

## The Hunters and the Hunted 1

The *Executor* and the ships that flocked about her moved through space like a pack of desert scyks on the hunt. As I made my way through the vast corridors to meet with Lord Vader I could not help but notice the tension that hung in the air was more pronounced than usual. Lord Vader was determined to find the hidden rebel base, the one the arms shipment that had been stopped at Derra IV was meant for. He had seeded the galaxy with thousands of viper probe droids but so far none of them had sent back anything that was really of use. This lack of information was making him testy and incredibly short tempered. One only had to step on the bridge to feel how nervous all the men working in the pits were. Every time he swept up and down the walkway they all followed his movements with their eyes wondering if they would be singled out next to bear the brunt of his frustration and anger.

Thrawn had not stayed long on board the *Executor*, his meeting with Lord Vader had only lasted a couple of hours and then with a brief stop by my quarters to say good-bye he was back off out to the Unknown Regions to rejoin the *Admonitor* with Rukh and replacement stormtroopers in tow. I wasn't good at partings at the best of times and the closer Thrawn and I seemed to become with each other the more awkward the farewells seemed to get. It was as if, while he was near me I felt whole and safe, even complete and when he was gone off working someplace on the far side of the galaxy I could shut that part off and not miss him but the actual parting was intensely painful and it made me peevish and difficult. Saying goodbye was easier for me to deal with by being cross and moody than allowing the truth to show through. I didn't like the sensation of being torn apart or knowing that just maybe it might be the very last time I would ever see him. It hurt, it made me feel weak and I hated it. I suspect he understood this because his good-byes were always quick and without a lot of fuss, as though he too disliked the discomfort of letting go. Still, despite the stiffness and formality I had ached with sadness when he had left my quarters, his kiss lingering on my lips and his scent ghosting the air.

The sense of emptiness I was filled with after Thrawn had left was almost bewildering and the only way I knew to get past it was to throw myself into my work so that is what I did. There was certainly enough to catch upon and while I had really only been away from it for just over a week it felt as though I had been gone for years. I settled down at my desk, cup of tea in hand and began to wade through the memos and messages in relative quiet. The to-do list was longer than I had imagined. At least, I thought

ruefully, it was quiet here. I should have known better. My peace and quiet lasted less than an hour.

Lord Vader was seated in his hyperbaric chamber when the door to his private quarters slid open. His back was to me and he was looking at the monitors on the opposing wall. He knew I had arrived but he ignored me. I stepped into the room and waited a respectable distance away from him while he conversed with Admiral Ozzel. I stood and watched; astounded at the Admiral's audacity. The manner in which he spoke to Lord Vader as he argued over something to do with the recent batch of probe droids that had just been released was rude and condescending. One of these days, I thought, that attitude was going to get Ozzel killed. Lord Vader only put up with rudeness for so long and Ozzel's only saving grace had been he had not actually screwed up in any way big enough to earn him Lord Vader's temper. When the conversation ended and the view screen flickered off Lord Vader got up from his seat in the open chamber motioned for me to come to him.

"My personal physician informs me that you will make a full recovery." he said, his gloved fingers holding my chin to look at me this way and that, as if inspecting my face would give him clues as to the state of my health. It had been our first face to face meeting since my return to the ship.

"Yes." I told him, trying not to flinch at the coldness of his touch.

"I find it disturbing that this man from your past is able to make such a nuisance of himself. Have I not taught you to defend yourself well enough? He should be dead by now not running around free, causing no end of trouble." he asked with a touch of disgust as he roughly let go of my chin.

I made a face and tried to keep my own temper in check. "Well, as far as fights go, I was doing fine, better than fine actually, until he stabbed me with an anzati assassin's blade filled with some sedative and that had residual venom in it." I protested. I felt the sting of reproach in his words and I didn't like it.

"You should have avoided being struck by that weapon. You are better than that, I have taught you better than that. I am most displeased." He growled.

I didn't know how to answer this because deep in my heart I felt he was right.

"Have you nothing to say to this, girl?" he asked turning his back on me in that manner which said '*I do not know what to do with you...*'

"Well, actually since you asked...yes..." I muttered.

His head turned to stare at me over his shoulder. "And that would be?"

"Perhaps it would be wise if you did not give me any more time off while we are on Coruscant!" I retorted. "I prefer to holiday on Tatooine!"

To my surprise, this earned me a barked laugh.

I added. "Although in defence of it all, it was because of what happened that an entire rebel cell was discovered in the palace."

He nodded. "Yes. That was a fortunate stroke of luck and you have won favour with Intel for your work in this matter, making me look good. Isard was pleased but do not let that go to your head." He turned back to face me waving his finger in my nose.

"Of course not, my lord." I sighed.

"Do you feel fit enough to return to your duties or do you require more time to recover?" he asked already knowing the answer.

"I have had quite enough recovery." I snapped at him. He was irritating me and he was enjoying it.

"Good." He said, using the force to bring a datachip to his hand from the desk across the room. "You can start by dealing with this." He paused, and then added. "I understand that you know the bounty hunter Boba Fett personally?"

"I have met him on several occasions." I said cagily.

"I require his services, find him for me and arrange a face to face meeting." He said thoughtfully. "Expedience in this matter would be appreciated." The hint of threat under his politeness did not go unnoticed.

"Yes, my lord."

He handed me the datachip and I took it gingerly. "You will deal with this list in your usual efficient manner. I also have some meetings this week that will need to be rescheduled and a holo-conference with Prince Xizor that can be cancelled. I do not have time to argue with him over matters which have already been decided."

I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes. "Yes, my lord, although the Prince will no doubt complain if you reschedule an appointment with him."

"Let him complain. Perhaps all his whining will eventually deafen my master's ears and the Emperor will see Xizor for what he truly is and deal with him accordingly." Lord Vader said testily.

"I wouldn't hold my breath on that." I muttered.

He barked another laugh. "I see your sense of humour was not impaired in this latest incident." He said tartly.

I shrugged. What could I say to that? I just looked at him and for a split second there was a moment when I sensed he wanted to say something more but an incoming comm from the bridge interrupted him.

"What is it Captain?" he growled as the image of a very nervous looking Captain Piett filled the screen.

"My lord, you wished to be notified when the recent batch of probe droids began to transmit their findings. We are receiving the first of these data streams now."

"Very well Captain." Lord Vader replied and waved the view screen off. He paused for a moment and then turned back to me. "I will be on the bridge. Notify me when you have made contact with Fett and when there is time later on I shall expect to see you in the training room, bring your lightsaber. The next time you face off against this rebel nuisance I expect you to kill him and not mess about; he is not a toy for you to play with. Is that clear?" He told me and without further word stalked out of the room to head to the bridge.

In the quiet of my office space, while sipping a cup of tea I began the process of getting in touch with Boba Fett, wondering what it was Lord Vader wanted with him. I knew it wasn't the first time the Empire had requested the bounty hunter's services nor did it surprise me. Fett was the best at what he did, of that there was no doubt.

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Several hours later I rubbed my aching eyes and stifled a yawn. I was considering my third stimcaf and still getting nowhere with the task at hand. This was not unexpected. The pathways to get a hold of Boba Fett were lengthy and varied. He was not an easy man to find, to get in contact with and above all, speak to in person. Still, I had a few tricks up my sleeve and I knew the system better than most, eventually I got what I wanted.

Boba Fett's Image shimmered in the small desk top holo image emitter. He was polite but curt and I matched this tone as I relayed Lord Vader's request. If the bounty hunter was surprised to see me or hear the request, his voice did not show it. It was simply business and I was merely the contact. As I confirmed the information I wondered where exactly he was because the signal was very clear, but I knew better than to ask. Keep it professional, my father had always said. When the transmission ended I felt that I could finally go to bed. As I walked, half asleep back to my quarters I felt the *Executor* shiver as she slid into hyperspace. For a moment I considered contacting Lord Vader to ask where we were headed then realised I didn't care. Suddenly I was exhausted, the travelling coupled with the previous night's lack of rest was catching up with me. All I really wanted was sleep. As soon as my head hit the pillow I was out like a light.

Two hours later my beeping comm woke me up.

"I do not pay you to spend all your time sleeping, girl!" Lord Vader barked into the comm before I even had time to open my eyes. I didn't have to be anywhere near him to know that he was in a fine temper.

"No, my lord you do not." I stifled a yawn and got up. "What can I do for you?"

“My chambers, immediately! I have work that needs to be attended to.” He barked and then disconnected.

I pulled on my robe and trotted down the hallway to his chambers, getting dressed was too time consuming and he didn't care what I wore anyway.

“My lord?” I asked as I slipped into the dimly lit room. He was pacing the floor.

“We will be entering the Hoth system when we come out of hyperspace. Research it and give me the data before we reach our destination.”

I stared at him for a moment and then nodded. It wasn't as if he did not have access to the same data that I did and could sit down and browse through it at his own leisure. He just liked to get the *Daily Digest* version of it. Over my years of working with and for him I had become pretty adept at figuring out what it was he really wanted to hear and what information was a waste of his time and would earn me a verbal dressing down or worse.

“Oh and arrange for the chef to change the consistency of the food he has been preparing for me, it is disagreeable.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And you may have to cancel all appointments I had for the next week as well as this one. I do not wish to be distracted while on this campaign. They can all be rescheduled at a later date.”

“If some of them cannot be rescheduled, shall I keep the appointment as is?” I asked.

“No cancel it and explain to the person who cannot find time in their lives to accommodate me the error of their ways. I do not wish to be distracted until after I find out if my hunch is correct. There is nothing more important than ending this ridiculous rebellion.” He growled.

I stared at him even more, my eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

“I believe the rebel base is in the Hoth system, if that is the case I shall be far too busy to deal with these petty annoyances. It is your job to sort that out. Now, don't you have work to do? Or do you enjoy wasting my time?”

“Yes I do, my lord, and no, of course not.” I said.

“Then I suggest you get to it unless you wish to spend yet more time in a bacta tank.” He snapped.

“Right away my lord.” I said and scurried out of his chambers as fast as I could before he decided to make good on his threat, so much for getting some sleep.

The Hoth system, it looked like a perfectly miserable place to visit, I thought as I sat and read through all the information the computer was spitting out at me.

Located in the Granita Cluster, out on the Outer Rim, it was mostly uninhabited. The system had a total of six planets which all revolved around a blue-white star. The six planets, Shron, Biosh, Nushk, jhas, Ordaj, Hoth were for the most part wastelands and then after Hoth, the planet which had the outer most orbit, lay the Hoth Asteroid field.

Nushk was a methane ocean planet and had four moons which orbited it. It was a large planet that appeared the most gorgeous colour of deep green-blue from a distance. I wondered what it would be like to visit, if that would have been possible, because I imagined it would be very beautiful in a very alien way. The planet that had the most moons of the system was actually a gas giant called Jhas, seconded only by Ordaj, also a gas giant but with only seventeen moons.

The last planet in the system, the one in the sixth elliptical orbit was Hoth. The planet the system was named after. It was an ice planet that was considered mostly uninhabitable despite the breathable atmosphere for most oxygen breathing beings. As I studied the planet's stats I could not but help think of Navaari. It was exactly the sort of planet he would have loved to play on. Its oceans were frozen despite the molten metallic core. There was a great deal of volcanic and seismic activity mostly caused by the incredible pull caused by Hoth's three moons, Isla, Eru and Iseri.

It was a planet most beings would shun given half the chance but despite the extreme cold temperatures, powerful winds and blizzards there was life on Hoth. According to the surveys that had been made by a company hired by the Imperials looking at the possibilities of mining the planet, life included the Wampa creature, a predator with fairly vicious tendencies, tauntauns, which when I saw an image of one, looked an awful lot like Cupas, bipedal animals that were omnivorous and often used as mounts. They were ornery creatures but loyal and smart. There were also creatures called Hoth hogs, a variety of rodents, ice worms and lichens. I wondered if the ice worms were anything like the ones that produced the rare silk the Chiss and the Dantassi were so fond of.

From time to time smugglers had set up on the planet trying to find a way to get lumini spice out of the planet's frozen core but were to the best of all records unsuccessful.

Reading about the system and its planets made me think about Navaari and the Dantassi. I had wanted to talk to Thrawn about what had happened on Hjal but every time I had tried to bring the subject up he had deftly side stepped the questions, changing to direction of the conversation and not answering anything I had actually asked. He also told me not to worry about not hearing anything from Navaari because that was normal. He assured me that Navaari would be well aware of where I was and how I was doing. When

I asked him how that was possible he had just given me that annoying raised eyebrow look and changed the subject again. I gathered all the data I had found on the system of Hoth and placed it in a single data chip then went to find Lord Vader.

He was in the middle of destroying the practice battle droids in his personal training room when I entered. I never tired of watching him practice. His ability to focus never ceased to astound me and rather than interrupt him I crept along the wall and sat down on the floor. He moved like a cross between a dancer, fluid and graceful and a machine, fast and powerful. Only when the floor lay littered with the charred remains of the high tech combat droids did he turn off his lightsaber and look at me.

“You have something for me?” he asked.

I nodded and went to show him the datachip but before I could get to my feet he had used the force to snatch it from my hand.

“What did you learn?” he asked, motioning for me to get up.

I began to tell him all that I had read about the Hoth system and its planets while he barked at a very scared looking young soldier to clean up the mess in the training room. I trotted at his side as he swept down the hallways to his chambers, passing on the information he had asked me to gather. Once in his chambers he stopped moving and stared at me thoughtfully, then turned to the terminal and plugged in the data chip. He watched as the Hoth system displayed and then returned to staring at me.

“So tell me girl, considering all you have learned, if you were a rebel which planet would you hide a base on?”

“Well, I would have to guess Hoth itself.” I said.

“Why?”

“Because it is the most inhabitable of all the six planets and it is also the only one with a breathable atmosphere. Shron is too volcanically active to sustain life or be a possible base. Biosh is a lifeless rock; there is no atmosphere to speak of. No one would build a base on a frozen methane planet or the two gas giants, so Hoth is the logical choice.” I said.

“Why not the moons of the planets orbiting the gas giants?” He asked as he studied the data on the screen more closely.

“The moons are easy to scan, if there were human activity on any of them the probe droids would have picked up on this easily.” I answered promptly. “Hoth’s conditions make long range scanning it incredibly difficult and there are deep caverns left by smugglers, easy to hide in difficult to find.”

Lord Vader nodded. “What about Fett?”

“I was able to contact him. He has agreed to your request.”

Vader laughed. “Agreed to my request? Girl, you do have a sense of humour.”

I didn’t answer that instead I asked. “How long until we arrive at our destination?”

“We should be coming out of hyperspace outside of the system in less than twelve hours.” He said absently.

“Then what happens?”

“If the base is there, as I suspect it is, then we will destroy it along with all those who inhabit it.” he growled making a fist with his hand. “This insurrection must be crushed.”

I sighed. The grand posturing got a bit tedious on two hours of sleep.

He turned to look at me and handed me another data chip. “I wish you to deal with these issues. Grand Admiral Zaarin is heading up a project and I wish an update on his progress, see that this happens. Also, the Emperor recently gave Grand Vizier Sate Pestage more responsibility in the day to day running of the Empire. You will write a polite letter stressing to him the importance of keeping a good relationship with me. He has been reticent about dealing with me and I will not tolerate this.”

“Why would the Emperor do that, give up some of his control?” I blurted out. I was completely surprised by this.

“He wishes to pursue his studies of the Force. There is much to learn about the Dark side and he feels that his time would be better spent concentrating on these studies than dealing with the day to day issues of Empire administration.” He told me. “This was a recent change and not announced publicly.” His tone of voice indicated he wasn’t going to say anything more on the subject and if I was smart I wouldn’t either.

I nodded. “Will there be anything else?”

“You will meet me in the training room in three hours to practice your lightsaber and combat techniques. Do not think I had forgotten about your recent failure to subdue this pest. Your incompetence is annoying.”

“Yes, my lord.” I nodded with a sinking feeling inside. I had not had a good work out for well over a week and I was certain that he wasn’t going to go easy on me at all.

“Now go away and stop bothering me.” He flapped his hand at me. “I have much to plan.”

I bobbed my head and did as he asked. At least I thought ruefully as I made my way back to my quarters, I had three hours before Lord Vader turned my world upside down again.

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We shuddered out of hyperspace and I did not even need to be anywhere near Lord Vader to know he was angry. I was already on my way to his chambers when he summoned me on my comm. I nearly crashed into General Veers who was just leaving and the look on his face told me that he

was grateful to have gotten out of Lord Vader's presence in one piece and still able to breathe.

"I would wait a moment before entering, Miss." He said quietly.

"Oh" I said. I understood what that meant and it usually wasn't good.

He nodded at me and then hurried down the corridor. I took his advice and waited a couple of heartbeats, watching him vanish into the turbo lift.

Maximillian Veers was an interesting man, born of a middle class working family he had escaped the mundane life of his parents by joining the Imperial Academy and finishing top of his class. He became even more successful in his military career when he became commander of the Emperor's personal AT-AT legion as well as becoming an instructor at the academy on Carida. When Thrawn met him, Veers was serving as a commander for the garrison stationed there. Recognising Veers's brilliance and loyalty, Thrawn had recommended him to Lord Vader and Lord Vader had listened. He had taken Veers on and gave him command of the Death Squadron's ground forces.

