quite fond of you, you know.” He ran his fingers through my hair.

I sighed and nestled against his body. “Then I will do my best to stay away from him.” I said. I didn’t think that would be too difficult. “But why does he hate you so much?”

Thrawn shrugged. “Who knows?” he said. “There must be hundreds of reasons for a man such as him to dislike one such as me, aside from the very obvious.” He paused for a moment. “I suspect he sees me as a threat. I have the Emperor’s ear and to a certain extent his respect. I rose through the Imperial ranks swiftly, was inducted into the Canted Circle, and as well was given charge of many important projects. I am in his way and he feels that without me to compete with he will gain more power. The Emperor allows these petty squabbles to run through his court and his military because he feels these minor conflicts help to strengthen an individual’s desire to stay alive and work harder to curry his own favour. I personally find it all terribly counter productive, however I play the games because they are a means to an end.” He looked at me. “I also have my own agenda and long term goals I wish to accomplish, there is much to do to prepare for the future. I would very much hope that you are a part of this future so stay out of Zaarin’s way.”

I gave him a small smile and we were quiet for a while then I asked. “So are you done with work for now?”

He nodded. “Yes, why?”

“Just asking.”

“Well at some point I will make supper and then I wanted to watch the holo-news but after that I had nothing specific in mind.” He said. “Was there something you wanted to do this evening?”

“I think I’m doing it.” I told him as I snuggled closer into his warmth.

This earned me one of his rare, brilliant smiles and another kiss on the top of my head. “Well, we do have to leave early tomorrow.” He reminded me.

“We? You’ll be flying with me?”

He nodded. “Yes, Lord Vader has requested my presence for a brief face to face meeting on board the *Executor*; I told him I would be accompanying you to deliver you safely. He found that very amusing. But yes, we will both be flying out tomorrow with the transport ship. I fully expect it will be a long, dull trip and we will not be alone. Once my meetings are done I hope to be heading back to the *Admonitor* with a new rotation of storm-troopers.”

“Will you tell him what happened while we were en route to the *Avenger*?” I asked.

He drew a deep breath. “I am debating the merits of that action. I think for the moment it would be best if we did not mention it. There is no proof of who

was behind the attack and perhaps it would work to my advantage if it were thought that the experiment failed, that we did not experience anything unusual.”

I was quiet for a moment then I nodded. “Okay, but if Lord Vader asks about it at all I won’t lie to him.”

Thrawn smiled. “I would not expect you to.”

I made a face at him and then sighed. “What a rotten week this has been. I didn’t get anything done that I wanted to.” I said. “I didn’t even get to buy new underwear!” He laughed. I punched him on the arm. “It’s not funny! I need new clothes and I lost the books and stuff I bought when Jyrki jumped me. I’m really cross about that!”

“I know you are, tekari.” He said getting up. “Are you hungry at all?”

“A little, I didn’t eat a lot at lunch. I mostly pushed it around the plate.”

He nodded. “How does some ke’tahl and djaari sound?”

That made me smile. “Oh, wonderful!”

“Then you can help prepare the jaari potatoes.” He said.

I loved ke’tahl and djaari, a Dantassi dish. Ke’tahl was a sort of creamy, spicy soup and djaari were small cakes of fried jaari potatoes which were sweet. It was one of the dishes that I had eaten on Hjal which I had really enjoyed. Thrawn had surprised me one day by making it for me, remembering that I had loved it the very first time I had ever tried it.

I followed him to the kitchen and took my usual place sitting on the kitchen stool by the counter watching him cook. Like everything else he did, he excelled at cooking and he really enjoyed it.

“Tea?” he asked beginning to make it before I had even answered.

“When you go back to the Unknown Regions, what will you do?” I asked.

“Continue to establish a foothold in the region and create bases to further the Imperial presence in the galaxy.” He said as he poured tea into two cups.

“What about the base on Nirauan?” I asked.

He smiled. “That will be the alpha base. It is well fortified and we continue to strengthen it and grow.” He gave me a peeler and a bowl full of jaari potatoes. “It is my hope that at some point I can convince some of my own people to join us. The Chiss, while not being overly friendly would be a valuable ally.”

