

In the City that never sleeps 1

“Do you have those figures I asked for?” Lord Vader asked as he breezed into my office.

I handed him the data chip. He paused to consider it then continued. “You will contact Xizor’s office and tell him I will meet him tomorrow at my personal residence. He may bring his usual entourage if he wishes.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“I am waiting for results from the latest test batch of personal combat droids, you will deliver it to me personally when it arrives. Outside of this I am not to be disturbed.” He growled.

“As you wish.” I said, and then an envelope which had arrived in yesterday’s post caught my eye. “Oh, this came for you.” I handed it to him. It was already opened as he had made it clear I was responsible for dealing with his mail.

“Is it important?” He studied the envelope for a moment then looked at me.

“It’s a personal invitation from the Director of the Imperial Opera Company and complimentary tickets to the opening show.” I replied.

“What drivel are they spewing out now?” he asked failing to keep the disgust out of his voice.

“It’s something called *The Agony of Tarkin*.” I told him.

He made a derogatory sound. “They made an opera about that pompous twit?”

I didn’t dare answer that. I had never met Moff Tarkin face to face before his unfortunate and rather explosive demise but I was well aware of Lord Vader’s opinion of him. I wondered if Tarkin had actually felt any agony at all since the Death Star’s explosion and his death were pretty much simultaneous. If the opera company wanted to write about agony they should talk to Vader. Burning to a crisp on a molten planet, sudden limb amputation and the death of one’s soul sounded a whole lot more like agony to me than instantaneous disintegration. I didn’t think it would be a show I wanted to see.

He tossed the envelope back onto my desk in disgust. “It is probably hilarious but unfortunately I do not have the time to indulge in such nonsense. If you wish to attend in my stead you may do so. Is there anything else?”

“No, your schedule is up to date, unless you have changes to make to it. The items you asked for will be ready by the end of the week. I

expressly requested they be delivered here for security reasons as per your wishes. Janas Schenk has not yet returned with a time estimate for you on the renovations you wanted done on your office and I sent a reminder to him this morning. Also the replacement speeder will be delivered to the garage by this afternoon. And lastly, Grand Admiral Zaarin requested a personal audience with you at your earliest convenience but said that there was no urgency. Something to do with a computer core he has recently acquired, his words not mine.”

He nodded. “Very well, set up a meeting time, you know best where you can slot him in but check with me first before you finalise anything with him.” He said. “Oh and there is a possibility I will be heading off world sooner rather than later. You will remain here unless otherwise specified. However,” he paused to make sure I got his next point, “should I need you with me I expect you to be prepared to leave at a moment’s notice.” and with that he left.

I sighed. I always had a travel bag packed in my office ready to go. Over the last few years I had learned my lesson on that front. When Lord Vader said we leave in five minutes, he wasn’t usually kidding. I glanced at the space where Lord Vader had been and made a face, then began the process of dealing with Xizor’s office. I was pleasantly surprised to find that there was little resistance to the meeting place change. Lord Vader often met with Xizor in his castle because there he had full control over the surveillance and he liked to keep a close eye on the prince. Xizor was an obsequious pest but he was a pest that the Emperor seemed to enjoy having around. While Lord Vader loathed the man, he kept his public ranting on the subject to a minimum.

Since returning to the Core, a few days ago, the game of jax and mouse between Vader and Xizor had seemingly become more complicated, more vicious, if that was even possible. Both men were at each other’s throats like a couple of wild panthacs. There had even been one attempt on Lord Vader’s life that had ended up totalling his favourite speeder, which lucky for him he had not been in at the time. It was not so lucky for his driver, however. He was convinced that Xizor was somehow behind it, never mind that he was not the most popular man in the galaxy and that at any given time on any given day at least a hundred death threats were registered against him with Intel. While it all made for good HoloNet news and *Daily Digest* gossip I personally found the whole thing tedious.

The mail runner stopped by the office and dumped a box full of post on my desk.

“Morning Miss Gabriel.” He said with his usual cheer.

“Thanks Remmy, say how’s the new baby?”

Remmy smiled. "Well, he's doing just fine, thank-you for asking. My wife was thrilled with the card and the basket we know you sent, it was very much appreciated."

I smiled and waved as he left. He had been delivering the office mail for a lot longer than I had been working for Lord Vader so he knew everyone by name but he had told me one day, when I had asked what I should call him, that most people didn't even see him let alone speak to him by name. Since that day I made a point of saying thank you and asking after his ever expanding family. When his wife gave birth to their fifth child and first son I had made sure that, in Lord Vader's name, they received a large gift basket, flowers and a card, guess they knew who had really sent it. Babies and presents were not really Lord Vader's thing.