From conversations with Thrawn, I knew that Lord Vader had an unusual amount of respect for Veers and I also knew that they had worked together on the AT-AT project in the past. I had met Veers formally only once at a small reception and our conversation had been minimal and polite. He didn't seem to be a very outgoing man and he kept himself to himself. Like most men under Lord Vader's command he kept his distance from me. I was almost certain that the general rule of thumb was *'if we don't talk to her she doesn't actually exist'*. Women, some people thought, were bad luck on board of a ship and anyone who worked as closely with Lord Vader as I did could not be good for anyone's health.

I drew a deep breath and then I opened the door to Lord Vader's chambers in time to see him ending his conversation with Captain Piett via the video feed. I was grateful to have missed the actual conversation but I could not take my eyes off the dying Admiral Ozzel clawing at his throat in the background. The force flowed around Vader like a sand storm. He was furious. His anger coloured the air and made it seem thick and difficult to breathe. For a moment the entire galaxy stopped moving and then Lord Vader got up from where he was seated, put on his long cloak and stalked around the room.

"You wished to see me, my lord?" I asked breaking the awful silence.

"Xizor has been pestering me on my private comm channel. You will inform his office that he is to cease and desist this practice. If he wishes to speak with me then he must first do so through you. I do not understand why he cannot follow simple decorum." He growled. "He will no doubt complain about this but I do not care."

"Yes, my lord." I said quietly. While Admiral Ozzel's death did not surprise me, in fact I was more surprised that it had not happened sooner, it was still an unpleasant thing to witness. I was fighting the urge to either scream or throw up. I wondered if I would ever get used to seeing Lord Vader's trade mark punishment in action.

Lord Vader looked at me, sensing my emotions. "Ozzel was an arrogant fool, girl. He paid for his lack of vision with his life. Do not mourn his death. The Empire does not have time or space for idiots who only wish to feel self important." He chided. "I tolerated his stupidity for as long as possible. This time he went too far. I told him not to come out of hyperspace too close to the Hoth system as surprise was tantamount to our strategy for a quick campaign. Now the rebels are alerted to our presence and we have to punch through their defence grid. That moron cost us time and man power which, had we had the element of surprise, would not be the case." He spat. "He refused to follow my orders and despite the fact that I and my officers had a battle plan worked out Ozzel has insisted that we follow his even though I am ultimately in charge. This has led us to the current situation where the rebels have the upper hand and were warned of our approach. They will no doubt have an escape plan in place and be willing to sacrifice many lives for this plan. Ozzel was an utter moron and had absolutely no finesse. Admiral Thrawn would not have made such a stupid error, yet despite my requests to have him permanently posted under my command the Emperor insists on wasting that man's talents in the Unknown Regions."

"No, I am certain Admiral Thrawn would not have made such an error." I said agreeing on the first part of his statement but not the last.

"Now I must prepare for a ground assault." He said angrily.

I paused for a moment then blurted out the message I originally had to deliver. "I have word from Boba Fett. He wishes to meet with you at your earliest convenience.

"Fett? I thought you had already arranged my meeting with him." Vader asked. "What does he want?"

"Yes. My lord but apparently he was already in the area. I received a comm message moments after we came out of hyperspace. He wished to inform you about Solo's presence here."

"I see." He said carefully. "Well, he will have to wait until this current issue is sorted out. Seeing as how he is a *friend* of yours, you can inform him that he may wait on board and I will meet with him as soon as I am able to." He told me nastily. "He may wait in your office and you will see to his needs."

I nodded. I didn't argue with his use of the word friend, although it wasn't a description I would have used in conjunction to my relationship with Boba Fett.

“If he wishes to remain onboard his ship he is free to do so, but the fleet may have to shift quickly and I expect a fire fight now that the rebels know we are here. Remind him that he should stay out of the way.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Lord Vader’s comm beeped and he did not bother to look at it. “We have engaged the enemy. You have work to do, see to it.” He said as he swept out of the room. I returned to my office, contacted Fett and then left terse messages with Prince Xizor’s haughty assistant. When the ship around me rocked I knew the battle had begun.

I stood in my quarters with the lights turned off, gazing out of the windows in astonishment at the fiery battle that blasted its way about the Executor. The ship which had become my home shuddered as something blasted against its shields and I had to resist the temptation to get a hold of Jorae on the comm to find out what was going on. I could see rebel transports fleeing while ion canons on the surface of the icy planet blasted the space around them to try and protect them from the Star Destroyers. I was glad I was not down on that planet and after a while got bored watching the fireworks outside and went to make myself a cup of tea. Some time afterwards Jorae popped into the office. He looked tired.

“Hey, I thought you might want an update.” He said flopping down on the nearest comfy chair.

“Rough watch?” I asked as he rubbed his eyes and yawned.

He nodded. “The whole ship is on battle alert but I have been pulling back to back shifts so I have to go off duty now. Six hours of rest. Did you hear about Ozzel?”

“I got to see the play by play.” I told him. “Vader doesn’t like it when his men mess up.”

Jorae shook his head. “Nope, wouldn’t want to be in Piett’s shoes though. You know what they say about working for Vader, *quick promotions, quick deaths.*”

“How many sayings along those lines are there for this ship?” I asked.

He grinned. “Who knows? I lost count ages ago.”

“Have you been watching the battle?” he asked as a brilliant flash illuminated the window.

“Yeah. Watching how well Imperial Captains can avoid being struck by cannon fire. It’s like some sort of bizarre dance. Was that Captain Needa’s ship that got clobbered?”

“Oh, you should have heard the comm chatter on that one. The rebs shoot like one armed blind men and we were all like will they hit it, will they hit it and then they did. The *Avenger* was not destroyed but ended up being disabled and drifted off into to deep space. Hell, I could steer better than that

I tell you!” he said making steering motions. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that making a ship as large as an ISD turn to avoid anything was about as easy as breathing in space without a suit on. The ISDs had enormous fire power and amazing defensive capabilities but the steered like fat drunken banthas on spice.

He gave me another grin.

I shrugged. “So who’s winning?”

Jorae snorted. “We are of course! Even with one ISD out of commission. Vader and the Fist are on planet as we speak. I wouldn’t want to be a reb right now I can tell you that for nothing. You should have heard the cheers in the comm room when Veers sent the message that this shield generator was down.” He said accepting the cup of tea I handed him.

“Do we know the losses yet?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Too early to tell.” He replied. “But Blizzard Force is on the ground and the walkers do a lot of damage. I sure wish I could see them in action.”

I sighed and sipped my tea. “No thanks, I am perfectly happy to be up here where it’s nice and warm.”

He laughed. “That’s because you are a sand rat.” He said getting up. “I’ll let you know how things go if there are any major developments.”

I nodded and waved to him as he left, just as my comm went off.

“Miss, you wished to be notified when Boba Fett arrived on board.” Said a bored sounding voice. “He is being escorted to your office as requested.”

“Thank you.” I said but I was already speaking to dead air. I finished my tea and made sure I didn’t look too wretched then went to meet Boba Fett.

The two young men who had been assigned to stand guard outside my office during Fett’s visit stiffened to attention when I approached. I was never sure why they did this since I was not military but it always made me smile and I always said the same thing every single time.

“At ease gentlemen.” I said, they ignored me as I keyed in the pass-code and entered the room.

Boba Fett was seated, well actually it was more like he was lounging on the couch with his feet up on the table and his folded across his chest, his head still covered by the helmet. He didn’t move when I entered but I could feel his eyes follow me closely.

“Master Fett. It is good to see you again and gracious of you to be so accommodating.” When in doubt fall back on formality and being polite.

“I was wondering if you would show up.” He replied and took his feet off the table. “Nice place, you have here.”

“Lord Vader apologises for keeping you waiting, he’s a little busy at the moment. He’s asked me to make sure that your needs were taken care of.” I said. “I work here, it’s my office.”

There was a moment’s silence and then to my surprise he laughed. “Look at you, little lady, all grown up. Last time I saw you, you were running around Jabba’s Palace wearing next to nothing trying to be something you’re not.”

“That was a few years ago.” I said embarrassed, hating the blush that crept into my cheeks.

“So it was.” He agreed. “Your father told me you were doing well and now I see that is the case.” He said. “So how long is this little skirmish of Vader’s going to take?”

“In truth I don’t know.” I said. “I suspect at least several more hours. Lord Vader told me to make sure that you were made comfortable so if there is anything that I can do for you, let me know.”

“Well in that case I suppose I might as well make myself at home then.” He said and he removed his helmet.

I looked at his face for a moment and smiled. He looked older than I remembered and a little tired but he had not changed much at all.

“That’s better isn’t it?” He said with a half grin, rubbing his hand through his hair. “Now, you mentioned something about attending to my needs?”

I nodded.

“I’d like a hot meal and a decent cup of mek’kefa, as I recall your father knew how to make a good cup, I expect you do as well.” He said nodding to the counter where my coffee carafe sat.

“That can be arranged. Will there be anything else?”

“Yeah, you can keep me company till the Old Man gets back. I’ve heard some stories about you. I’d like to know if they’re true or not.”

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I had not been kidding when I had told Thrawn that I had known Boba Fett for most of my life, although I wasn’t sure the word *known* really applied. I really knew very little about him personally, when I actually thought about it, but that never really bothered me. My father had always treated the bounty hunter with cordiality and respect. The two men had always spoken to each other more like old work colleagues than anything else but I had never really noticed or thought about it until now. He had always been a peripheral part of my life.

I sat across the small table from Fett and played with the small salad I had brought along with his meal. I wasn’t particularly hungry but letting him

eat alone seemed rude. He did not converse while he ate and if he enjoyed the food, he didn’t say but I guessed that he was hungry because he finished it all. Once the plates were cleared away I poured spiced coffee from the carafe and he sipped it with a relish that reminded me of my uncle’s jaxes when they were given a fish treat.

“I see the ability to make decent mek’kefa runs in your family.” He commented, using the traditional name for the drink. I just smiled and cradled my warm glass in my hands. I tried not to stare at his face but I couldn’t help it. The last time I had seen him I had not known about my birth parents, now I did and this man wore the face of my biological father. It was unnerving and strange.

“Do I have something on my chin?” he asked after a long moment’s silence.

I shook my head. “No. I was just wondering how it was you were able to make this meeting so quickly.”

“I was in the neighbourhood, I told you that.”

“So you did, in all the excitement of seeing you again, I forgot.” My words were tart to cover up the fact that I had been staring at his face.

Boba smiled, that terrible, beguiling smile that always made me a little bit nervous and a little bit curious both at the same time. “I had work here and then you all dropped out of hyperspace right on top of me.”

“Lord Vader’s timing is usually better than this.” I said. “Work? I suppose that would be Han Solo.” I said remembering the rumours I’d heard. “Haven’t you been after him for a while now?”

He shrugged his shoulder slightly. “The man leads a charmed life but Jabba wants him badly enough to make it worth my while.” This wasn’t a lie but he was more annoyed than he let on. It didn’t sit well with his reputation that Solo kept slipping through his fingers.

“I would venture to say that Lord Vader wants him even more so.” I told him.

He smiled grimly. “Don’t suppose you have any more details on that, do you?”

I shook my head. “I do a lot of things for Lord Vader but actually making his business deals for him isn’t one of them. He wants to talk with you directly, but you would know how this works better than I would, you’ve done this for him before, right?”

“Vader and I have crossed paths many times, so yeah, you might say I know the drill. Usually though he makes me wait on board my ship. This royal treatment is unusual so I can only assume I have you to thank for that or he wants something more than I would be willing to give.”

I shrugged. "I don't know, he just asked if I knew you and then left instructions."

He looked at me for a moment and I felt as though his dark eyes could see clear through to my soul. "Well, lucky me then." He said breaking the awkward silence.

I toyed with my glass and smiled a little. It felt strange to sit across from him, and I didn't know what else to say but I felt I had to speak because the silence was overwhelming.

"You said you'd heard stories about me?" I asked, breaking the silence that made the air claustrophobic.

Fett's smile was slow and predatory. "I heard you have a little bit of a pest problem."

"Jyrki Andando," I sighed. "Did papa tell you?"

"He mentioned it to me when I last saw him, but I knew about it before, word gets around and you seem to be a hot topic for Galactic News and HoloNet gossip." He said.

I rolled my eyes. "Doesn't this galaxy have anything better to do?"

Fett laughed. "Apparently not. So, it's true then? You are being stalked by that black haired mechanic you had a crush on?"

I made a face. "Yes, it's true."

Fett frowned. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I am not really sure. When Jyrki heard I was working for the Empire, for Lord Vader he went ballistic. He's convinced he has to save me but his methods are a bit unconventional."

"As I heard it, his methods almost got you killed."

I nodded glumly and at his urging told him what Jyrki had been up to. When I was done he sat back on the couch and stared at me. The set of his mouth told me he wasn't overly impressed with the whole goings on.

"I can deal with him for you." He said flatly, coldly after a lengthy pause.

"No." The word was out of my mouth before I could even think to take it back. My answer earned me a raised eyebrow. So I tried to explain. "It's complicated and someone is already dealing with it."

"Ahhh, let me guess, Vahlek Akosh." He said with some distaste.

Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

"Your father mentioned the Tze'yusha'Jin was looking into it but I got the distinct feeling there was more to the story than he was letting on."

"Like I said, it's complicated."

"Families usually are, little lady, but this guy is hunting you and no one seems to be doing anything about it." He told me curtly. "I can."

"Well then..., if Uncle Vahlek can't deal with Jyrki will the offer still stand?" I asked after thinking about it.

Fett smiled slightly. "It will," He paused then added, "as long as I am still alive."

I nodded, sighed and regarded him for a long moment. "Why would you do this for me?" I asked finally.

"You remind me of my daughter and I owe your father a large favour." He said after a very long pause.

I had to work at keeping my jaw from hitting the floor. "You have a daughter?" I asked. He could not have shocked me more if he had said he was really a Jedi knight in disguise on a mission to kill Darth Vader.

He nodded, sipped his coffee and drew a deep breath. "Yes, a long time ago I was married for a brief time. It didn't work out but I have a daughter from the union. Ailyn would be about six or seven years younger than you I guess, I have not seen her in a very long time."

I was so surprised I didn't know what to say.

He smiled in a way that softened his face. "Not exactly the hardened bounty hunter image you had in your mind?"

"I just never pictured you as a family man." I said.

"Well, apparently I'm not." He said sharply and I regretted my words immediately which must have shown on my face.

"I'm sorry, I mean no offence."

He leaned forward. "Look, I have known you since you were an annoying, precocious child who thought I was some sort of super being. You followed me around like a little love sick Jawa pestering me with all manner of questions until I had to beg your father to get you out of my hair." He smiled slightly at this memory he had of me. "Your dad and I go back a ways, long before he ever got married and settled down actually, though I bet he's never told you that. I owe him, which I don't like. You are his daughter; I've known you a long time. Now I hear you are being stalked and hurt by a guy you used to adore for taking a government job. That doesn't sit too well with me especially since I can do something about it for you, clear up my debt to your old man and not have to see the worry on his face every time I ask how you're doing when I get my ship fixed. I want him concentrating on my boat not on his kid! I don't want to have to find a different docking bay just because I find it disturbing to hear you are being hunted. That would piss off your dad and annoy the hell out of me, which trust me, you don't want."

I just stared at him. It was one of the longest speeches I had ever heard him give and it completely took me by surprise.

"Is there any more mek'kefa?" he asked when I found myself with nothing to say.

I poured him another glass. I still could not wrap my head around the revelation that he had a family. It made me wonder just how much he really knew about me and my crazy family. How much my father had really told him. I had always known that there was a sort of strange friendship between Boba Fett and my father but I had not realised that they had known each other before my father was married. I sighed. My father's murky past was something he never discussed. It was as much a secret as who uncle Vahlek really was. It seemed to me that my family was full of dark secrets which tended to involve shady characters from the wrong side of town.

"Working for Vader seems to agree with you." Fett said after a long silence.

I nodded. "I like my job, despite its hazards." I told him, "And I am good at it, it seems."

That earned me a smile. "Well my guess would be if you weren't you wouldn't be here."

"It sure beats working at the palace." I retorted.

"Different location, same story." He replied airily. "Last I heard you were embroiled in a big scandal with a disgraced officer."

"Well, don't believe all you hear." I shot back.

"So you aren't involved with a high ranking Imperial Officer who was recently publicly disgraced and sent packing to the nether regions of space?" he asked with a sly smile.

"I didn't say that." I didn't want to get into this conversation at all.

He laughed. "You have this uncanny ability to get yourself involved with all the wrong people."

"Since we are being so personal, can I ask you a question about your family?" I asked suddenly annoyed enough to cross this line.

"You may ask."

"I heard from a reliable source that your father was the man who was the template for the clone soldiers who fought in the Clone wars. Is this true?"