“Do you think that your people would be willing to do this? I thought that they had exiled you?”

“Indeed they had but not all of my people, not all of those who served under me agreed with this punishment. There are many who remain loyal to me despite my supposed disgrace.” He said as he prepared the base for the soup.

“You seem to be falling from grace where ever you go.” I teased him.

He nodded. “Yes, rather like your ending up in a hospital bed, it is a bad habit of mine.” He added all the soup ingredients and began to stir the pot slowly. “It is a means to an end, nothing more, a ruse of mine to create an illusion for others.”

“The Emperor exiled you, banishing you from his court but you were in attendance at the medal ceremony. Doesn’t that tell people you are not really in disgrace?” I asked as I shaped the small cakes from the grated potato goo I had mixed.

“What that said was that whatever it was I was doing in the Unknown Regions was unimportant enough to be interrupted for a medal ceremony. It gave the impression that my assignment is low on the list of vital Imperial operations.” He replied, taking the small potato cakes and setting them in the frying pan.

I shook my head. “That is really crazy thinking, you know?”

He grinned. “Yes. I do know.”

“No wonder I lose at chess to you.” I said with a sigh. “There’s no way I could think like that.”

He laughed. “You lose at chess with me because you spend far too much time trying to distract me with your feminine wiles.”

“I like watching you work under pressure.” I told him with a grin. “And I rather like the results I get when you realise that resistance is futile. Anyway I usually win at the best part of the game in the end.”

His smile was warm. “Perhaps after supper we could have a rematch?”

“Gosh, I don’t know, the last few days have been such a strain, I’m not sure that I could....” I started.

He shut me up with a sudden, passionate kiss and then broke it off abruptly to continue cooking. “You were saying?” he asked smugly.

“Well... uhm...since you put it that way....” I gasped. I was glad I was seated because his kiss could still make my knees wobble.

“I thought you might see it my way.” he said with a grin. “Go set the table, supper is almost ready.”

After we had eaten and the dishes were taken care of, we ended up back on the couch watching the HoloNet. After an hour of news which was mostly dull I decided that we should bypass that whole chess playing thing and get to the real fun.

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Dim light from the city outside filtered through the gauzy white curtains of the bedroom and cast odd shadows all around. Thrawn’s flat was high enough up that there was no steady stream of traffic to disturb our sleep, especially this late into the night. This would have been great if I could have slept but instead I lay awake, half sprawled over Thrawn’s body, stroking up and down his bare chest idly with my fingertips, my head resting on that hollow of his shoulder. I should have been exhausted enough to go out like a light but instead my mind buzzed and sleep eluded me which meant he wasn’t getting any rest either.

“If you think any harder, tekari, your brain will explode.” Thrawn said, eventually breaking the silence.

“Sorry. I should be really tired but I’m not.”

“I see I need to work you harder then.” he teased.

I glanced up at him. “Why can’t we just stay like this forever?” I asked. It was a stupid thing to say and I already knew the answer but for this small pocket of time, in his arms, in his bed I felt safe and whole. I didn’t want it to end; I wanted this precious little moment in time to last an eternity.

“Well, for one thing, sooner or later one of us would have to get up to use the ‘fresher.” He replied.

I poked his chest. “You know what I mean.”

“I do. Just as I also know that you are well aware of the answer to your question.” He said gently. “But that does not mean I do not understand the sentiment.” He paused. “These quiet moments between us are pockets of serenity in a time of great turbulence. I also treasure them.”

I sighed. Marvelling, as I caressed him, at how my creamy white skin contrasted with the colour of his own. It reminded me of clouds and sky. We were so different and yet here we were together, compatible and mostly content.

“What’s on your mind, aside from the obvious?” he asked when I said nothing further.

“Demetrius Zaarin.”

He laughed. “Were I a jealous man that would probably bother me. Here you are, in my bed and you have another man on your mind.”

I pinched him and was satisfied with the yelp I received. “Not funny.” I told him.