I took the green post box off the desk and sat it on my lap, sorting out the junk from the important mail. When I came to a small packet that was addressed to me I stopped to open it. There was no return address on the padded envelope and the postmark was smudged to the point where it was unreadable. Inside was a small datacard wrapped in a piece of cloth. I got no sudden flash of memory from it when I touched it, but the hair on the back of my neck stood on end anyway. The datacard was an older model and it was dirty. I wasn't sure it would work when I slipped it into the reader.

Welcome back to Coruscant, Mouse, or should I call it the Imperial city now? Did yer think that just because yer helped to murder Antygra that I would no longer know where ye' are or what ye' are doing? Did you think that simply because he was dead I would leave yer at the hands of that monster?

Ye' are mine; yer told me that on Tatooine. Yer told me that yer would always love me. We are bound together for all eternity, Mouse. Yer belong to me and not the Empire. The sooner yer come to realise this, the better for everyone concerned. I know yer didn't mean to hurt Antygra so I won't hold that against yer. Next time we meet yer won't need that body guard of yers, I'll be the one protecting yer.

My hands trembled as I listened to Jyrki's voice. I had to fight the swell of panic and the barrage of flashbacks that clattered through my mind. What he had done to me on Mattri had changed me forever and no matter how hard I tried I could not seem to forget this, I hadn't forgiven him either. *Just breathe* I told myself over and over until the sensation of drowning passed and the world of darkness his voice brought on receded back into a suppressed memory. I made two copies of the recording before I slipped the datachip out of the reader and back into the envelope it had been mailed in. Once my hands stopped shaking I realised that some thing

he had said had jumped out at me. I sighed as I wrote to Shiv. I knew he was both online and working today.

>>>Hey, Shiv, what happened to Tygs?<<<

>>>He was sent to Kessel for life, why?<<<

>>>So he's not dead?<<<

>>>Not as far as I know, but Kessel isn't exactly the best place in the galaxy to be, why are you asking?<<<

>>>I just got a datacard message from Jyrki and he claims I helped to murder Tygs.<<<

>>Send it to INTEL, don't mess about with that, he's on their most wanted list. You could ask your boss about Tygs, I heard he was present at the final sentencing. The official word I got was life in the spice mines, but who knows for sure? Are you okay?<<<

>>>I'll be fine.<<<

I sat back with a sigh. I had been glad that Tygs had been arrested but I hadn't wanted him killed. My computer peeped at me letting me know that a flagged message was coming in, the results from the test droids. I downloaded the information to a data chip and went to deliver it to Lord Vader, as per his instructions. He took the information without bothering to say anything and it was only because I hesitated that he even looked up at me from his own desk.

"What is it, girl?" he asked.

"What happened to Antygra Zyllendel?" I demanded.

"That is none of your concern."

"I'll slice the data files if you don't tell me." My defiance startled even me.

He stared at me for a moment then stood up. I could feel his annoyance slowly becoming anger but he was also curious. "He was arrested, tried for treason against the Empire and he was sentenced accordingly." He said as he paced around behind his desk.

"Was he executed?" I asked point blank.

"Yes."

"Did you execute him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because that is how we deal with traitors."

"Then why does the official report say he was sentenced to life on Kessel?"

"Because, apparently, hearing that we execute spies and traitors to the Empire is bad for moral." Lord Vader replied. "Why are you asking? Why do you care?"

I handed him a data chip. "I made you a copy; I thought you would want to at least see hear it. I'll pass the original on to Intel."

"I take it this is from your mechanic friend?"

I nodded.

"Well he is persistent, I'll give him that." He said as he tossed the datachip down on his desk.

"You think this is funny?"

"No, I think he is unimportant."

I didn't really know how to answer that so I just turned to leave.

"I can assign a Noghri to you." He said.

I looked at him. "Do you think that will help?"

"I think you need to kill this man yourself. I've trained you better than this. You know how this man thinks, you know more about him than anyone else, yet he terrifies you. Do you think I don't sense your fear of him, sense your conflict?"

"How can I kill someone I loved, someone who was like family to me, who taught me and saved my life?"

"Easily, if you find enough hate." He replied bitterly. I shivered. He knew what he was talking about.

I opened my mouth to say something but realised there was nothing left to say on the matter. I shook my head. "A Noghri bodyguard will not be necessary, but thank you anyway."