A shiver of emotion passed across Fett's face and I wasn't certain he would answer me but he did. "Yes that is true. His name was Jango Fett."

"I also heard that you are not actually his natural born son but a naturally matured clone of his." I was pressing my luck and I could feel him fight against some emotion I couldn't place.

"Yes, that is also true."

I sat back and bit my lip, staring at his face. He met my stare evenly, his dark eyes hard and angry, but the anger wasn't directed at me.

"Why do you want to know this?"

"How much about me do you really know?" I countered.

"Not enough to know why you are asking these particular questions."

"Then I guess papa never mentioned to you that I am actually adopted and not his or my mother's biological child, did he?"

Fett shook his head. "No, he failed to mention that."

"It was kept a secret. I didn't know until shortly before I left to work for Lord Vader and not so long ago I found out who my biological parents were." I paused to look at his face but his expression gave nothing away. I continued. "My biological mother was a Jedi and the man who sired me was the Arc Clone commander she worked along side, who would eventually hunt her down and kill her. He never knew he had a child, she hid me away to save my life and paid for that with her own. When I look at your face I am looking at the face of my biological father and the man who executed the woman who gave birth to me. So, how do they call the offspring of clones in relation to other clones? What does this make you to me, a brother? An uncle? A cousin? What!?" my words tumbled out, rapid and cross. The silence in the room after I had nothing left to say was heavy and awkward. We started at each other for a moment then he broke the deadlock.

"You must get your looks from your mother because I don't see much of my father in you at all." He commented dryly.

I got up from the table and paced the room. I was angry, hurt and confused, all of a sudden I didn't understand any of this or how to deal with it.

"Merlyn, what is it that you want from me?" he asked. "You told me this for a reason, so what is it?"

"I don't want anything from you. I just wanted you to know."

"I have nothing to give you." He said.

"I am not asking for anything from you!" I snapped, and then backed down a bit. "Maybe I just needed to know as well."

"So you just wanted to add to your already complicated family with yet another complicated member?"

I stood still, ignoring his question and regarded him for a long moment. I wondered if he was right and all I really wanted was some sort of connection to people who had actually given me life. I stared at his face, searching for something that was familiar in myself. I shifted my weight and folded my arms across my chest, making a face as I did so.

He surprised me with a throaty chuckle. "Now, *that* stance and *that* expression I do recognize." He said. Then he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, with a slight smile, he added. "I don't know what you want me to say. Family is a complicated thing for me as well. I grew up with my father more often gone from home than he was there, leaving me to be raised by the Kaminoans and droids. I was ten years old when I watched the

Jedi Master, Mace Windu, decapitate him ruthlessly on Geonosis. I didn't exactly have a stellar childhood and I have no idea how families are supposed to function. I suppose that's the reason my own marriage didn't work out." He drew a deep breath. "Your biological father would probably have been an Alpha Class Recon Commando. They were clones who were unaltered in anyway to allow for independent thought. I am a little surprised to hear he fulfilled Order sixty-six. Many of the Alphas didn't."

"Order sixty-six?" I had heard of this but the details were sketchy.

Fett sighed. "It was an order that was encoded and trained into each and every clone to recognise the Jedi as traitors to the republic at a time of the command being given."

"Why?"

"You'd have to ask Palpatine that, he was the one who arranged for it to happen, of course no one knew that at the time."

"The Emperor?"

Fett nodded.

I frowned. "So what you are telling me is that the Jedi purge had been planned for even before the Clone War started?"

"It would appear so." He said.

I let out the deep breath I had been holding. "Then it was inevitable that my birth mother die."

"Perhaps. Who can say what is meant to be or not." He said with a shrug. "Destiny is something only the fortunate believe in."

"But the Emperor planned it?" I asked again.

He stared at me for a long moment and nodded slowly once.

The slow anger that ate its way up through my being must have shown on my face because Fett's expression changed indifference to curious. He went to say something but before he could my comm beeped. I answered it tersely then shoved the ache of fury that was trying to consume me down as deep into my gut as it could go. There was just not enough hatred in the galaxy for Palpatine.

"Lord Vader has returned and will see you now." I said, almost relieved that this entire conversation was over.

Fett nodded and stood up. "Time to get this show on the road." He said as he picked up his helmet. I bit my lip as I watched him. I didn't really know what to think of the conversation we had just had. The entire thing had had a very surreal quality to it. He regarded me for a moment then asked. "Tell me something, does Vader know about your birth parents?" he asked.

"Yes." I said.

Fett smiled, it was a nasty, cold smile. "That man has a vile sense of humour." He said to himself.

I didn't back up when he stepped over to stand in front of me. I didn't pull away when he curled a finger under my chin and raised my face upward. I didn't look away from his gaze when he stared into my eyes.

"You may not physically resemble my side of the family, such as it is, but now that I know it's there, I see him in your expressions." He said. "You have his tenacity and I imagine a bit of his temperament. I don't know what one would call the relationship between us either so why don't you just call me a friend and we'll leave it at that. I wouldn't go around bragging about it though, if I were you, not everyone loves me, you know." He cautioned with a grin. Then he let go of my chin and put his helmet on. "So... are you taking me to Vader or do I have to go and find him myself?"

"I'll take you." I said.

"Then lead on, little lady." He said. "But think about my offer. Seeing as you're family, I'll be pissed if this moron kills you."

"I'll keep that in mind." I said as we left the room.

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I sat in the small mess eating what I had been told was Targ stew but looked a lot like something a Ronto would yak up, still it tasted good enough. For a quick lunch it was fine and since I hadn't eaten anything else, I was hungry.

"Mind if I join you?" asked a familiar voice.

I grinned. "Hullo stranger."

CJ sat down across from me. "How can you eat that?" he asked.

"Pretty easily with a fork." I told him cheekily. "Besides, you're one to talk." I eyeballed his tray and gave him a look. "When did you get back?"

"I've actually been on board since before the fleet jumped to the Hoth system but I was on duty, and we went straight into battle alert so I couldn't really be sociable, you know? I came back in on the last troupe transport with a bunch of new guys fresh out of the academy, what fun ride that was, let me tell you." He waved his fork at me and changed the subject. "I heard you had some excitement on Coruscant recently."

I raised my eyebrows in question because I had a mouthful of stew.

"One of my colleagues at the Palace told me you ended up in a bacta tank."

"Buggery sandrats news travels fast."

"It does when what you do hauls a high ranking officer out of a meeting full of VIPs and you end up in Vader's private care facility. So what happened?"

I shrugged as I gave him the *Daily Digest* version of Jyrki's surprise attack.

"An Anzat blade, wow, did you get to keep it? Those things are worth a small fortune." He asked when I had finished.

"No, Thrawn gave it to Intel."

"Pity. How is the Admiral doing anyway?"

"I suppose he's fine. I expect he's busy discovering the wonders of the Unknown Regions."

"I heard a rumour that he's up for a promotion soon." CJ said sitting back in his chair.

"Oh?"

"I'll tell you over some of that special coffee you make so well." He said with a grin. This was CJ speak for *too many ears in this room, let's talk in private*.

My office had become a sort of unofficial hangout. CJ sprawled himself on the corner comfy chair and put his feet up on the small table, watching as I made spiced coffee.

"So talk." I told him when I handed him a glass of coffee.

"Word is your man is up for some sort of secret promotion, or maybe actually was given one."

"So you said...if it's so secret how do you know about it?"

He grinned. "Sweetheart, I'm part of the in crowd." He said.

"Uh huh, keep telling yourself that bantha-boy!" I grinned. "Anyway, that's not exactly spiced coffee worthy news. So get to the good stuff."

"Word is that the Emperor upped or will up the number of the council of twelve to thirteen."

That caught my attention. "He's planning to promote Thrawn to the circle of Grand Admirals?"

CJ nodded.

"When?"

"Soon, if it hasn't already happened. It's incredibly hush hush so you know the rumour mill is buzzing. I only know about it because one of the guys I actually still get along with overheard a conversation between Pestage and Palpatine." He said. "Mös couldn't believe that the Emperor would even consider doing this. I believe his exact words were *'I can't actually wrap my head around the fact that the Emperor would stick an alien in the highest military circle there is. The rest of the white suits will go nova over this.'* He was pretty stunned about what he heard."

"Why is everyone so against the fact that Thrawn isn't human? What difference does that make?" It was always jarring to hear Thrawn referred to as alien because that was not how I saw him at all.

CJ shrugged. "Like I'd know, I think he's a decent guy and since you seem to have a thing for him, my guess is he can't be all that bad of a person underneath his snobby-cool-know-it-all exterior. You're not the type to latch on to just anything in a uniform. You're pretty picky about the male company you keep."

That earned him a raised eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Well, if you weren't, you'd be slumming with Zaarin and anyone else who gave you the eye and showered you with flattery. Everyone knows Zaarin has a thing for you and it pisses him off that you showed him the door."

I laughed. "Zaarin's a pompous ass."

"Yes he is, but he's also a high ranking officer with the brains and the power to back it up. There's lots of girlies at the court who would sell their mothers just to spend a night with a man like him." CJ said thoughtfully. "He doesn't hear the words 'bugger off' all that often. The guys talk about that a lot; you raise a lot of eyebrows."

"The guys talk about me?" This raised my eyebrows. "What guys?"

"Uh, well... you know... the guys." He shrugged then smiled. "How many females do you see working for the Empire, especially in the upper echelon? Of course you get talked about but you aren't the only one though so don't get all Holo-starlet diva on me."

"So what do the *guys* say?" I asked with a bit of bite in my voice.

CJ shook his head vehemently. "Oh no, trust me you don't want to know the locker room chat. Suffice to say some of it is complimentary and the rest of it is testosterone driven, practically pornographic and liable to make you hate men forever. I will tell you this though, you get favourably compared to Mara Jade a lot."

"Who the hell is that?"

CJ just stared at me for a moment. "You don't know her? I thought you did some work with her a while back, a babysitting job. She's the pretty bit with reddish gold hair that hangs out on the Emperor's arm a lot."

"You mean Lianna, the dancer - courtesan?"

CJ laughed so hard I thought he would choke. "Dancer? Courtesan? You mean no one ever told you who she really is? You ferried her about on some mission and you thought she was just a dancer?" He could not keep the incredulity from his voice.

"That's what I was told by the Emperor. I don't tend to question him a lot you know?" I replied angrily. "I knew there was something more about her but when the Emperor says do something I do it and I don't ask who or why."

He made a face. "Wow, where to start? You know about the Hands, right?"

I just blinked at him.

“How is it you know so much about some stuff and nothing about others? I would have thought Vader would have at least told you about the Emperor’s Hands.”

“I vaguely remember something being mentioned about some super secret group called that, though I think it was Thrawn who told me but no specifics. I don’t care about that crap anyway. That stuff is Intel’s department not mine. I’m an office girl, CJ, not a super agent!”

“Yeah, right.” He said giving me that *as if I believe you at all* look.

“I honestly didn’t know her real name. I didn’t want to if you must know. I knew there was a whole lot more to her than meets the eye but she wasn’t exactly a big fan of mine, if you get my meaning. I think she thought I was going to steal her place by the Emperor’s side or something. I flew her to a job and then I brought her home. The job went a bit south, I helped out and I didn’t ask too many questions.”

“Well, her real name is Mara Jade. She’s one of the Emperor’s Hands, his super secret agents, assassins and all round nasties. He apparently found her as a child, raised her and trained her himself. It is said she can hear him anywhere in the galaxy through the force. But like you, most people don’t know who or what she is. The concubine-dancer- palace- fluff thing is just a ruse. That woman is as deadly as she is gorgeous. She’d kill a man twice her size with her pinkie and not break a nail.”

“Are you serious, raised by the Emperor?” I asked trying to picture of the woman I had flown to Rothana, the same woman I occasionally talked to at palace functions with this woman that CJ was telling me about. Navaari’s words about her echoed in my head...*she’s not a dancer she’s a predator....* I had known she was something more but never really exactly what. I hadn’t wanted to know. No wonder she had given me the evil eye when the Emperor had made a fuss over me.

He nodded. “Very serious, though it would be good if you never repeated this to anyone since I could get knee deep and high for telling you. But honestly, I thought you knew.”

“So the guys *talk* about her as well?” I asked.

“Of course, she’s damned hot. Hell, Merly we talk about everyone. The barracks are like gossip central. It’s a huge myth that men don’t indulge in that sort of thing. We’re worse than women, if you really want to know.” He said with a grin. “But she’s like the ice princess so everyone knows she’s unattainable, you on the other hand actually make friends and occasionally chat to us lowly men of the Imperial world. You have the reputation for being nice, although a little odd and you are still alive even though you work with Vader which really raises eyebrows. What you think no one finds that unusual or discussion worthy? You’re the best thing that ever happened to the gossip

corner. Every time you end up on Coruscant something really crazy happens to you. Now the guys have a pool about what will happen next. Of course you broke a few hearts when you decided to date Thrawn, there are a few hangers on who believe you might get fed up of being with an older man who isn’t human but I told them to give it up. I’ve seen how your face lights up when you speak his name.”

“Are you kidding me?” I just stared at him.

He shook his head and chuckled, thoroughly enjoying himself. “Nope, you are very entertaining.” He said. “Besides you can’t tell me that when you and your pal Shiv get together you don’t do the same thing. Everyone gossips it’s part of palace life!”

“It never occurred to me to consider that I would be such a huge topic of interest, to be honest. It really is just an office job, a very demanding sort of office job but in the end... that’s what it is”

“Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart and one day you might actually believe it as well!”

“You guys really talk about me?” I was having issues with this.

He laughed. “You are so naïve. How do you manage to maintain that mental state and still work for the Empire?” He shook his head. “Of course we talk about you, like I said, we talk about everyone. You just happen to be great gossip fodder. You get into a lot of mind bogglingly bizarre situations, the Emperor thinks you are worthy of note and Vader seems to like having you around. You’re the odd girl out playing with the in crowd so you stand out. Don’t sell yourself short; you make for great locker room chit chat!”

I opened my mouth to say something then shut it again. I had no idea how to respond to this so I decided to change the topic. “So, why would the Emperor promote Thrawn to Grand Admiral in secret?”

CJ sighed. “Good question. I can only speculate that he doesn’t trust the rest of the bunch as much as he trusts Thrawn.” He said. “You know the Admiral better than most wouldn’t you say he’s pretty devious and good at strategic planning?”

I nodded. “Just a bit.”

“Well, I expect they’re planning something. Something the Emperor doesn’t want anyone else to know, something that might disrupt the power balance. Or maybe that is the reason, having an odd number on the council means no stalemates. Making Thrawn a Grand Admiral does give him a lot more power.” CJ shrugged. “I have no idea what the Emperor actually does anymore. He’s becoming more and more reclusive, and with the new Death Star project underway things have been more tense than usual.”

I drew a deep breath. “So where have you been? I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I got called back for small mission, a babysitting job. I can’t discuss it, so don’t ask.” He said. “And then I had some debriefing to go through. Technically I am still in trooper rotation so I had to return to finish it off, besides how could I not come back to see your pretty face and weasel your fabulous spiced coffee recipe from you?”

“Ha very ha.” Was all I could think of as a reply, ignoring his easy flirtation with me. “So was he promoted or hasn’t that actually happened yet?”

“I don’t actually know. It’s very hush hush. You’ll have to ask the Admiral yourself. When you find out, I’d love to know though.”

“You think I’d actually tell you? CJ, you’ve just told me you’re the biggest gossip I know.”

He laughed. “Only with you sweetheart, only with you.” It was an easy lie and he told it well.

“Flirting will get you nowhere, I’m spoken for.” I told him firmly. He was so easy to like and I enjoyed his attentions in a way that could be dangerous. He was so different from Thrawn in so many ways and I knew I could easily be attracted to him but the part of me that was drawn to CJ also knew that an affair with him would end very badly. I squashed all hints of the small attraction I felt.

“That’s what makes it all the more fun.” He grinned. “Any more coffee?”

I poured him another glass and for a moment we were quiet, the scent of mek’kefa filling the air, the silence between us comfortable. The thing I liked best about CJ was that while he was ambitious and hard assed he was also unpretentious and spoke his mind. I knew where I stood with him.

“So were you with Blizzard Force?” I asked after a few minutes.

He nodded. “Yep. What a campaign, classic recruitment stuff...join the Imperial Army and have tons of exciting fun romping around in freezing temperatures and snow, chase down misguided rebels and use them as target practice.” His voice had a cold, sarcastic edge to it.

“So what happened?”

“What you mean to tell me your boys in the spook room didn’t give you the play by play?”

“They’re not my boys and I want to hear an eye witness version.” I said.

He sighed. “It was a slaughter if you really want to know. They put up a good fight but they were out gunned and out numbered. I have trained for a ton of things but I have to tell you fighting in subzero weather sucks. No matter what the quartermaster says, snow trooper outfits are not as warm as you think.”

I shook my head. “No, the warmest clothing for subzero is animal fur. The Dantassi use the skins and furs of the Tavta elch, a huge migratory

animal that lives on cold planets, because the hair is long and hollow and traps the heat, it’s also very matted at the base makes it wind proof. It’s the warmest clothing you can wear.”