“Yes it is.” He countered. “You over-think the strangest things.”

“Why is that strange? He tried to kill me, for no good reason. Then he tried to date me. You don’t find that a bit weird?”

He shrugged a little. “You are a beautiful, bright young woman, which is why he pursues you but when he pulled that stunt with the cake he did not really know who you were. Once he figured out your place in the grand scheme of things he decided to make a play for you. He didn’t know, I suspect, that you were already involved with someone and when he did find that out, and discovered with whom you were involved I imagine he was doubly annoyed. As I told you before, he is a man who does not like to hear the word no, especially from the mouth of a young woman he would have considered easy prey. That you chose me to consort with would only have added to his reasons to loath me and chase you. He feels I take away from him that which should be his by right of rank, although it is probably lucky for him that you do not like him very much.” He glanced at me as I made a face. He smiled. “I know just how tough and difficult you can be but he has no idea. I imagine that had he tangled with you, he would have been in for a very nasty surprise and that could have been ugly all around. While you sometimes dress like a pretty piece of palace fluff you are anything but. Even Lord Vader has commented on that.”

“Oh?” I twisted my head upwards to look him in the eyes. He was grinning.

“Yes, indeed. He has mentioned on more than one occasion your propensity for surviving difficult situations, mouthing off when you should probably stay quiet and your apparent fearlessness of his temper. I think he rather admires your boldness. It’s probably a relief to him that you do not quake in your shoes when he is nearby and I am quite certain he secretly enjoys your company, but he’d never admit that.”

There was a compliment in there somewhere but I didn’t try to find it. “Do you think that Zaarin will try to kill you again?” I asked shifting the topic back to where it had originally started.

He sighed. “That is difficult to say. I do know that by using that prototype and failing he risked a lot, most likely more than he had bargained for. I am certain that ship was not part of any official experiment and was done off the books, so to speak, so it was an expensive gamble. He has several black projects on the go and I only know that because I keep very well informed, more so than I should.” He paused. “I think that after this failure he will back off a bit to see whether or not I speak of the incident and then when nothing comes of it he will certainly rethink his strategy. I do know he has greater ambitions than just my elimination, I just do not know what they are exactly.”

“Does all this back stabbing court intrigue ever end?” I asked.

“No, as long as power is involved and people do not see beyond their own lusts for more.”

“Are the Chiss like this?”

He drew a very slow, deep breath. “I would like to say no, that we as a people are beyond such petty power struggles but that is not the case. The ruling houses are constantly vying for more power and bickering amongst themselves.” He paused thoughtfully and then continued. “I believe that my brother sacrificed himself to maintain this balance of power when he went missing, preventing one ruling family from gaining a large military advantage over another. These struggles for power will never end. There will always be those beings who desire to own more, rule more, be more and will do anything to have these things no matter what even at the cost of the lives of others.”

“But you are not like that?”

He was silent for a long moment. “Do not mistake my lack of avarice for a lack of ambition, tekari.” He said carefully. “I also desire to better my station but not at the risk of everything else, including my soul. I have no desire to rule the galaxy but I would do my utmost to be a good custodian should the opportunity ever arise.”

“But you wouldn’t just kill someone because they were simply in your way professionally, would you?”

“It is not my way, so I don’t think so.” He said thoughtfully. “But that is difficult to answer honestly.” I was quiet, digesting his words. He ran his fingers through my hair. “You do ask the tough questions, which is a good thing. As long as you keep asking these questions I have faith that you will never be tainted.”

I raised my eyebrows in question.

He added. “You work amongst such corruption and greed yet you seem untouched by it all.”

“I’m not untouched.” I interrupted. “I’ve learned to hate and I have learned to kill.” I told him failing to keep the anger out of my voice. “And I have learned to use a power that before was just a party trick. I am not the same person I was when I first left Tatooine to come and work for Lord Vader, not by a long shot.”

“But you don’t let it eat your soul and twist you until you are bitter and hateful, Like Vader and his master.” He said.