He regarded me for a moment and then sat back down. "Don't you have work to do?"

I didn't answer him I just left and returned to my office. I sent the original of Jyrki's latest message to Intel. The other copy I packaged in a secure courier envelope and sent it to my uncle along with a small terse message which said.

'Zte'sa, your time on this is running out. If he comes near me again, I'll kill him.'

And then I went back to work as if nothing had happened. I was in the middle of rearranging Lord Vader's schedule for the next day when the inter office messenger blinked at me.

>>> *Hey Rim Girl, you up for going out for a bite tonight?* <<<

>>> *Hey Shiv, not up for going out, but I happen to have an unwatched set of Holloway style holos sitting at home if you feel like ordering in?*>>>

>>> *Sounds great, will swing by your office in half an hour. What do you want to eat?* <<<

>>> *I know a great Zabracki place that delivers...* <<<

>>> *Excellent!!!*<<<

This was something to look forward to at the end of a long and difficult day.

Shiv strolled around the living room admiring the art while I pottered around the kitchen. I didn't feel awkward inviting him into what I still thought of as Thrawn's home, because he'd been here once before and been welcomed in. Thrawn had once told me that he was happy that Shiv had chosen to take me under his wing. I was glad too; Shiv was a good friend, one who didn't put up with any silliness from me. He kept me grounded, which was a necessity considering where and for whom I worked. It would have been easy to let all the glamour and wealth of the Imperial Court lifestyle go to my head. Even though I tried really hard to ignore the silliness, I could still see the negative changes it had on me. I had made Shiv promise me once that if I ever started turning into one of those people that he should smack me upside the head. So far, he had taken this request to heart. The results were amusing and occasionally painful.

"He has amazing taste in everything doesn't he? I never get tired of looking at his art collection." Shiv said, looking over his shoulder at me as I walked into the room.

I smiled as I opened a bottle of wine. "Yes, he does, but that's not a side of him most people ever get to see."

"Well, can you blame him for keeping that part of his life private?"

I shook my head. "Considering how the carrion eaters that dine on gossip seem to turn everything good into everything ugly, I'm glad he's that way."

"Have you heard anything from him lately?"

I shook my head. "No, not since my birthday. I guess I had hoped for a letter when I returned here, he's usually good at keeping track of when I am back on planet, but you know how it is..." I shrugged but I didn't quite keep the whine out of my voice. It was the first time I had worried about him and what he was actually doing, something that when I had really thought about it, I knew very little about.

He smiled. "He's a high ranking Imperial Officer, Merly, he's busy."

I made a face. "I know that, I just get concerned is all!"

"Well being an Admiral in the Imperial Navy isn't exactly a nine to fiver if you know what I mean. As I understand it from the teeny weenie amount of things you will let slip about the two of you, he tries to fit you into his life as best he can. You're a lot luckier than most of the girls I know

in your place. He actually gives a damn about you unlike some of the other officers and the girls they sleep with.”

“I know, you’re right, I’m sorry. I hate that I feel this way but I do. It’s driving me crazy.” I stopped him from lecturing me further. “But if I can’t talk to you about this stuff, then who can I talk to?”

“Cati?” he teased.

I gave him a look. “I adore her but she doesn’t want to hear this crap from me, she gets an earful from enough of her other clientele. I don’t want to become one of those girls who always whine about everything man related.” I retorted.

“Are you really worried about him?” He asked coming back to sit at the breakfast bar, taking the glass of wine I offered.

I thought about it for a moment. “Worried isn’t really the right word.” I replied. “He can take care of himself and he’s incredibly good at what he does but it’s still dangerous.” I paused for a second to choose my words carefully. “When I first came to work for Lord Vader I actually never gave all this fighting stuff much thought, it’s not as if we see a lot of massive space conflicts on Tatooine so I didn’t know enough to be concerned but now that’s changed. I’ve been in some of these space battles, albeit relatively safe on the side lines but still, I’ve stood and watched Imperials die fighting for what they believe in. Lately it seems as though the conflicts between the Empire and the Rebellion have been getting more and more vicious, so yeah, I am concerned. Thrawn’s brilliant but he’s not omnipotent, there is always the chance that something will go wrong.” I shrugged. “And, I miss him.”

“Of course you do.” He said with a gentleness that made me look up at him. “I’d be worried if you didn’t.”

We touched glasses and took sipped our wine in silence for a few moments.