“You sound quite the expert.” He said giving me that speculative look. “There’s a story in there some where.”

“Maybe, but not today.” I said. “So what happened on Hoth?”

“You really want all the gory details?” He asked in a voice that told me he really didn’t want to talk about it.

I made a face.

“We landed, we killed them, we got out. It wasn’t exactly the most challenging thing I have ever done.” He said flatly. “The AT-ATs were a big blow to the rebel ground troops except for the walkers the air speeders took down with the leg lasso. Damned clever trick actually, so kudos to what ever bright spark thought that up. It was all over when General Veers took out the shield generator.” He rubbed his forehead and suddenly he looked tired. “When the actual fighting was done, we were shipped back on board. They left a crew on Hoth and the next thing I knew was we were flying through asteroids. Don’t suppose you can clue me in about that little bit of fun.”

“Actually I can, that was Lord Vader’s idea of a wild bantha hunt. He was after a smuggler named Solo. He believes that Solo has gotten himself involved with the rebellion and was ferrying the Empire’s most wanted. And, like most things when Lord Vader wants something he is fairly bound and determined to get it. We ended up going through the asteroid field after the *Millennium Falcon*.”

“Why the hell did this Solo go into the asteroid belt in the first place?”

“Because he is a lunatic?” I said. “I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I can tell you that Solo is one of the best pilots I have ever seen, so I guess he figured he could waltz with the dancing rocks and live to tell about it. Lord Vader, being an even better pilot than Solo, decided the rewards outweighed the risks.”

“Bloody hell.”

I nodded. “We lost one ISD and two others were badly damaged, including the Avenger. ISDs are not made for flying through asteroid fields. We lost a few TIEs as well.”

CJ shrugged. “What’s a few lost TIEs when chasing down the galaxies most wanted?” he said sarcastically. “So, did we catch him?”

“No, not yet. The *Executor* pulled out of the chase when the Emperor needed to contact Lord Vader.” I told him. “I’m not sure where we are right now. After being up for nearly twenty hours straight, I went to bed.”

“Do you have a clue as to why Vader was so intent on putting his fleet at risk for the sake of a single smuggler?”

I shook my head. "I haven't heard anything since. Lord Vader is incommunicado at the moment. I suppose he has a lot on his mind right now." I said with a shrug. "It's not like he tells me everything that's going on and usually if I ask when he's in one of his moods I get told to mind my own business or worse."

"I see he still treats you with the standard Vader respect and dignity then?"

"You just have to know how to be with him, is all. He has his moments and he has a lot on his shoulders." I said.

"Says you. I don't know anyone else who would agree with this though. He's as bad tempered as he is brilliant and he stomps on anything or anyone that gets in his way. You know that he's the ultimate example of ruthlessness for the Royal Guards. It's not like he treats you with kindness and respect. He beats the crap out of you under the lable training when he's pissed off and I am pretty sure that's just half of it. He's abusive and brutal."

"You sound like Thrawn." I growled.

"Does that mean you'll like me better then?" he took the hint and dropped the subject.

"I like you just fine, I don't want to date you."

"You don't know what you're missing, sweetheart." He smirked. "And word has it you aren't just dating the Admiral you're ...."

"Okay okay!!! I give in you win! I don't know what I am missing and I don't want to know!" I shut him up before he got crude.

"See, you missed me." He said with a satisfied grin.

"My aim is terrible." I told him.

He laughed in a good way. I didn't have that many friends but he counted as one of them. He was easy to be with. "Speaking of aim, when do I get to kick your cute ass next?" He asked.

I grinned. I had learned a few tricks since the last time we had sparred and now I was itching to try them out. I opened my mouth to say something smart when my comm peeped. I made a face and sighed.

"Let me guess..." CJ said and cupped his nose and mouth with a hand then made heavy breathing sounds.

I couldn't help but laugh at his parody of Lord Vader. "Duty calls." I said, making *get out of my office* shooing motions with my hand.

He nodded, getting up. "You know where to find me if you want some fun!"

I just smirked at him. "Yes, but I get to define the fun because your version will get me into knee deep bantha poodoo! See you later." and went to find out what Lord Vader wanted.

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I was in such a hurry to reach Lord Vader that I very nearly crashed into him as he strode through the corridor on his way to his private chambers. I was certain the pirouette I did to avoid bashing into him and then the fancy footwork I had to do to keep up with him would have made my dance teacher proud. My dress swirled about me the way Vader's cloak flowed about him and for a moment it was an odd blend of deep blues and night black. For a split second it reminded me of a ballet I had once seen but these thoughts were quickly cut short my Lord Vader's brusque reproach.

"I don't pay you to dawdle, child!" he snapped, not breaking his stride. I trotted to keep up with him.

I blew the stray hair from my forehead. "You wanted to see me?"

"I need all the information you can find on Bespin and Lando Calrissian!" Lord Vader barked as he swept down the hallway.

"Yes, my Lord!" I said, and then asked. "Is Calrissian involved in the rebellion?"

"Do you *know* him as well?" His tone of voice was dark and annoyed.

"Uh, no, not personally but I have heard of him. His name gets bandied about in smuggler's circles."

"So finding information on him should be easy then?"

I looked up at him, exasperated. "Have I ever let you down let?"

"Do you actually expect an answer?" He replied archly, glancing down at me. "And be prepared to pilot my shuttle, my regular pilot is out with the Corellian flu." He added. "You know my routines so you can do the job in his stead."

This surprised me. "Uhm... wouldn't it be better if one of your more experienced officers did that?"

He stopped mid-stride and rounded on me, I had to swiftly back up a step so as not to smack into his chest plate. The last time I had walked into him, it had earned me a painful cuff across the head. "Are you refusing?" He growled

"Uh... no, not exactly, but may I remind you I am a civilian and this is a military operation so it's not exactly proper protocol." I said quickly.

"I decide what is proper protocol not you!" He leaned over me. His voice was laced with sarcasm. "I thought you *wanted* to fly Lambda class shuttles, I thought you *enjoyed* the experience and I thought you *welcomed* the opportunity to fly with me in a lambda class shuttle." He was being mean. Before I could answer he added nastily, "You don't protest about flying Admiral Thrawn about or is that becau...."

I cut him off before it got too personal. "I do like flying with you, but not in the middle of a battle. I am not a bloody combat pilot!" I argued back. "And as I recall I did protest about piloting for the Admiral."

He ignored my last statement. "What battle? Oh for Sarlacc's sake, girl, you call that little skirmish back at Hoth a battle?" He shook his head in disgust then went back to stomping down the hallway. "You should have seen the fight over Coruscant when Grievous kidnapped Palpatine, now that was worthy of the title 'battle'. These little annoyances the Rebel Alliance seems to enjoy engaging in are not battles, not by a long shot!"

"That thing at Hoth was more than just a little skirmish!" I told him crossly. "I lost count how many TIE pilots died! Never mind the ground crew or the damage done during our wild bantha chase through the asteroid field."

"Pah, bad pilots die every day, as well they should!" he shot back. "You will do as I ask and fly my shuttle because it is what I have told you to do! You will cease in this useless arguing with me and you will get me the information I requested now! Have I made myself understood or do you need a reminder to be obedient?" He said, looking back over his shoulder at me.

I backed down because all the hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stood up on end. "A reminder will not be necessary, my lord."

"Good, because your insolence, while occasionally amusing, tries my patience!"

"Yes, my lord, my apologies." I said meekly. I turned to leave and get on the task assigned but he grabbed my arm painfully yanking me back and continued speaking. My squeak of surprise made the heads of the two guards just down the hall turn. They glanced my way then quickly went back to pretending they had neither seen nor heard anything. There was a certain line of thought which said that if one did not look at the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord would not notice said person.

"While you're at it, I want you to put in an order for a new cloak, two more pairs of boots and two pairs of gloves and make sure they use the best materials and follow the standards they are supposed to because the last pair of boots they sent did not last as long as they should have and the hem of the cloak frayed." He paused for a second then added. "And I want an update on the newest personal combat droids I asked for last week." He stopped and waved his finger in my face in that annoying manner which always reminded me of a nasty teacher I had once had

"Yes, my lord." We had come to the door of his chambers. I waited a moment to see if there was more.

"What are you waiting for, girl? I expect your report on Calrissian in an hour, do not test my patience further!" He said with more than a hint of threat in his voice. I nodded quickly and scurried off to do what he had asked, happy to get out of his line of fire.

My office was a place of quiet and calm. P2B4 had made me tea and a sandwich. I was grateful but I didn't really taste it as I ate. My mind on other

things. I sat at my terminal and began a system wide search. I stared at the data coming across my screen, sighed and began to assimilate the information I was reading sipping my tea absently. An hour later I found myself back in the presence of Lord Vader while he sat in his meditation chamber which was open.

"Yes, girl, what is it?" He snapped as his seat rotated around to face me.

"You asked for my report on Calrissian?"

"And what did you find that was of use?" He asked. This was Vader speak for *just get to the important points I can't be bothered to read all the nonsense you've managed to dig up!*

"Well..." I began, "He's running a mining operation above the gas giant Bespin."

"Mining what, exactly?"

"Tibanna gas." I answered.

"That is most interesting, why have I not heard of him or this place before now? Tibanna Gas is used as a hyperdrive coolant. The Empire should have knowledge of this." He said thoughtfully.

"I found no records of any tax payments to the Empire and there is no listing on any of the smaller mining guilds of the operation. I can only assume he is working covertly and selling on the black market." I said. "The mine must be quite lucrative though, there are close to five and a half million beings inhabiting Cloud City."

"And what about Calrissian?"

"He's a Socorran. He calls himself an entrepreneur and a business man but when I looked back through the records it seems to me he's a cross between a smuggler and a gambler. Most of his business dealings are shady to say the least. He's been arrested a couple of times by local authorities but there are currently no outstanding warrants on file for him. He gained some sort of notoriety at Taanab." I paused for breath and added. "Judging by his file, I'd be willing to bet he'd rather deal with the Empire than fight against it."

Lord Vader was quiet for a long moment. "Are there any technical read-outs for the city's facilities?"

I nodded and handed him the data chip I had brought in case he had asked. He got up and slipped in into the reader, studying the plans carefully.

"Why would Solo go there?" He asked.

"They know each other." I told him. "The story I heard was that there had been an attack on the Hutts, some slavery and spice operation near Ylesia. It turned out to be a set up by a rebel named Bria Tharen. Solo hired Calrissian as a pilot for the job. It didn't go so well."

"Are they friends?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. At least I wouldn't use the word friend to describe their relationship. When I worked at the palace the rumour was that they were not on good terms. Seems Solo couldn't pay the people he'd hired for the Ylesia operation because Tharen took all the spoils for herself to help the rebel cause. I know they worked together one more time after that but I don't think they get along that well. Rumour was they squabbled all the time."

"So Calrissian won't be likely to protect Solo then?"

"Probably not if it meant saving his own interests and investments." I remarked. "But," I added, "This is speculation on my part I don't actually know how much of this is gossip to make the outside world think they don't get along and how much is actually true. The smugglers don't tend to advertise their friendships much, it makes them look weak."

He nodded and continued studying the city's layout. "I see they have a carbon freezing facility."

"Yes, they use it as a stable method for transporting the Tibanna gas."

"That will be useful. Prepare my shuttle for immediate departure as soon as we come out of hyperspace. I will deal with Calrissian myself." He said after a few moments. "I look forward to seeing how much your piloting skills have improved since the last time you flew for me."

"Yes, my lord." I said with a sigh. Boba Fett was right; Lord Vader had a vile sense of humour.

Then, as if he could read my mind Lord Vader said, "Inform Fett that he is to remain out of sight on Cloud City until I arrive. I do not want him interfering with what I have planned. I will meet with him at the appropriate time."

"Yes, my lord." When he turned his back to me I knew I had been dismissed and could return to my office. This time getting a hold of Fett was easier. The small holo image shimmered on my desk and while I could not see his face which was hidden by his helmet, when I relayed the message to him, I could feel his grin.

"Worried about his kill count, is he?" Fett asked after I had finished passing on Lord Vader's request.

I shrugged and rolled my eyes, "Whatever."

He chuckled. "Okay, little lady, but you can tell the boss man I expect to be compensated for my time if this doesn't go the way it's supposed to. I'm not at his beck and call!"

I opened my mouth to answer that but Fett's holo image made a *don't bother* gesture. "Give my regards to your old man when you talk to him next." He said.

"I will do."

"And remember what I said about your ex- flame."

I nodded. "But you should know that killing Jyrki would piss off my uncle."

"I'll take that into consideration but the Tze'yusha'Jin don't scare me. You can tell Akosh if he doesn't sort this out for you, I will." He said and with a little two fingered salute he signed off before I could reply to his threat.

I sat back in my chair and sighed. I was tired and the tension level on the ship was high. I looked at the chrono and decided that I should probably try to get some rest before we came out of hyperspace. I wasn't sure what Lord Vader had in mind but I was pretty certain that it would be a good idea if I was at least half way awake if I was to play pilot for him.

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The young man who sat in the co-pilot's seat watched me nervously. No one had told him that instead of the usual pilot he was getting me instead and he didn't know how to react. It wasn't the first time this had happened, it wouldn't be the last but every time the young imperials who had been assigned as co pilot looked at me as though I had sprung five heads and smelled bad.

I didn't see any point in trying to put him at ease or explain why I was sitting in the pilot's seat and not the usual pilot. It wasn't as if I actually knew the answer to that question anyway and telling these young men that it was just Lord Vader's way of showing affection didn't go over well. Imperial men didn't have much of a sense of humour. I ignored his dirty looks as I started my pre-flight warm up and made him go through the secondary check list twice, just because I could.

I was being crabby and my mood wasn't improved when Vader, a compliment of stormtroopers and two more stone faced officers arrived. It was a full house. Lord Vader appeared in the cockpit and told the flustered young co pilot abruptly that he was not needed. The young man seemed more than relieved than scared as he evacuated the cockpit as fast as was humanly possible. I watched the entire discussion without comment. I was silently fuming inside but there wasn't much I could do about it. Lord Vader wasn't known for his kindness or his understanding when it came to refusing a direct order. And complaining about it was not a smart thing to do, even for someone who had a little amount of leeway with him, like me.

My headset crackled as flight control radioed me. "Shuttle *Dark Blade* you are cleared for departure."

"Roger that, *Executor*." I said looking at Lord Vader.

“What are you waiting for girl, get on with it!” he growled as he sat down.

I didn’t answer him; instead I answered Flight control and styled the shuttle to swing her out of the landing bay. My initial annoyance at the task I had been assigned vanished the moment the shuttle listed off the flight deck. He was right though, despite my protests I loved flying the L-class shuttles and I even, for the most part, enjoyed flying with him at my side because every time this happened I usually learned something new.

This time, however, the trip was different. Lord Vader was pensive and quiet, brooding on the up and coming task he had set for himself and his men. I could feel that he had something heavy on his mind and that he didn’t want to talk about it. He had shut himself off from me and it was a little like sitting next to a black hole. He had been distant and withdrawn ever since Hoth. I couldn’t begin to understand what he might have been thinking but I was certain it had to do with Luke Skywalker. That didn’t really bode well for the Skywalker kid, especially if the Emperor was also interested in him, as I suspected he was.

It was just before day break when we hit Bespin space. The shuttle shuddered as atmosphere and gravity began their work. Cloud city’s lights glittered in the lightening sky and it hung above the gas giant like a tiny floating jewel in the slender belt of breathable air. The skies around us were just beginning to bloom in the brilliant colours of pre dawn. It would have been idyllic had we not been so rudely accosted by Cloud City air security.

I spoke with the local air traffic control who were utterly unimpressed with our arrival. When me being polite didn’t work I tried to get official this didn’t work either so Lord Vader snatched at the mike I was still wearing yanking it, along with my head, closer to him and threatened the man on the other end with a very nasty death if he didn’t call off the dogs and let us land. For a few shaky seconds my control on the shuttle wavered because I could not see what I was doing.

“Watch where you are going, girl!” He said crossly as I narrowly avoided a brush with a tall building.

“Let go of my headset then!” I snapped back. “I can’t see to fly and be your damn comm device at the same time!”

He flicked my head away with an annoyed, “Pah!”, and the rest of the scenic trip in and around Cloud city was uneventful. The two ships that had guided us to the landing pad veered off at the last minute. I stuck my tongue out at them as they flew off then I brought the shuttle down on the designated landing pad gently, to make up for the bumpy ride. I was going to get a reputation for reckless flying despite my best efforts not to.

As I shut down the engines and disengaged myself from the head set, Lord Vader got up and filled the cockpit with his presence. “You will remain on board and await my return.” He said waving a finger in my face.

“How long will you be?” I asked.

“As long as it takes, do not leave the shuttle and do not disobey me or the punishment will be severe!” he replied. “I want the ship ready to go as soon as I am done here, with no messing about. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” I said and was incredibly glad I had thought to bring a book along with me. I resisted the urge to wave good-bye to him as he left the cockpit and turned to complete my shutdown to standby procedures.