“Do you think the Emperor knows about what Zaarin has been doing?” I asked, shifting the conversation away from me again.

Thrawn shrugged. “Who can say for sure? I am constantly surprised at what Palpatine does know and yet by the same token I am often shocked at how blind he is.” He sighed. “Half of the problems currently plaguing the Empire are a direct result of some of the laws and plans that he has laid into place. Things became worse with the implementation of the Tarkin Doctrine but this is a consequence of trying to hold on to more power. Ruling through fear is a solution which never lasts long because once people get over their fear they become angry. Angry people will fight back. Disbanding the puppet senate was not the best move for uniting an already fractured empire. Things, while they seem fine on the outside are not so fine under the surface. I wonder if the Emperor sees this. But right now he maintains his absolute leadership.”

“How does he manage to do it if it is so difficult?” I asked. “The galactic empire is enormous.”

“The mysterious power he has which you call the Force and, for the most part, through fear. Most populations will not form a resistance or rebel against the current government out of fear of military reprisal. Most of the time this works but push people too far and you end up causing rebellion which is what is happening now. Palpatine’s uncanny ability to see the way of things, the future, aids him but you have taught me that this ability is fickle, you have shown me that the Force is not always a user’s friend.” He paused while I nodded. “He is incredibly powerful but he is not as all knowing as he would have everyone else believe. He can control much with military might and fear of censure, but he does not see everything all the time. Were both he and Vader to fall, the entire Empire would most likely crumble. There is no one strong enough to hold it all together. If that happens we would see the rise of smaller war lords and then real chaos would ensue.”

“Why did he want to be Emperor?”

Thrawn shook his head. “My dear, you would have to ask him that question. I do not know what true purpose it has given him but I do know he went to great lengths to obtain this power and has gone to even greater lengths to hold and maintain it.”

I sighed. Politics were just about the most confusing thing I had even encountered. “And if the rebels were to win, if a new republic government was established?”

He thought about that for a moment. “That scenario is highly unlikely but of course, not inconceivable. A republic style government would be a tremendous amount of work and while at first, because all parties would be glad of the chance to air their points of view it might function, after a certain amount of time, when the power struggles begin it would be difficult to maintain. The reason the previous republic fell was not simply through the machinations of Palpatine but also because greed and corruption had finally rotted the government’s core to the point that the bad outweighed the good. Change was inevitable, in this case it was Palpatine who brought it about, quite cleverly I might add. The man excels in the art of manipulation but nothing lasts forever.”

I made a face. “If the Empire fell what would you do?”

My head moved with his chest as he drew a deep breath. “In truth I don’t know. I suppose that would depend on how the Empire fell and what came in its stead. What sort of tools were left over to work with, in terms of military might, weapons, warships, man power and how many people were willing to fight for the Empire after its demise.” He was quiet for a long moment. “I do not think it will come to that and it would take a catastrophic event to bring such change about but given the right tools and timing. I suspect, knowing my nature, I would fight to maintain the law and order that have so far been established.” He said. “But to be honest, this is a scenario I have not given much thought to however, it is an interesting problem to consider.”

“So leaving the navy and settling down on Hjal with the Dantassi to take over as a village elder is not your idea of retirement?” I teased.

He turned over on his side so that he could look at me. He smiled as he tenderly caressed the side of my face. “That idea is not without its appeal, my dear. If such a thing were possible, would you be at my side as you are now, wild and beautiful? Bear me lots of rambunctious and brilliant children? Teach them to be fearless and stubborn just like their mother? Would you bring me spring wine and tjani cake in the quiet of the evening and mate with me every night until the small hours of the morning?”

“Only if you paid me a very obscene amount of credits.” I retorted quickly but his words made me long for something I knew deep in my heart would never happen. That longing was painful which surprised me.

He laughed that deep rich laugh that came from the pit of his chest and moved closer to me. “Perhaps if we play our cards right, one day such a future is possible but for now I will take what I can get.” He whispered in my ear. “We are just a few hours from day break so no more talk of politics, the possible fall of this mighty empire or thinking of other men, especially those who would only do you harm. For now, you are all mine and I intend to take absolute advantage of

this situation since it’s obvious you are not going to allow me any rest at all.” He told me, his velvety voice suddenly like warm honey.