I looked at Shiv for a second then asked coyly. “So, just how much do you know about what goes on at the palace these days?”

“Enough to make Isard worry should I ever turn into a rebel sympathiser.” he said casually but there was a pain in his voice that made me wince. “Why, what do you want to know?” He asked.

“I heard a rumour about something when I was on the *Executor*.”

“There are lots of rumours going around could you be a tad more specific?” he said cagily, watching me from over the rim of his wine glass as he took another sip.

“I heard that a certain Admiral whose home we are currently sitting in is about to be promoted to the highest level attainable.”

That made Shiv pause. “How...where did you hear that?” He was genuinely surprised.

“I told you, while I was on *Executor*. Is it true?”

“Did Vader tell you this?”

I shook my head. “No, he’s never mentioned it and I haven’t asked him about it,”

He drew a deep breath. “Merly, you can’t know this.”

“Why not?”

“Because in difference to the usual palace gossip, this is seriously top secret. Almost no one knows.”

I shook my head. “Can’t be that top secret, I found out and you know.”

“Yes, and that worries me.” He said. “Who told you?”

“How did you know?” I countered.

We stared at each other. He caved first.

“I get told certain things when I need to organise separate venues, particularly when there are high levels of security involved. Despite the *Shiv is a bit of a twit* thing I try to maintain, my job actually entails a lot of security details and I get entrusted with a lot of classified information.” He said after a moment. He raised his eyebrows. “Your turn.”

“Someone who works closely with the Emperor tipped me off, but in confidence.”

“Let me guess, a certain Royal Guard on trooper rotation.” It wasn’t a question, I had written to Shiv often enough about my friendship with CJ.

I made a face. “I am fairly sure he thought I knew when he told me.”

He shook his head. “Listen to me; you need to keep this information really, really quiet.” He sighed. “Or have you already told anyone else?”

I shook my head. “No one, I only asked you because you are the best source of news I know.”

“If word of this was to get out, if the media gets a hold of it well, bloody hell Merly, it would be messy and really bad. I am not even sure the Council of Twelve knows about this. The last thing you want is to be labelled as a leak or worse.”

“I get the message.” I said defensively. “What do you mean they don’t know?”

He avoided giving me an actual answer. “What about Thrawn, is he aware you know about this?”

“I asked about it loosely in one of my letters but we don’t write in basic so it would be hard for someone who didn’t speak Cheunh to

translate. I haven't heard an answer yet." I told him. "In fact I am still waiting for Jarack to drop by so I can send Thrawn my thank-you for his birthday gift."

"He sent you a gift; you never told me that, what did he give you?" he changed the topic so effortlessly I was momentarily speechless then I pulled my necklace out from under my top and showed him.

"Oh my!" he said as he took the pendant in his fingers to look at. The way he moved the stone back and forth told me that he had found the stone's inner fire. "Is this genuine?"

I nodded.

Shiv shook his head. "Well, this just reaffirms my statement about his taste and how he feels about you." He said letting go of the pendant. "But you should avoid showing that off, or at least telling people who it is from."

"Why?" I asked, and then added. "And just for the record, I don't run around showing off."

"I know you don't do that but I needed to say it anyway. It makes me feel better."

"Okay, so why the warning?"

"While I know that he gives you expensive gifts because he actually likes you, there are some at court who will think he is buying your loyalties or worse buying Vader's by courting you." he said.

We'd talked about this before. "That's ridiculous!"

He gave a little one shoulder shrug. "Is it? Paranoia runs rampant within the Imperial Court especially these days. Thrawn is a major player, despite his supposed fall from grace, and you are the woman who shares his bed. You and Lord Vader have a very good working relationship which has also not gone unnoticed. People will assume the worst not the best."

I sighed. "Why does everything that is good have to turn into something sordid and tainted?"

Shiv shook his head. "It doesn't have to if you don't let it. But the inner circle of the Imperial world is a vicious place. This is a court that does not like unknowns and that's what the two of you are. Thrawn because he is alien who shares nothing of whom or what he is to anyone. He is a huge threat to the men who want the power that he appears to so casually disregard yet so effortlessly gains." He said. "You are an unknown because although you officially have the title of Personal Assistant, the rumours are that that Vader regards you as much, much more than this but no one knows quite what that is. You get special treatment from important people, yet you still wander around the place like a dewy eyed farmer's daughter fresh off the transport. You, my Outer Rim friend, don't add up."

I made a face.