I watched from the side viewport as Lord Vader and the rest of the men he had brought along with him walked along the landing pad walkway to be met by someone I suspected was Lando Calrissian. The dark haired, dark skinned man was impeccably dressed and smiled easily but his body language told me he was nervous but not utterly afraid and after a brief discussion he led Vader and the storm troopers, as well as the officers into the building we had landed near.

I let out the breath I had been holding and felt the tension in my shoulders ease for the first time in hours. I knew the shuttle was empty and I was on my own. I was more relieved than anything else. With nothing else to do up front I decided to do a walk through the shuttle, then once that was done, I made a cup of tea and settled back down in the pilot’s seat to read a book that Thrawn had given me.

My father had once commented that flying was ninety percent boredom and ten percent sheer panic when something actually went wrong. I was fairly certain I had covered both ends of that spectrum in this one trip and wondered if, perhaps, I should have brought along two books instead. I had the feeling that what ever it was Lord Vader had planned was probably going to take a while.

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It occurred to me, as I stepped back on board *Executor*, that in my wildest dreams I could never have imagined my life as it was now. I was strangely exhausted despite having spent hours doing nothing but sit around and wait yet at the same time I was too wired to sleep. My mind raced, my thoughts were scattered and unfocused. Sorting out everything that had happened seemed just as impossible as getting some rest. I considered going to the training room and exercising my demons away by working out but I didn’t really want to. After dithering around the living space of my quarters for a few moments I finally settled and did the only thing I could think of that

made any sense, I made tea. Once that small chore, which never failed to bring me down to earth, was done, I sat down to write to the one man in the galaxy I missed more than anything and the only person I could talk to about what had been going on.

*Mia e'Tekari,*

*In your last letter you wrote that you hoped life onboard the Executor would be relaxed and quiet. Well, I regret to tell you that things here have been anything but 'relaxed and quiet'; in fact things have been completely crazy.*

*Do you remember the arms shipment at Derra IV? Well, just recently, they found the Rebel Base that shipment was supposed to be sent to. One of the new Viper probe droids discovered the secret hide out on Hoth and things got pretty interesting. Probably it would have been an easy mission but Admiral Ozzel, in his infinite wisdom, had the fleet drop out of hyperspace way too close to the system. The rebels figured out that we were on our way and things got messy. As you can guess, Lord Vader wasn't impressed with Ozzel's colossal cock up and dealt with him in the usual abrupt manner. Now Captain Piett is Admiral Piett and the crew have taken started a pool on how long he will survive in this position. The grim humour on board this ship is depressing.*

*It seems the rebels had a pretty good evacuation plan in place because before we even had ground troops on the way they were sending transports off the planet protected by a large ion canon. While the ISDs went after the rebel transports Lord Vader sent General Veers to the planet with Blizzard Force. The rebels were able to disable one of the ISDs but in the end, Jorae told me, around seventeen rebel transport ships were destroyed in total. From where we were in space it was just pretty flashes of light. Not much to look at really until you think of all the lives being snuffed out in the blink of that brilliant momentary explosion. It hurts me to be near it all. It seems that so many beings dying at once is painful, at least for me. I have been listening to my mother's diary to see if she says anything about this but so far nothing along those lines has cropped up.*

*The ground troops had better luck and with the AT-ATs on the surface it wasn't much of a fight. What was interesting was the rumour that the AT-ATs could be stopped by hobbling the walkers' legs with some sort of cable. Bet that caught a few people by surprise. When Lord Vader got to the base most of the rebels had escaped, including Han Solo and he, Lord Vader that is, was not in a good mood about any of it. By the time he was back onboard the Executor the planet had been completely evacuated. The rebels were*

*pretty badly beaten and the losses on the Imperial side were fairly minimal by comparison. Once the ground battle was done the space chase began.*

*Lord Vader sent the entire fleet after Han Solo's ship the Millennium Falcon, but Solo managed to elude everyone by flying into the Hoth Asteroid Field which caused some serious damage to several ISDs. Do you know that taking an ISD into an asteroid field is a lot like trying to swim in the desert, incredibly pointless and very stupid. I wasn't able to see the actual chase, I was not allowed near the bridge, so all I saw from the windows in my office were a bunch of asteroids alarmingly up close and personal. It was pretty hairy.*

*Jorae told me the comm chatter between the ships in the fleet was insane. I got to listen in for a bit and it sounded more like some crazy-assed podrace commentary than anything else. I must admit to a few panicky moments when some of the larger asteroids smashed against the shields and the ship rocked a bit, but for the most part it was the smaller ISDs that took the brunt of the damage not Executor. The hunt went on for several hours and the only reason the Executor was not damaged more is due to the Emperor demanding to speak with Lord Vader. You can't get a clear signal in an asteroid field so we headed up in free space. I have never been so happy in my life to clear away from a bunch of bouncing stones. I have to tell you, it was just about craziest thing I have ever seen done in a space ship yet, particularly one as large as the Executor.*

*The Falcon had been tucked away in a cave or sink hole on one of the larger asteroids, according to the TIE Bomber chatter Jorae heard, but despite the searches and the bombing raids they didn't flush the Falcon out. One of the pilots said it was a giant space worm that spat the Falcon from its huge mouth back into space. This news raised a few eyebrows in the spook room, let me tell you. Despite my best efforts to convince Jorae that Space slugs are not a myth, he wasn't having any of it. He let me listen in on the com chatter. You should have heard the guys; they were all a twitter about it. It was almost funny!*

*Once the Falcon was back in open space, the chase started all over again but somehow they missed catching her despite the fact that her hyperdrive was obviously not functioning. Captain Needa, whose ship had lost track of the Falcon, was summarily executed in Vader's standard manner after he had come on board Executor to apologise. I was awfully glad not to have been there when that happened. A couple of the guys who ended up having to deal with the Captain's body were pretty down about the whole episode. A high speed chase through a field of dancing rocks is one thing but executing Needa was overkill.*

*Lord Vader decided that Solo must have taken the Falcon into hyperspace and deployed the fleet to try and figure out where the smuggler had gone. Not surprisingly, it was Boba Fett who tracked Solo down to a place called Cloud City, Bespin, which is where things really got weird.*

*I know you are sitting there asking yourself, how could it get any weirder...well, get comfortable and I'll tell you.*

*Firstly, it began weird when Lord Vader requested me as his shuttle pilot. Okay so that's not so out of the ordinary, but it was really annoying considering we were still in state of battle alert. It didn't make anyone else happy either. I don't know if it is because I am a girl or because I don't wear a uniform, but me at the helm seems to make everyone except Lord Vader very uncomfortable. It's not even as if I am a bad pilot or anything but it does feel odd to be ferrying around the Emperor's Iron Fist, along with a small platoon of storm troopers and a couple of officers when there is an entire ship full of qualified pilots who could do the job. Lord Vader wasn't too impressed with my protests and I figured it was better to do as he asked than end up like Captain Needa. He was even less impressed when I almost flew us into a building because he decided to use the headset comm I was wearing to yell at Cloud City Air control without taking the head set off my head first. Once the excitement of trying not to crash was over and we had landed, he and his men disembarked and I was told to stay put. Sometimes I feel like a well trained slash hound when I am around him. Yip, yip, yip yes master...most of the time I don't mind but occasionally it gets tedious.*

*I don't know if you have ever been to this system, but Cloud city is an impressive place. It hovers in the oxygen layer, what the locals call the 'life Zone', above the gas giant Bespin. The planet itself is incredibly beautiful. Its reddish coloured gases move lazily about the surface and lower atmosphere making it seem as though it is wearing a swirling red dress, veiled in delicate lace of golds and oranges. There are almost six million people living in this place which just floats here like a giant sail barge. I wished I had been able to fly around the city to get a really good look at it, but Lord Vader was in one of his "don't piss me off moods" so I wasn't about to try my luck. As he outlined some of his plans, I just felt sorry for the rebels he was chasing.*

*He planned on using Skywalker's friends to lure him into Cloud City and making use of the carbon freezing facility to trap him. He seemed pretty confident that Skywalker would not only come to rescue his friends but try to engage Lord Vader in a fight. It doesn't sound like this kid is really all that smart to me, you know?*

*It isn't often that Lord Vader will speak about his son but something odd happened a while back that made me ask about him. We had been in the middle of a meeting when there was a sudden ripple in the force. It felt as if*

*a cold hand had brushed the back of my neck. I had started to ask Lord Vader what it was but he had waved his hand at me to shut up. For the longest moment he stood statue still, as though he were listening to a sound only he could hear. The conversation that followed went something like this...*

*"Skywalker is powerful in the force." He had said after what seemed forever.*

*"He is your son." I had countered.*

*"Yes, there is that but he is stronger now. He was well trained."*

*"Who is training him? I thought all the Jedi had been...uhm...dealt with."*

*"My old master managed to avoid capture and gave the boy some help. I dealt with Kenobi on the Death Star but it would appear that Skywalker has taken his lessons to heart." There was a touch of pride underneath the contempt; I could feel it as strongly as I feel your desire when you want me in your bed. (Which, by the way, I miss.) Anyway...*

*I asked him, "What will the Emperor do with Luke if you catch him?"*

*Vader had turned to look at me. "Do you really wish to know?"*

*I hadn't really had to think about my answer. "Uh no, I guess not."*

*He had turned his head to look back out at the stars. "The Emperor will train him in the ways of the Sith."*

*"I thought you said there could be only two..." I did not dare to ask the question which was really on my mind, namely if the Emperor got a hold of Luke to train up as a sith, what did that mean for Lord Vader?*

*Vader had glanced at me. "Perhaps there is hope for you yet." Was his only comment, it had made me shiver. Shortly after this all hell had broken loose because we had dropped out of hyperspace too close to the Hoth system and the fight over the Rebel base began.*

*I'm not sure when he came up with the plan to catch Luke, but I do know that Boba Fett was helping him. Speaking of Fett I had a long chat with him and ended up telling him about my biological father. Talk about a strange conversation. I won't regale you with the details here, that's a conversation to save for face to face with something to drink. It's too surreal to even try and write about.*

*Anyway, I waited on the landing pad for pretty much the whole day. It was probably one of the dullest assignments I have ever had but I wasn't about to argue with Lord Vader given the mood he was in. There is enough work on a shuttle, if you look for it, and I had a book with me, one that you had given me. However, even I have my limits and once I finished the book, cleaned the engine and done all the rest of the keep Merly occupied tricks I knew, I decided to take a short nap in the cockpit, you know how easily I can*

*sleep in the pilot's chair, (no jokes please). The most annoying thing about the entire day was that I could not leave the shuttle to explore the city. I must have had a good nap because the next thing I knew I was being barked at by Lord Vader to let the Executor know he was on his way back and the sun was setting.*

*I didn't need to be force sensitive to figure out that things had not gone so well and considering that only half the men he had arrived with left with him I guess it was good for me that I got to stay with the shuttle. The trip back to the Executor was pretty quiet from my side of things and I was grateful not to be sitting with him in the back. He was in a don't disturb me if you want to live sort of mood and I decided not to ask him about the wound on his arm.*

*Later on I pestered him about what had happened; he told me had been in a lightsaber fight with Luke Skywalker. He didn't really want to talk to me about what exactly had happened even after I inquired about the damage to his shoulder. He did fill me in on what had happened to Han Solo, though. Well actually, I had to bug him about that as well, mostly because I was curious about how that particular part of the story ended. It turns out that Solo had been easily captured, betrayed by Lando Calrissian. Vader used Solo as a test subject for the carbon freeze facility and then once he was placed into carbonite, Boba Fett was allowed to take him back to Jabba the Hutt. Fett has been after Solo for years so I am betting that this will be a bit of a relief for him and Jabba will be thrilled. I can't imagine what he'll do with a Solo encased in carbonite though, but I have to tell you he'd make a great wall decoration. Jabba was so ticked when Solo dumped his spice cargo. I don't recall ever seeing the Hutt so annoyed with one of his smugglers or so vengeful before.*

*Calrissian must have had a change of heart after watching his sometime friend get put into carbon freeze because shortly after I got notification we'd be bringing prisoners back to the Executor all hell broke loose on Cloud City. I think some sort of evacuation order had been given because people suddenly began streaming from the buildings and fleeing. The people he had wanted to capture escaped on the Millennium Falcon and I sometimes think this ship has a charmed life all of its own. Once Lord Vader was back on board the Executor he gave the order to chase the Falcon and capture her along with her crew. Vader had his men disable the hyperdrive on the Millennium Falcon but I guess something went a little wrong there because they managed to engage their hyperdrive anyway and she escaped with all hands on board, except Solo, that is. I guess Lord Vader was really distracted by the fight he had had with his son because he let Admiral Pielt live despite the fact that the Millennium Falcon slipped away*

*from right under everyone's noses. The whole ship has been buzzing about it ever since. I didn't need to be on the bridge to know that Lord Vader was furious but he also had his mind on other things.*

*Lord Vader is now utterly wrapped up in finding his son. It has become his obsession and even though he hides it, I know. It doesn't help that the Emperor nags him about it. If were to tell you I don't know how I feel about this would it seem odd to you? Would it be even odder if I told you that I even though I have never met Luke Skywalker I already don't like him? Part of me is jealous and part of me is annoyed and part of me wonders why I even care? It doesn't make much sense but I don't have anyone else to talk to about it.*

*Once I got the shuttle back on board, I was off duty. It was a long tedious day and I should be sleeping but here I am back in my quarters and I can't shut my brain up so guess what...you get this letter! I had thought that we would be heading back to the core at some point, as soon as Lord Vader concluded what ever business he still has left here but as I look out of my window I can still see Bespin and we are in a holding orbit, so I guess we are not done here yet.*

*I have to be honest with you, despite the fact that Shiv and the crew will be there, I don't much look forward to returning to the Core. With you gone it will be hard to be back there and even harder to rattle about in that stunning flat of yours all alone, which is my round-about way of telling you that I miss you but I suspect you already know this.*

*I should also tell you that the last book you gave me, you know the one you handed me before vanishing off into the Unknown Regions again, completely caught me off guard. I had taken it with me when I flew Lord Vader to Cloud City figuring there might be a bit of a wait in there but I wasn't expecting it to be so... well... arousing, for lack of a better word. It made me shiver and not in the way that happens when one is cold. I had no idea the Chiss had authors capable of such passionate wording or intensity. You always give me the impression that your people are quite cool and dispassionate with you being an exception, of course.*

*You might want to warn me the next time you give me a book like that to read. Telling me it is considered a classic somehow doesn't really give me any clues as to its true nature. Mostly, it made me miss you so needless to say by the time Lord Vader returned to the shuttle neither of us was in a particularly cheery mood. You were right though, I loved the story and how it was written. It was racy and breathtaking plus it made me cry at the end which you knew would happen. I was incredibly happy that I was alone when I was reading it. So, to answer the question you asked before you left, yes I would certainly love to read more of his work, although I'd prefer to do*

*that when you are closer at hand. You might want to let me know when you will be around next because I have plans. Speaking of plans...what is this I hear about you having a possible change of rank?*

*Now, I need to get in touch with Jarack so that he can deliver this to you. Take care of yourself.*

*Mera'ta'llath'Ja,  
Merlyn*

I folded the letter and slipped it into an envelope. An hour later, while I was in the middle of watching the HoloNet news cast my door chime rang. The surprise on my face made Jarack grin and the stormtroopers at his side tense slightly. He smirked as he walked in, waving his escort away, they ignored him despite the Imperial symbols on his flight suit sleeves.

"Thank-you gentlemen, I'll be fine." I told them. There was a moment's hesitation and then an imperceptible shrug and the stormtroopers left, the door closing quietly after.

"I wasn't expecting to see you." I said. "In fact I was going to try and get in touch with you to pick up a letter."

"Does this mean I surpassed your expectation with my exceptional service?" he asked with a smirk.

"The next time I see Thrawn I'll be sure to tell him how wonderful you are." I teased and gestured to the couch.

"I heard you had some excitement." He said as he sat down.

"Are you talking about Hoth or Bespin?"

"Both actually." He answered.

"Yes, well actually I think the most exciting part of the whole event was watching the bridge crew trying to navigate an SSD through an asteroid field. Well, I didn't actually get to see them but I saw the results."

Jarack raised both eyebrows in silent question.

I just shrugged, what was there to say about it? "So, what brings you to my neck of the galaxy?"

"I have something for you." And he drew out a large sealed package from his satchel and handed it to me. As I smiled he grinned. "See, that's the reason I do this job." He said.

"Oh?" I asked trying not to hug the courier package to my chest. "Do you want something to drink?"

He shook his head and said. "The Admiral inferred it was of great importance that this get to you today so here I am, but I can't stay."

"Hang on a sec then, I have something for you to return to him with." And I handed him the envelope. "So, you just happened to come all the way out here just to deliver mail?"

He gave me a little shrug. "Actually, this was a side trip. I was on a little mission for the Admiral, nothing spectacular and now that I am done I must return to rendezvous with him as soon as possible." His tone of voice told me he wouldn't elaborate.

I just shook my head. "Keep your secrets, then. Will you tell the Admiral I said hullo?"