“You don’t control my thoughts.” I told him with a grin. “I can think what I want!”

“Oh really?” He pulled me to him and began to prove to me that while perhaps he didn’t control my thoughts he sure as hell could manipulate them.

“Hey, no fair!” I protested, batting at his hand.

He gave me one of *those* smiles and purred in my ear. “All is fair in love and war, my dear. You leave me no choice but I promise my terms for your surrender will be fair and perhaps even enjoyable.”

“I can hurt you....” I warned.

He smiled as he began to kiss me, starting from my ear and working his way downwards. “I know...but I’ll take my chances.” He said. He rolled me onto my back and I decided, as he began to show off his tactical genius and familiarity with the terrain he was about to conquer yet again that in this case surrender might be every bit as good as winning.

In the morning, when we left the flat for the transport ship, it was raining, a rare occurrence on Coruscant. It did nothing to improve the look of the city or the state of my mood. The buildings were all shrouded in a gloomy mist, the rain making the landing platforms slick with puddles. It seemed to me a fitting end to a week that had been mostly unpleasant. I was not unhappy to leave this planet and it felt as though the current weather was the city’s way of telling me it was not unhappy to see me go.

I didn’t have much in the way of baggage with me, just the satchel I carried some of my most treasured possessions in and some clean clothes. I had thought about bringing more of my things that I kept at Thrawn’s flat but decided against it. I had enough stuff on board *Executor* as it was, while I liked being on board her I didn’t feel the need to move in completely.

The pilot of the transport shuttle showed Thrawn and me to the cockpit. The two extra nav seats had been reserved for us because the rest of the ship was full with troops on their way into rotation onboard the *Executor*. It felt a little odd not to be sitting in the pilot’s seat and even more odd when, while we were under way just before went into Hyperspace the co pilot told me off when I had begun to fiddle with something on the console by the chair.

“Please miss, don’t touch anything. That equipment is very delicate.” He said without hiding his annoyance. I just looked at him surprised, about to explain, somewhat crossly, that I knew exactly what I was doing when out of the corner of my eye I caught Thrawn shake his head subtly.

“Sorry.” I mumbled and glared at Thrawn who just arched an eyebrow at me, giving me an almost imperceptible grin and went back to reading the data pad he had in his hands. I sighed. This was going to be a very long and dull trip. It was a good job I was utterly exhausted. I strapped in and reclined the chair as much as possible so that I could sleep comfortably. I was looking forward to

being back onboard the flag ship because it was almost the only place I knew some semblance of peace and quiet.

After what had to have been one of the most boring trips I had ever been on, I stepped off the transport shuttle behind the troops that had disembarked and was grateful to finally be off that ship. The trip had been long but thankfully, I had dozed through a good deal of it. I walked down the ramp behind Thrawn and was utterly ignored by the officers that were there to meet him which made me smile. There was nothing else for me to do except head to my quarters and settle back in.

As soon as the door shut, I dropped my bags on the floor, stripped off my clothes and headed for the shower. After the eight hour trip on the transport shuttle I felt as though I was bathed in all the grime that the universe had to offer. The hot shower felt like heaven to me. Once I felt clean and smelled more like a girl and less like a bantha I got dressed and headed to my office. I was almost certain there was a pile of work the size of the Jundland Wastes waiting for me to do. I also needed to catch up on where we were, what we were doing and where we were going. Mostly it just felt really good to be back, almost like coming home home.

*Home...* that word had taken on some very strange meanings for me in the last few years and on the whole I wasn't sure what to think about it. When my droid cheerful welcomed me back with a hot cup of tea in hand I realised that I actually didn't care about what to think about it. I sat in my chair quietly contemplating the tea I cradled in my hands, staring out of the window into the star field beyond. We were at sublight speed in normal space. The giant ship's engines were barely a perceptible rumble but it was enough and it made me smile.