"I always do, Miss." Jarack waved my letter to Thrawn and then tucked it in his satchel. "I am sure this will keep him entertained for a bit, maybe I can even catch a few hours sleep. Take care of yourself, Miss Gabriel, you look tired."

"As you so aptly put it, we've had a bit of excitement here, it does throw a bit of a hyper-wrench into my sleeping routines."

"You mean Vader actually lets you sleep?" He asked cheekily getting up and heading to the door.

I made a 'Pssht' noise at him and waved him out of my quarters. "I guess I'll see you next time."

He nodded and I watched as he left. It was late, I was exhausted and suddenly the only place I wanted to be was in bed. I was about to turn in when the door chime rang again. I thought it was Jarack, that maybe he had forgotten to tell me something but when I opened the door to my surprise it was the young man who took care of the mail. He surprised me even more by handing me a pile of small packages.

"These came in on the last delivery but we were told not to give them to you until today." He said. "I guess it must be a special day or something. I hope it was a good one, Miss."

I took the mail from his hands and merely nodded. Special day? Nothing came to mind but mail was always welcome. I thanked him and closed the door, puzzling over what made this particular day different from any other.

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In all the excitement and madness I had completely forgotten that it was my birthday, the actual day I had been born and not the day my family had always celebrated. I didn't consider this day particularly special, it was an unfamiliar date to me and I had insisted that everyone in my family just ignore it. My birthday had always been celebrated on the day that I had been

found and not born; I had seen no reason to change that. For the second year in a row, despite my requests to not recognise this day, everyone had utterly disregarded me on this matter. It seemed my family and friends liked having any excuse to celebrate and nothing I said or did would change that. I had to admit a little part of me was pleased.

Although my instinct was to read Thrawn's letter right away, it was the package from my family that I opened first. I slid the little recording into my player. I knew instantly that Bedi had been the instigator despite the fact that it was my father who had made the holo. My father's image shimmered into place, he looked a little uncomfortable and I knew that just out of the holo-emitter's range, Bedi was urging him to speak. My father usually wrote to me on a datacard.

*"Well...erm... as you can see, Merly we've totally ignored your wishes again. Actually it was Bel and Bedi's idea but we all agreed this is a special day and it should be treated as such. So you will be the one person in this family who gets to celebrate two birthdays instead of one. Mostly everyone here just misses you and this was a decent excuse to send you a small care package from home. But since your real birthday, your found day is still the main event we just sent little, silly things this time."*

He stopped for a moment and his holo image shimmered.

*"Anyway, I hope that you are safe and well. Vahlek said that when he left Coruscant you looked much better and your last letter confirmed that you were still among the land of the living. I do worry about you...oh Bedi is poking me to tell you that Rys got a job as a back up singer and she dropped by last week to see how you were doing. There is a data chip in this parcel some where with her address on it. Apart from that, honey, there is nothing new to tell you and mostly we all wanted to wish you a happy birthday. Vahl said he'd send you something separate, he's off world right now doing goodness knows what."*

Suddenly everyone was trying to crowd into the capture and I laughed as Bedi and Bel shoved in by my father. The holo-capture platform at the docking bay was small.

*"We love you and miss you! Take care of yourself, love."* My father said and was then drowned out as the other two yelled birthday wishes. I guessed they had over loaded the holo recorder because it shut off suddenly.

I unwrapped the small gifts which had been carefully mailed to me and smiled, Tatooine salt sweets, a large packet of my favourite blend of mek'kefa beans, a small holo capture of everyone I could put on a shelf and a little bottle of my father's self made alcoholic poison. It was a small piece of home and it made me long to go back. I missed them all. I also sometimes missed

my life there and how it had been before I had come to work for the Empire but given the chance, I wouldn't change how things had turned out.

The next thing I opened came from Shiv who, unlike my father, had no problems with making a hologram for me.

*"Hey Rim Girl!*

*I know you said not to fuss but hell, it's your real birthday so we all decided to ignore you! Birthdays should be celebrated. And don't shake your head at me!*

*I heard that you guys were off battling the rebels somewhere but the HoloNet news is sketchy right now so how about sending some details? It would be nice to know that you are still in one piece.*

*Here on Coruscant, it is the same old same old. There was no big move to Naboo this year though. The Emperor has withdrawn a lot from the public eye and Sate Pestage isn't interested in the usual change over so everyone stayed put. I can't say that I am sorry. The move was always a big pain in the rear to co ordinate. Besides I have other more pressing things to deal with at the moment.*

*Pestage is a strange man, downright creepy actually but I guess that should not be too surprising seeing as whose footsteps he's following in. He's on really chummy terms with Ysanne Isard so I guess things, from an Intel point of view, will get tighter. Isard is a real piece of work and lately she has been digging her claws into a lot of things. I can't talk about them here but I'll fill you in when you get back. Ever since Tygs's arrest the atmosphere at court amongst us lowly Palace workers is tense to say the least.*

*Anyway I didn't start this holo to whine at you, I can do that when you come back, you are coming back at some point aren't you or did that manic ex-flame of yours scare you off Coruscant for life? I hope not, I miss you, you know. So have a happy day. The little gift is from Me, Ynyth, Bobbyn and Cati, yes I told her. I know it's not the birthday you really celebrate but we have something else planned for that. Still you were born on this day so we decided to make it a big deal, deal with it! Oh Cati says not to get blown up or anything, that would be a bad way to celebrate! Love you lots!"* Shiv ended the holo with a kiss kiss motion.

I opened the little package and grinned. They had sent me a set of holodramas, the first two seasons of my favourite show. A gripping drama set during the Clone War times called *Lost Brotherhood*. I had complained because I kept missing episodes due to various incidents, accidents and being hauled off planet with Lord Vader. Now I had something to watch aside from

the boring junk that was transmitted over the ship's internal entertainment channel.

My uncle had written me a letter, instead of his usual datacard messages. His handwriting was slanted, old fashioned and surprisingly neat.

*Lei-lei,*

*I know you will be making 'that face' but a day of birth should be celebrated. Your father told me that they are mailing you something from home and asked if I wanted to be included but I had already made some plans so I begged off this time. I would have recoded a datachip but the damn recorder is broken, so I am doing this the old fashioned way.*

*I am currently on Anzat. Earlier today I met with someone who might be able to help me understand where Jyrki got a hold of the Scha'ad'uk. I once trained under this man, who is as ancient as he is wise, and I thought that he would have some answers for me. Unfortunately he was unable to help as much as I had hoped.*

*There are a number of the Scha'ad'uk unaccounted for, worth a huge amount of money in the collectors circles. He was very distressed to hear what had happened. It is an offence to misuse the assassin's blade in this manner. I could tell you the tradition of the knives but that would take me a day's worth of writing and I think that's a tale better told in person. He was able to point in me in the right direction as to how Jyrki may have gotten a hold of the blade though, so we will see what information that turns up. I am grateful for your patience in this matter with Jyrki; I know it has not been easy for you. I promise you I will deal with him.*

*Now on to other things, I was on Nar Shaddaa a week ago and happened on a small shop that specializes in custom holograms of all kinds. I know that despite your gregariousness and ability to make friends you still get a bit lonely especially when you are in space with Vader so I had this made for you. It is a mini holo-pet. They were able to take one of the images I had of Kahvi and turn her into one of these holo-pets. They come in all sorts of sizes including life size, but the holo-transmitter for the life-size was too big to post. I also thought that the mini-pet would be something that you could sit on your desk, a little bit of whimsy for you.*

*I hope that you are well and fully recovered and that you are having a glorious day. Will see you soon enough I imagine. Stay out of trouble.*

*All my love,  
Zte'sa Vahlek*

I took the little holo transmitter which was as large as the palm of my hand and set it on the table in front of the couch, then turned it on. Much to my utter delight suddenly a small blue-glowing bearded jax hologram popped up and began to run around the table doing all the things that bearded jaxes do. I briefly skimmed through the instruction manual that had come with it and was delighted to find out that I could name my holo-pet and get it to do tricks. It was the perfect thing and I loved my uncle for it. I sat and looked at the gifts and the messages. Despite what I had told everyone about not celebrating this day I was grateful no one ever listened to me. Before I opened Thrawn's parcel I got up and made a cup of tea, saving and savouring the best for last.

*A mia' Tekari,*

*The Chiss have a saying; Sweetest is the fruit that is just out of reach. And, indeed, this is how you are for me at this very moment. Here, in the deep black of these Unknown Regions so far away, I am forced to come to terms with the fact that there is someone in my life for whom I care deeply, despite my initial desire to avoid all attachments of any sort. Have I learned how to tell you that I miss you with the appropriate language yet? I think so. If you are smiling as you read this then I have already achieved part of my goal.*

*I distinctly recall you mentioning that this was the date of your birth, although not the day you celebrate it on and no doubt you told everyone in your family and small circle of close friends to ignore it again. I am also absolutely certain everyone important in your life has disregarded this request. As you can see, I am no exception.*

*I once told you, on my home world we celebrate birthdays with a mixture of solemnity and quiet reflection. The idea being to look back over the year that has passed and see where improvements could be made, what mistakes were made and what was good, well done and praiseworthy. When I first experienced how humans celebrated a birthday I was horrified at the crassness of it, the sheer madness of the partying and the gayety of it all.*

*To me, as a Chiss, this was not a worthy way of marking the passage of one's life. The birthday celebrations I observed at the Academy on Carida were raucous, loud affairs that usually involved a great deal of alcohol and tended to end badly with fist fights and an over abundance of testosterone induced emotion. Still, these events were rites of passage and as I observed more of them I began to see that human birthday traditions such as parties, the giving of gifts and mementos were not so much about being boorish or self centered but rather just a very different way of recognizing the span of*

*a life time. Humans, I have come to understand, do not need a specific or special day to reflect up on their lives, they have a tendency to do this whenever the moment suits them.*

*Were I with you on Coruscant and had time permitted I would have taken you out to dinner at that lovely little bistro you like so much. I am certain that you have the perfect designer dress from Cati for such an occasion somewhere in your closet, something pretty and flattering to show off your beauty as well as be seductive enough to make me want to utterly misbehave.*

*Dinner would be a delicious, flirtatious affair throughout which I am sure you would tease me to distraction using your feminine wiles and your delightful force talent. While, I would do my best to maintain my cool in public, I would be forced to devise my plan of retaliation. I, too, can be subtle as you well know. I am certain you can imagine the things I am capable of and I can picture the blush on your cheeks as you read this. You have no idea how much that thought pleases me.*

*In-between all of these games of seduction, we would talk about everything and anything, as we always do, and I would learn a multitude of new things about you that I had never known before.*

*After dinner, I believe that going dancing at Geddy's or taking in a show at the Opera House would be in order, here I would do my very best to seduce you with delicate caresses and warm whispers so that by the time we returned home you would not be able to resist my nefarious plans for the rest of the night.*

*Once home, we might step out onto the balcony with a night cap of brandy but chances are greater that I would simply whisk you off to bed and celebrate the day that you were born to the absolute best of my ability for as long as my stamina and your desire hold up. Perhaps it would not be the loud, drunken and often wild revels which I have observed in the past, but I assure you it would be an evening neither you nor I would forget.*

*Sadly, my dear, we are not afforded this luxury so you will have to make do with my words, your imagination and this small gift I am sending which I have had in my possession for some time now.*

*I bought it from a small shop on Corellia, a place called Vosteo's. I had thought about presenting it to you while we were on Coruscant, an early celebration of this day, but circumstances brought on by your friend Jyrki prevented that. I had then hoped a quick meeting that had been planned with Lord Vader might provide the opportunity to give it to you in person but this meeting was cancelled. The rebels Lord Vader is intent on chasing took precedence over the strategic planning session. So as a last resort I*

*have once again abused Jarack's good nature and asked him to deliver it to you while he is on a mission for me, hopefully in time for your birthday.*

*Now, I am afraid I must end this if it is to reach you in time. I know that this letter will be bittersweet. The mixture of longing and desire, tied up with distance is difficult. Believe me when I say that you are not alone in feeling this. You are in my thoughts, tekari, and as distracting as this is it is also a comfort. Be well.*

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

I sat with trembling fingers and unwrapped the perfectly folded paper that covered Thrawn's gift. I was careful not to tear it because it was beautiful, elegant and had been hand made, hand painted so that I wondered if it was from Csilla. Hidden by the exquisite wrapping was a small, round box made from what at first glance looked like bone. The little box which sat in the palm of my hand was lovely and delicate. Both box and lid were decorated with intricate and beautiful carvings that were of a style familiar to me. I smiled when I recognised cracker-berry flowers. I cupped both hands around it and closed my eyes to see if it would give up any memories.

*It was Navaari I saw, sitting someplace cold. He was carefully putting the finishing touches into the bone box he had made. There was a smile on his face, he was speaking with someone but I couldn't see who. I couldn't tell what he had said but there was laughter.*

The image faded quickly but it had been enough. I lifted the lid to the box and my heart skipped a beat. The pendant dangled from its chain as I lifted it from its little nest. The setting was of a simple design made from Corellian silver. It showed off the oval stone which was about the same size as the top of my thumb without over shadowing it.

I played with it in my fingers. I didn't have to look hard to find the stone's inner fire. It was one of the most exquisite examples of milky ma'arilite, as well as one of the largest that I had ever seen in my life. I didn't dare to think what a piece such as this was worth as I unclasped the pendant I always wore and fastened the new one around my neck. The blue-green fire that danced in the stone was astonishing in its brilliance and was as vibrant as the little round one I usually wore was subtle. I curled my hand around the stone and listened for any of its memories but the only thing that came to me was a strong sense of longing mixed with great affection. Underneath the pendant was a short letter, folded up neatly to fit into the box.

*Sj'iu tekari,*

*You will never know how sorry I am that I cannot place this piece around your neck myself and see the look in your eyes when the stone shows itself to you. As you have surmised by now, it was Kirja'navaar'inkjerii that carved the small box. I had spoken to him some time ago about your familial discovery including your date of birth. The Dantassi believe greatly in honouring the day of one's birth so, on arrangement, we met not too long ago and he showed me what he had done to commemorate your birthday. It was the perfect container for the pendant I had found on Corellia.*

*Kirja'navaar'inkjerii joked about my lack of imagination, saying that you already had a ma'arilite pendant. I told him of your love and fascination for the stone and he shared with me the story of how he showed you Hjallian sky fire. A small part of me wished I could have been there to share this moment with you but of course given the circumstances at that time perhaps it is a good thing I wasn't there at all. He remarked that the piece I found resonates with the same colours you saw that night. Indeed, it is one of the most brilliant examples of this stone that I have ever seen.*

*The Mon Calamari I purchased the pendant from told me that setting is new but that the actual stone is quite old. He mentioned that it had been in private collection for a very long time and the only reason it was now on sale was that the owner had passed away and his estate had been sold off. I do not know if there will be any unpleasant memories in the piece, I hope not.*

*In difference to the small pendant I gave you so long ago, this one is neither subtle nor secret. It is vibrant and dances with colour. Yet, true to form if you hold it up to the light you can see the translucent nature of the stone. It is a beautiful piece meant to be worn by a beautiful woman not tucked away in some collection drawer never to be seen.*

*I hope that for a small pocket of time on this one day you have found peace and joy. I also hope that despite your pleas that this day to go unrecognized this was not the case. You are a bright spark in what is more often than not a dark galaxy. So, with that I wish you a happy birthday.*

*A'mera  
Za'ar*

I re-read Thrawn's letters and decided that his eloquence was a form of Chiss torture. His words created an ache and a longing in me that I had not thought possible. *Bittersweet* he had written and he had summed up my emotions so well that not for the first time did I wonder if he had me under constant surveillance.

With a deep sigh I sat back and absently played with the new pendant that hung around my neck, staring at the reminders that I was not alone in

spite of how I sometimes felt. With these thoughts in my head I went to bed. I was exhausted and I had expected to sleep like a stone but that was not the case, instead I dreamt.

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*I was standing in the sunlit Gallery Hall of the Jedi Temple. In the dream I wondered how I had gotten here because the temple I knew was dark and spooky. At my side was a tall man in Jedi robes of browns, he had his arms folded across his chest and like me he stared out through the open columns to the bustling city below. I turned my head to look up at him and realised it was Qui Gon Jinn, at the very same time I realised that it was not me in the dream looking at the Jedi Master but my mother. I was seeing through her eyes, a passive viewer on events that had already happened.*

*"You seem troubled A'kali." Qui Gon said.*

*She nodded but said nothing.*

*"The disturbances in the Force trouble you?" he asked.*

*"Yes master." She answered. "Master Tane tells me it is normal for one my age to feel ...anxious but I sense something more than simple angst."*

*"Walk with me." Qui Gon told her and they made their way slowly through the corridor to one of the small gardens. She raised her head to the sun's warmth and breathed in deeply. I could smell the scent of green grass and rich loamy soil. He led the way to a garden bench and they both sat down. For a long moment they were silent.*

*"You miss your master while he is away, do you not?" he asked.*

*She nodded. "I have grown fond of him, maybe too fond. When he leaves I feel a sense of loss I cannot explain. This is what Master Yoda means by attachment isn't it?"*

*Qui Gon smiled. "Attachment is hard to over come, it is a normal human emotion." He said gently with a smile. "But I sense this is not what troubles you, young Padawan."*

*She shook her head. "I have doubts, Master," She said, "about the path that has been chosen for me."*

*He cocked his head to one side and looked at her, waiting for her to continue. Qui Gon Jinn was a patient man, he would wait until she found the right words to explain what she was troubled over.*

*"I want to have children." She said suddenly.*

*"That particular activity is not encouraged amongst the Jedi." He said gently almost jokingly.*

*"I know and that is why I now question everything that I have been taught. I work with the babies that come to the Temple and every day I find myself longing for a child of my own more and more."*

*"Longings can be overridden, A'kali. Part of your training teaches you how to do this and Master Tane excels as a teacher. You have chosen to take the path of a Jedi, you have been a most diligent and dedicated student. Why the sudden change?"*

*She was silent for what seemed a very long time before she found the courage to answer. "I had a dream, or perhaps a vision of the future. I saw myself with child. A baby girl. It was so real that when I woke up and found myself in my own bed alone I was heart broken." She told him, her voice trembling at the memory of her dream.*

*"A vision of the future?" he asked. A catch in his voice made her look up into his blue eyes.*

*She nodded.*

*"The future is fluid, A'kali. It is always in motion and difficult to see or predict. Perhaps you are seeing a possibility from a future that would have happened had you not been taken to the Temple and trained." His words were logical but she sensed the underlying concern in his voice.*

*"Yes Master Qui Gon." She said, and then burst out. "But it was so real! I was still a Jedi, I saw my lightsaber and I knew the ways of the force! I was using the baby training techniques on her, on my baby and worst of all I was terrified for her. And there was something else. Something awful was happening in the galaxy. I have never felt such fear before."*

*"Do you know what you were afraid of?"*

*She shook her head. "It was just a shadow, something dark which clouded everything else. I woke up or the vision stopped after this, but it left me ... very afraid for my daughter."*

*"You do not have a daughter." He told her.*

*"But I will." She said firmly. There was no mistaking the worry in his eyes then.*

*He went to say something else but was interrupted by a young man, another Padawan slightly older than A'kali.*

*"Master, I am sorry to intrude," he said shyly. "Hullo 'kali."*

*"Hi, Obi Wan." She said, blushing.*

*"Yes, Obi Wan, what is it?" Qui Gon asked without any note of annoyance in his voice.*

*"The council has asked to see you, Master. There is trouble on Naboo and they have requested help. The Chancellor has asked for negotiators."*

*Qui Gon Jinn sighed. "Very well, go ahead and I will be there momentarily." He told his apprentice. He waited until Obi Wan was out of sight then turned back to the young woman who sat troubled at his side.*

*"A'kali, when master Tane returns you must speak of these matters with him and if you cannot wait then perhaps one of the others can help you? Perhaps Master Tholme, I know that you and his apprentice, Quinlan, have spent time together so perhaps you would feel more comfortable speaking with his master about such matters if you are too intimidated by Master Yoda or Master Windu. I see how these thoughts trouble you, it would not be wise to keep them bottled up inside."*

*"Yes Master Qui Gon, thank you. I appreciate the time you have taken for me today."*

*"It is part of the job of being a master. In the end, A'kali, time is really the only true gift we have to pass on to others. It is a precious commodity, and sharing it with a thoughtful and delightful student such as you makes every moment worthwhile. Do not trouble yourself so much with things that have not and may never happen. Concentrate on the here and now, be mindful of the living force and it will guide you." He smiled and got up. She did the same, bowing her respect to him then watched as he left the garden. While she did not know it at the time, she would never see him alive again.*

*The dream shifted and moved, the scene faded to the desert where I found myself back in my own body once again, staring at the snaking sands, the aftermath of a desert storm. The man who stood at my side had been dead for longer than I had been alive but I felt as though he is a part of my soul anyway.*

*"You face great trials in this time of darkness, daughter of A'kali L'uanna. The darkness that has stretched its hand across the galaxy is powerful." He said.*

*"What am I to do?" I asked.*

*"Center on the living force and trust your instincts. You have a bright spirit and your mother's strength of will. Be strong when you are tested and do not let the darkness devour your soul as it has Anakin. We were wrong about so many things and arrogance was our greatest failing, do not let it become yours." He turned to look at me and his fingers lifted the new pendant that Thrawn had given to me. "Ma'arilite, the stone that holds the soul's light." He said softly to himself. "May it guide you in the worst of times yet to come."*

*As though wrapped in a heat haze, Qui Gon shimmered and vanished. The sand hissed about me as the wind stirred it up. I shivered despite the warmth, scared of what was being foretold and the scene around me changed again.*

*I found myself in the darkness of the bedroom in the flat on Coruscant. I shifted restlessly. Thrawn, at my side, was woken by my movement. He reached over and caressed my skin with the tips of his fingers. The fear that had swept me up in the desert was swiftly replaced by desire. Wordlessly I moved to his touch, my eyes closed so that the sensations he created were heightened.*

*“Sj’iu tekari, kej e’mal vamarae ...” he whispered in my ear, his breath warm and moist upon my neck.*

*I whimpered as the ache he created deep within me became overwhelming. His lips found my skin and burned where they touched. Somewhere deep in the back of my mind I knew I was dreaming but I didn’t care. I needed him and I wanted him so badly that I was willing to sleep forever to have him.*

*“Peyla’mer a’mal’yn.” He whispered. You are mine, he had said.*

*“Zav’niaask nen kahden.” I whispered back. Forever and always.*

*“Of course you are, child.” I heard him begin to chuckle but the voice was not that of Thrawn.*

*I opened my eyes and found myself staring into a face that was horribly familiar to me. The Emperor laughed then. I struggled to get away from him, fought to untangle myself from the bed sheets which had wound themselves around my legs. His gaze burned through to my soul and the pain it caused was fierce. I tried to push back from him as he cackled in a glee which bordered on manic. From somewhere in the distance I heard an alarm sound, the constant peeping becoming louder and louder, melding with the terrible sounds of the Emperor’s voice until I could no longer tell them apart.*

*I woke up screaming.*

*What had been an alarm in my dream was in reality my comm. Sweat soaked and pumped up on adrenaline I answered it rudely. Lord Vader’s reply was equally impolite. After giving me his latest set of orders he disconnected without further word, leaving me with about an hour to get myself ready to ferry him to his meeting with the Emperor. He had not sounded happy about it.*

*I untangled myself from the bed sheets which had trapped my limbs and got up. I sat with my head buried in my hands on the edge of the bed trying to make sense of the nightmare I had just escaped from. It could not be a coincidence that I had a dream where Qui Gon had warned me about some terrible thing yet to come just as Lord Vader was called to meet with the Emperor and dragging me along. With a sigh I got up and went to shower. At least, I thought ruefully, I would go to what ever doom awaited me clean.*

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*I was in the middle of the pre flight check when I watched Lord Vader approach the shuttle. He was carrying a box in his arms the way a new mother would carry her first born child and he was anxious. I could feel the tension coming off him in waves. Whatever it was that was making him uneasy, I didn’t want to know, I turned my attention back to the job at hand.*

*I knew Lord Vader had settled on board when his mind brushed mine with a ripple that said ‘Get on with it, girl.’ He would not be sitting with me in the cockpit because this was his personal shuttle, not just a standard transport shuttle. It was designed to especially for him and it was designed to be private. I also knew that he was not alone back there either. His two Noghri body guards had managed, as they always did, to come on board without detection. I was used to him being terse but ever since the meeting with his son on Cloud City several days ago, he had been closed off and dangerously on edge. When he had assigned me the job of flying him to meet the Emperor I had not dared to disagree, nightmare or no nightmare.*

*I piloted the shuttle out of the *Executor’s* docking bay into open space, enjoying the one thing in my life that was uncomplicated. Flying was freedom, especially when I was alone in the cockpit. I added the course data to the ship’s nav computer which I had been given and watched the stars distort as we slid into the hyperspace lane. I had no idea exactly where we were heading, the co ordinates had gone from the datachip to the Nav computer but wherever it was, the Emperor was already there waiting for Lord Vader, waiting for what ever it was in the box that Lord Vader carried. I got the distinct feeling that this was not going to be a happy meeting. Despite the success at Hoth, Lord Vader had failed to capture Luke Skywalker and the Emperor did not look kindly on failure, not even from his second in command or perhaps it would be better to say especially not from his Sith apprentice.*

*The trip was long and tedious. I was glad when the nav computer peeped that we were coming out of hyperspace. Before long a lush green planet appeared in my window. It was a gorgeous looking place and I wondered what it was about this world that had drawn the Emperor to it. It didn’t seem like the sort of place he would have much use for.*

*“The docking bay is on the south side of the mountain.” Lord Vader’s voice in my head shattered my small moment of peace.*

*“Yes, my lord.” I answered.*

*What he hadn’t told me was that the docking bay was quite literally carved into the mountain.*

*“Watch the dorsal wing when you bring her in, this docking bay roof is much lower than it looks.”*

I silently rolled my eyes but he was right, the mountain docking bay roof was indeed lower than it looked. The shuttle's wings folded up, and I guided her in carefully. The ship touched down gently and I shut the engines off.

"*Shall I wait here for you?*" I asked mentally as I unbuckled my straps and made my way back into the main body of the shuttle to meet him.

"No, you will accompany me. The Emperor has expressed the desire to see you after my meeting with him." He said as I almost bumped into him.

"As you wish, my lord." I said, not liking the sound of that at all. "How long will we be here?" I asked trying not to look at the transport box he held in his hands.

"For as long as my Master requires it." he replied waspishly. "Come along, child, the Emperor does not like to be kept waiting."

I glanced at the two shadows lurking in the background and let Lord Vader lead the way out of the ship. My mouth had gone dry and my hands trembled. It had been a good while since I had come face to face with the Emperor and I was scared. I could not imagine what he would want with me but fragments of my nightmare flashed through my mind. I shut them down, choosing instead to concentrate on the image I had memorised of Qui Gon Jinn. My jitters eased a little.

The strange facility, Lord Vader had called Mount Tantiss, was a pretty out of the way place and the labyrinth inside of it was even twistier and difficult to get to. Lord Vader stalked down the shuttle's ramp and brushed past the small welcoming party that had waited for him nervously. I did not see the Noghri disembark, they had other less conventional means to leave the ship. Unlike Rukh, they did not even bother to acknowledge my presence, let alone speak to me. I could sense them though and I took a certain amount of comfort from their stealth.

It was a gloomy and depressing place filled with great evil and haunted by ghosts I could sense but did not understand. I shuddered as I followed Lord Vader through the dimly lit halls. I wondered briefly what the Emperor did with such a dismal, out of the way place but I wasn't going to ask. It felt as though we had walked for kilometres but I knew that was not the case. The dark, narrow paths made it impossible for me to know exactly where we were or how deeply into the mountain we had gone. When the corridors finally opened up into what looked like a foyer and became brighter, Lord Vader stopped, turned and looked at me.

"You will wait here and not go wandering off. My master values his privacy." Lord Vader growled.

I nodded my understanding and watched as he swept off to his meeting with the Emperor, the box that bothered him so much in his hands and the two Noghri in tow.

"Miss Gabriel, please follow me." A gravelly voice came from out of the shadows, making me jump with fright.

I looked around me and found myself staring into the pit dark eyes of one of the Emperor's lesser advisors. The man was almost as creepy as the Emperor himself. He was dressed in the heavy, dark coloured robes of his office and he moved with a silence that was just plain disturbing. I did as he asked and followed him to a suite of rooms that did nothing to ease my growing nervousness. I had to work hard at quelling the sandjiggers in my stomach. I felt claustrophobic, being deep inside of a mountain was not comforting nor did it help to calm me down.

"The guest area is fully equipped and you will find refreshments and beverages in there." He said gesturing to the small room I supposed was some sort of kitchenette. "I am to request that you do not leave this area unescorted, the rest of the facility is off limits to civilians and guests. You will be executed on sight should you decide to leave these rooms unless it is by the Emperor's request, is this understood?" He said with the same tone of voice he had used to tell me where the refreshments were.

I knew he was not lying and if I were to even poke my nose outside of the guest suit's doors I would be shot. While I had not seen them, this place was filled with members of the secretive Royal Guard. I wondered if C.J. had ever been here. I made a mental note to ask him about this place the next time we chatted.

"Miss Gabriel, do you understand what I have said?" He interjected into my thoughts.

"Yes." I told him and tried not to let the shiver of fear that cascaded up and down my spine show.

He nodded and left silently, the door shutting behind him with a dull thud.

The small suit of rooms was sparsely furnished but it had the Emperor's distinctive taste, darkly elegant and expensive. I wandered about the main sitting room area and marvelled at the bookshelves and the art work hanging on the walls. The paintings were from a variety of artists including Venthan Chassu. I was stunned to see one painting in particular and as I stood beneath the large work of art, I had to suppress the urge to run and hide. It was Chassu's grimmest work from his darkest time, the last piece he ever painted and the absolute crown of the collection in the room. *Palpatine Triumphant*, the painting Thrawn had once told me about, chilled me to the bone. I didn't

think, in my life, that I had ever seen a more frightening work of art. Chassu had captured the evil in the Emperor perfectly.

The painting was of medium size and had been rendered with Chassu's astounding eye for colour and beautiful technique. You had to lean in closely to see where he had touched brush to canvas and under the right lighting you could see the huge range of colours that he used. It would have been beautiful had it not been for the subject matter.

Chassu had depicted Palpatine seated upon a throne that looked, on first glance, as though it were carved from Nubian alastra stone but on closer inspection I could see that the throne was actually created out of the broken bones and skulls of variety of beings, humans included. It was like watching a bad shuttle wreck, it both repelled and attracted at the same time. It wasn't the morbid throne that bothered me, however, it was the look that Chassu had painted in Palpatine's eyes. There was a glitter of unbridled malevolence in them. The smile on his face was not one of a man who loved his subjects or cared about his Empire, it was the smile of a man who knew he had won everything. It was the smile of a man who not only had power but used it in every single way he could. I stood and stared into the darkness that were his eyes and felt my heart stop. Here, in this room staring at this painting, I knew a fear that I had never actually acknowledged before.

This Emperor Palpatine terrified me to the very depth of my soul and this was the first time that I had truly realised it and for a moment I felt sheer panic. Ice cold sweat ran down my back, my heart began to pound so fiercely I was certain the entire mountain could hear it and I had to fight against the sudden nausea that swelled up in my belly. It was like drowning, I couldn't breathe. I bent over putting my head between my knees until the sensation of dying passed. When my heart had slowed down enough I stood up straight and concentrated on breathing in and out. What ever the reason for my being here, it was not going to be fun. I decided that what I needed the most was a hefty shot of brandy but since that was not an option I went to explore the small kitchenette. I had no appetite but I hoped that a cup of tea might calm me down a little.

I assumed that the meeting between Lord Vader and his master would have taken many hours, as was so often the case, but it was surprisingly short. I was browsing through the books when the pinch faced man who had escorted me here came to take me to meet with the Emperor. The ride in the turbo lift was short and tense. I had to fight against the desire to run and struggled to maintain my composure. When the lift stopped and the door opened I couldn't seem to breathe. Rooted to the spot, I didn't move and barely felt the hand on my shoulder that nudged me out of the turbo lift onto the long, wide walkway which led to where the Emperor sat. The audience

hall was quiet and oppressive. I tried to quell my rising anxiety because this was exactly what this chamber was designed for. This room was all about instilling terror, all about intimidation and it worked incredibly well.

"Come closer child." Palpatine's soft, husky voice rippled through the room like a cold caress.

"Yes Excellency." I whispered like a frightened child and did as he asked.

He sat on a raised platform, slunk in a chair which seemed to swallow him up. It was not a throne made from shattered skeletons of but a seat made from a dark ore that almost moulded itself to his body. He slouched back against it, his arms draped flaccidly over the armrests. I stopped within that acceptable circle of space and knelt down on the floor.

"Rise girl, and come closer so that I can see you. I will not bite." He purred.

I swallowed back my panic, tried to calm my pounding heart and came to stand in the light which illuminated the area around throne. The Royal Guards that normally flanked his throne had melted back into the shadows. I was not a threat.

He leaned forward slightly and looked down at me. "I see you have recovered well from the latest incident with the renegade Jyrki Andando." He smiled as he reached out and caressed the side of my face with fingers that were dry and cold, before I could answer he continued. "Admiral Thrawn was most concerned when he received the message that you had been attacked, you are so very lucky to have such a *friend*." His voice sent shivers down my spine. I had to fight not to jerk away from his touch. I just nodded because my mouth was so dry I wasn't sure that words would come out right.

"I hope the next time you are assaulted by this man you will take care of the problem yourself, you are more than capable. After all, you were able to kill Riori Griff easily enough and you were badly injured when you did it. It would be unfortunate if I had to continue to waste resources on training that was not being used and assign someone else to deal with him." He told me. I was not sure of the exact nature of the threat behind his words was but I knew I didn't like it.

"I understand, Excellency." I said even though I was not so certain I did.

The Emperor sat back in his chair again; the shadows of his hooded cloak mostly shrouded his face. I watched carefully as he smiled slowly, his left hand moving slightly to something which lay on the small table beside him. The transport box looked familiar and with a jolt I realised it was the same box that Lord Vader had carried so carefully with him. The silence in the room was oppressive and when the Emperor spoke it only seemed to add to the weight.

He caressed the box with the backs of his fingers. The action was obscenely familiar to me, only it was Thrawn's fingers and my skin. I shuddered. "Ah yes, Lord Vader's gift to me." When he spoke it was almost a lover's sigh. "I sense your curiosity..." He said. "Come closer."

I did as he requested but I didn't know how to react. I wasn't sure what he wanted from me. I only knew that I was scared, more scared than I had ever been of anyone in my life. Even though he had never done me any harm, even though he had never hurt me or given me any reason to be afraid of him, he terrified me. He opened the box carefully and drew out something but it was in the shadows so I couldn't tell what it was.

"Here, child, tell me what you think of this." He said leaning even closer to hand me what he had taken from the box. I didn't think to hesitate I took it without considering the consequences. Wrapped in a cloth was a hard cylindrical object, I stepped back and opened it trying not to show my surprise when I uncovered a lightsaber.

"Excellency...?" I swallowed. This was what Lord Vader had carried so carefully, so gingerly? A lightsaber? For a fleeting moment I wondered if it was actually my mother's and Palpatine had someone how discovered the truth, somehow found out where it was, taken it from my uncle but on closer inspection I understood this was not the case.

"Lord Vader has mentioned that he has begun instructing you on how to use a weapon such as this. Go on, touch it, child, I am most curious to see what you think of its craftsmanship." He said gently, once again sinking back into the throne, into the shadows.

I did as he asked, picking up the lightsaber in my hand despite the fact that every instinct in my body was shouting at me not to. I should have listened to that little voice but the Emperor's will was far more powerful. I sucked in air. This lightsaber had a history, a long and terrible story. The instant I held it in my hand it told me its tale with images so crystal clear, so incredibly violent that I wasn't at all certain I had not actually been swept back in time. I did not even realise that I had dropped to the cold stone floor or that I had screamed. The pain that engulfed me was bewildering. I curled up into the tiniest ball I could and rode out the storm of memories as best I could.

A book or a Holo Drama unfolds its tale one page at a time. The reader is drawn backwards and forwards through lives, through time, through entire galaxies without ever having to leave the comfort of their own homes. For me, objects unfolded their stories like frantic lovers trying to share an entire lifetime in a single moment, jumbled and chaotic. The visions ran through my body and my brain like a herd of banthas fleeing a fire. The experience was excruciatingly painful but I didn't let go of the lightsaber because like most

people watching a Holo Drama, no matter how awful it was, how scary or how suspenseful, I wanted to know the ending.

In the space of a few moments I had learned more about the history of the object I held than any storyteller could have told me. I had also learned much more about the man I worked for, more than he would ever have wished me to know. I doubled over in agony as the phantom pain of limbs lost, love lost and every betrayal it was possible to experience shot through me. It was a misery which was never mine yet I felt it, fresh and raw. I heard someone cry out from far away. It might have been me but I would never be sure.

The first thing I became aware of when the images slowly receded was laughter, soft and malevolent. The second thing I realised was that I was huddled on the cold stone floor, curled over, gasping for breath, clutching the lightsaber with my hands to my chest so tightly that my knuckles ached. I moved slowly, looking upwards until my eyes met those of the Emperor's. I wondered if he could read the hatred I felt for him in my stare. For a split second I considered igniting the weapon I held in my hands and killing him but from somewhere deep in my mind another voice, a voice that often came to me in my dreams, whispered me back into sanity, a lullaby of calm, and slowly the rage receded. I drew a deep shuddering breath.

"I see that rumours of this gift of yours were more than just idle gossip." The Emperor murmured.

I could think of no answer and just worked on breathing in and out. I blinked the tears that had welled in my eyes away and ignored them as they rolled down my cheeks.

"Well, child, tell me what you saw." He said. His voice was gentle, almost avuncular but there was no mistaking the hardness behind it. This was not a request I could refuse.

"This was Anakin's. He built it." *This weapon is your life...* words Anakin had heard more times than I could ever have counted echoed in my head. "He used it during the Clone wars." I said when I finally found my voice. "He used it when he fought against his mentor, Obi Wan Kenobi on a planet filled with fire." There was so much more to this story, so much more history which I knew but I could never have been able to sum up the lifetime's worth of pictures in a few sentences. This was the lightsaber that had cut down the children in the Jedi Temple, the same weapon that had slaughtered the separatists who were waiting word from their master on Mustafar. Its memories held so much rage and sorrow that I did not think there was enough space in the galaxy to contain them all. No wonder Lord Vader was the way he was. I did not know how he lived with these memories on a daily basis.

“What happened at Mustafar?” the Emperor prompted.

“There was a battle.” I said slowly. “Between Kenobi and Anakin,” The terrible emotions I felt threatened to overwhelm me and I had to fight to steady my voice. “There was so much anger and so much hatred. Anakin thought that Kenobi had betrayed him...betrayed you and everything that he believed in. He was so angry, so confused, and so afraid... he lost his mind....” I could not put what I had been shown into any coherent story. Anakin had not known what to do. He had been twisted into something he didn’t know how to cope with so he slipped into the dark abyss. He could not reconcile what he had done with what had been done to him or with what he had seen so he had simply given into it and had lost his soul to the man who would become Emperor.

“Yes,” The Emperor sighed lovingly. “Continue.”

“Kenobi beat Anakin. Anakin thought he could win but he let his arrogance get in the way and Kenobi... Kenobi severed Anakin’s arms and legs....” My voice caught, I had felt the pain flash through me as though it were my limbs that Kenobi’s lightsaber had sliced through flesh in a move so graceful it was like a dance. The agony was unbearable. The Emperor said nothing. He was a surprisingly patient man who knew when and how to wait.

I found my voice and continued. “Then he took the weapon, he kept it for many years safe and secret. He gave it to the boy named Luke and showed him how to use it.” I closed my eyes. There were so many images I didn’t know yet how to unravel them. What I did not tell the Emperor was how Kenobi would take the lightsaber out of the box he had hidden it in every now and then to look at it and weep for the one who had once owned it. He had felt responsible for what had happened to Anakin. He had not known how deep the betrayal had gone until the very end and it had shocked him to his very core. He had loved Anakin as a brother and a part of him had died when Anakin had turned. So many lives had been shattered all because of Palpatine. It was bewildering that one man could wreck so much havoc.

The Emperor nodded as if this news was not unknown to him already. “Tell me what happened on Cloud city.”

“Lord Vader and Luke, they fought.” I told him. “Luke came to Cloud city because he wanted to rescue his friends from Lord Vader but he didn’t know it was a trap. Lord Vader wanted to seduce him into falling into the carbon freeze unit but Luke was able to escape this fate. Lord Vader wanted to bring him back to you, as a gift, alive but encased in carbonite.” My voice sounded flat. Vader’s voice, a remnant of the lightsaber’s memory, echoed in my ears...*The force is with you young Skywalker...but you are not a Jedi yet...* Luke had been so scared but so determined as well. He did not know that he was facing his father. “The fight was so one sided. Vader played with

him, tried to seduce him into failing. Luke had no chance but he landed a lucky blow which caught Lord Vader on the shoulder. In retaliation, Lord Vader cut off Luke’s hand.” I said quietly. “I do not know what happened after this. That’s where the memories end.”

“You sense no deception in Lord Vader? No desire to save or protect this boy? No desire to tell this boy of his heritage?”

I shook my head. “No Excellency. This weapon holds no memory of Luke knowing who his father is. Lord Vader only wished to please you. He lives to serve you.”

“Do you truly believe that, my dear?”

“Yes.” I said with as much conviction as I could muster.

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence as the Emperor weighed my words, sifted to find a lie. But I had told the truth and the visions that had assaulted me were, for the most part, from Anakin’s time with this weapon not Luke’s. I let him probe because there had been nothing to hide. Satisfied that I had not been withholding anything he wanted to hear, the Emperor chuckled. It wasn’t a very good sound.

“Your loyalty to my apprentice is delightfully touching. What has he done to deserve such admiration, child? He is a man who has done despicable things. He slaughters without thought of mercy or second chances; he is ruthless and full of hate. He would kill you in an instant if you were not of use to him in some way or under my protection, yet you come to his defence without hesitation.” He asked as he leaned forward to take the lightsaber back out of my shaking hand.

I did not know what to say. I had no answers for this question because I did not understand myself what it was that bound me to a man so consumed by regret, hatred and anger it was devouring him up from the inside out. Perhaps a part of me believed that some where deep inside of Lord Vader a piece of the man he had once been still remained, because I knew he had once loved someone so much he was willing to risk everything for her, or maybe it was because he had given me a place and a purpose. I simply didn’t know.

“No matter, my dear.” The Emperor said when I didn’t answer him. “Lord Vader knows his place as will you, soon enough.” He drew a deep breath. “I was not aware you had such a valuable gift until quite recently but given how it seems to affect you I can understand why you choose to keep it hidden.” He gracefully placed the lightsaber back in its box and sealed it.

From my place on the floor, I looked up at him wondering if I was now to be punished for keeping it a secret.

“You must have Kiffar blood in you. Psychometry is their particular gift.” He mused. “It would be of interest to try and trace your bloodline. I am quite certain we would find Jedi blood in there somewhere, would we not?”

I didn't answer and for what seemed to me to be an eternity he stared into my face, into my eyes, as though he were looking as deep into my soul as he could but I had learned how to mask some of my feelings. I had learned how to hide what I thought and what I felt. Perhaps not all of it and certainly had he dug hard enough the Emperor, with his power, would have broken through my walls but I had learned and it had been Lord Vader who had taught me. I just stared back, waiting. I wasn't sure if his question was rhetorical. If he already knew the answer and just wanted to hear me confirm it or because he really had no idea about my family. Either way I wasn't answering.

He smiled at me and a part of me felt as though it had died because I realised, as I knelt on the floor, that it did not matter if I could hide some of what I felt from this man or not. It did not matter if he knew who my birth parents really were. He knew what I could do, he had learned of my gift, the only one that was not a force talent but was simply enhanced by the force. The one gift that was the most useful to him and most terrifying to me.

He touched something on the arm of his throne as he spoke to me, his voice now laced with disinterest. "You may leave me. Lord Vader does not like to be kept waiting. Aloo will show you out." He said and waved me away.

His throne turned around and as it did I watched him caress the box which held Luke's lightsaber along with the boy's severed hand, a grisly memento of the task Lord Vader had failed to complete. I stood up slowly, my legs were still shaky and politely curtsied although the Emperor had his back to me and could not see it. No matter what I felt, no matter what occurred, courtesy needed to be observed. Numbly I walked to the turbo lift where the Emperor's aide was waiting for me. I was calm and collected as I glanced at him but on the inside I wanted to run away as fast as I could and never look back. The last memory I would have of that dreadful room was the Emperor's soft laughter.

Lord Vader stood with his hands behind his back, staring at the Chassu painting. I reached out to him with the force but he blocked it. "You will pilot me back to the *Executor* and then we will be heading back to the Core." He said coldly without turning to look at me. He had not known why the Emperor had wished to see me but he had suspected and now he was unsure of where I stood, uncertain of what I had told the Emperor and whether or not he could trust me. It was at that moment I understood he thought I had betrayed him and I did not know how to tell him this was not the case.

"Hurry up, girl!" he snapped.

I nodded and followed him, his Noghri slipping into the shadows behind me and we went back to the shuttle the same way we had come. As gravity lost its grip on the small ship and the planet receded into the distance

I felt an enormous sense of relief. I did not know what usually went on down on Wayland, or what terrible secrets the mountain hideaway held but I knew for certain that I never wanted to set foot there ever again.

The return to the *Executor* from Wayland was difficult. I had been badly shaken by what the Emperor's little gift from Lord Vader had shown me. It had been work just to concentrate on piloting the shuttle without mistakes. We were about half way back to the *Executor* when Lord Vader had joined me in the cockpit. I guessed that his curiosity had gotten the better of him but for a long time neither of us spoke.

It was me that broke the silence. "Did you tell him? Did you tell him about my gifts, about what I can do?" I asked suddenly, angrily. He did not turn his head to look at me. He sat still in the co pilot's chair and stared straight ahead out into space. I waited for him to answer; I only needed to ask the question once.

"No." he answered finally. "What did he want from you?"

"He gave me your... I mean Luke's lightsaber to hold." I told him flatly.

There was a terrible silence and then he asked. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing he did not already know." I said coldly. "If he did not find out about my psychometric talent from you, then how did he find out?"

"Perhaps you should pose this question to the man whose bed you share." He said, glancing at me.

"Why? Thrawn would have no reason to tell the Emperor about what I can do." I snapped. I did not want to even hear that sort of suggestion but the seed of doubt had been planted. I had never actually asked Thrawn not to speak of it. I had just assumed he would not betray my trust. I had assumed that he understood how awful this particular talent was for me and the consequences, should the Emperor find out what I could do, would be terrible. I shook my head, as if I could shake the doubts away. "No, he would never do that."

Lord Vader shook his head. "Are you really so naïve?" he asked.

I looked at him, waiting for him to explain. I was getting tired of hearing that word.

He sighed, or came as close to sighing as he was physically capable of. "Admiral Thrawn has his own agenda with the Emperor. It would earn him great favour to reveal something of value to my Master about you. This gift you have is very rare and very useful to him."

It was my turn to shake my head. "No, Thrawn cares for me; he would not use me as a tool."

"Love is blind and you are stupid." He growled. I guess he knew a thing or two about this particular subject.

I had to take a deep breath to calm down the rising annoyance I felt stir in my gut. I gritted my teeth and concentrated on the hyperspace lane we were flying through.

“What did you tell the Emperor?” Vader asked again, it wouldn’t be pretty if he had to ask me a third time so I told him the gist of it. There was no need for details, he knew them all intimately.

Lord Vader was thoughtful as he replied. “So, you were telling me the truth.” He mused.

“I don’t lie to you.” I snapped crossly.

He just chuckled and folded his arms across his chest. “Everybody lies girl, when it suits their purpose.”

I gave him a filthy look and sighed. I thought about what we had just talked about. The Emperor had indeed known everything I had told him, none of it had come as a surprise. He had not needed me to confirm these things because he had already known the truth. The one thing he had wanted to know was the one thing I had been unable to tell him. So all he had done was test his hunch about me in the in the most brutal possible way. I was certain that Thrawn had not spoken to Palpatine about my talents, I had betrayed myself.

While I had learned so much about the force and how to use it over the past few years I had never learned how to control the ability to read the memories from objects and this talent was growing in strength. Now my head was filled with bits and pieces of the nightmare that Lord Vader lived with every day.

In my life I had never known such violence or anger. Anakin had chosen his path because he had desperately wanted to save his wife. The death of his mother had scarred him deeply and he had feared losing another person that he loved so much. But I had a hard time understanding how he could have gone so far. How he could have believed that Darth Sidious, who was actually Palpatine, could save his wife with the Force was beyond me. It was because of this belief; this lie that Palpatine had told that Anakin had gone on to brutally murder the younglings at the Temple. With this action, Anakin’s fall from grace was utterly complete.

I wondered, as we sat there, if it was ever possible to escape one’s past and escape one’s destiny. My birth mother had hidden me to protect me, knowing that if I had indeed inherited her talents I would be a target, yet in the end I had ended up in the exact place with the exact people she had tried to protect me from. It didn’t feel good, especially in light of all I now knew. The Emperor’s question came back to nag at me. I glanced at Lord Vader and wondered what A’kali L’uanna would think of me now had she lived? The answer that wormed up through my gut was not positive. She would have been horrified and who could have blamed her. I had become attached to and

admired the man who had turned against her and all the other Jedi. Anakin was a traitor to his kind. The man, who had, as the Emperor had said, committed more atrocities than one person could even consider. In my small corner of Lord Vader’s life I had refused to see these things but the deaths and the savagery seeped its way past my blind-spot. He had slaughtered children. Nothing I could think of made that act justifiable, not even saving Padmé’s life. I sighed and blinked away tears which threatened to blur my vision, the horror of my experience in Palpatine’s chamber receding to a numb sort of shock.

My sigh caught Lord Vader’s attention and I felt him turn to glance at me but I didn’t return his gaze. Instead I turned my head away from him so that I was staring out of the side view port into the weird illumination that was the hyperspace lane we were in. I felt his Force touch, a questioning like itch in the back of my brain, but pushed it away. He was surprised and there was a momentary flash of anger and perhaps even hurt from his side but then he withdrew. He was satisfied that whatever it was he was hiding from his Master had stayed hidden. I was startled to realise that I was deeply angry with him. I wasn’t sure I could define the reason why. The mood which permeated the cockpit was oppressive and the rest of the trip back to the *Executor* was uncomfortably silent.