He continued. "Despite the fact that neither of you flaunt your relationship with each other, people have still figured it out. It's a little difficult to hide the chemistry between you two actually, even though you try. HoloNet reporters can smell an affair or a scandal a light year away. Plus, what makes it all the more unusual is that from behind the scenes, the Emperor seem to condone your affair, leading people to think there is more to the story than just simple romantic attraction. That very public banishment and innuendo about your involvement was for show, most people in the inner circle suspect that there were ulterior motives behind that event. It would not be the first time that Emperor has played this sort of game. It's natural for the flesh eaters at court to want to strip the bones bare."

"So...are you saying that my relationship with Thrawn was set up by the Emperor?"

Shiv shook his head. "No, I don't think that is the case but this is how it looks to the outside viewer." He shrugged "I don't know the Admiral nearly as well as you do but I don't think he's the kind of man who would engage in a serious relationship with someone just because it was good for his political career. If that were the case he'd be best pals with the Council of Twelve and you'd see him at the Officer's club being social, or with a HoloNet starlet on his arm instead of keeping himself to himself here with you."

He swirled the remaining wine around in his glass. "You know, when you first came to work for Vader there were pools going on all over the place as to just how long you would last in the job. You've surpassed them all. Then people started to take bets on which of the high ranking officers you would end up with. Thrawn was not on that list but Zaarin was, in fact he was ranked number one. You're not what you appear to be and anyone who spends more than five minutes with soon figures this out." He paused to sip his wine, "Did you know there's a huge theory saying that you are really Vader's daughter secretly being trained by the Emperor to take his place?"

I nearly choked on my wine. "Are you serious?" I rolled my eyes. I had not heard that one yet.

He nodded. "Merly, you would probably have kittens if you knew half of the stories that fly around the palace about you."

I buried my head in my hands. "I don't think I want to know. I can assure you, though, I am most definitely not Vader's daughter and I am absolutely not being groomed to take his place. I never heard such ronto-

rot in all my life.” I giggled, then sighed. “I don’t understand this obsession the court has with sex, scandals and conspiracy theories.”

Shiv replied. “Because while to the outsider courtly life may seem exciting, glamorous and fun, in reality it is mostly boring. People look for anything to make it less dull and give their stupid lives here some meaning.” He answered. “I know you don’t sleep around and Thrawn would not jeopardise his career by indulging in bedroom politics. That would be beneath him, he has too much integrity and pride for that.”

“Pride?” I asked, rising to the bait.

Shiv laughed. “Oh yes, maybe you don’t see it but he is proud and arrogant, he just hides it behind that cool blue mask of super intelligence.”

I made a face. I did see it and had even called him on it once or twice, but Shiv didn’t need to know that.

“Don’t put him up on a pedestal, even the best of men cannot live up to that sort of expectation.” He chided gently. “He’s not perfect you know, if you do that to him you will be disappointed.”

“I do know that, but you’ve got to admit, he’s pretty damned close.” It was as close to gushing as I ever got. I quickly shut my mouth and refilled our wine glasses.

Shiv rolled his eyes and gave me a huge mock sigh. “Ugh, love really is blind, isn’t it?”

I just looked at him then realised how neatly he had veered me off track. “Stop avoiding my initial question and tell me what you can about this possible promotion.” I poked his arm.

He took a drink of his wine and sighed. “Okay, you are aware that the dedication for the new wing is coming up soon?”

I nodded, “In two weeks if I read the memo correctly.”

“Well,” Shiv said with a nod, “If I were you, I’d expect to see a familiar face in attendance at that event.”

I let out the breath I had been holding. Grand Admiral was the highest rank that a military officer serving in the Empire could achieve. For Thrawn it would be the pinnacle of his career and it would give him a great deal of power and perhaps even the respect he had earned.

“So it’s true and the Emperor is really planning this?”

Shiv raised his eyebrows. “Come on kiddo, use your brains. I can’t tell you anything concrete outright and you know that. But let’s just say the dedication party will be a really big thing and if a few high ranking people vanish off for a while to hold a private meeting...well.” He gave a small shrug.

“Why so secret?” I asked. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Doesn’t it? Imagine what sort of a message this will send to the Council of Twelve when they find out. It shakes things up. It makes people edgy. It tells the fat rats who think they own it all that they can be replaced by someone who isn’t human. Thrawn is one of the Emperor’s most valued, most underrated and most useful pieces in what is a very complicated chess like game.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have my sources.” He said. “Did you know that Thrawn has been demoted about eight times and then the Emperor promptly promoted him again?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s spoken about some of that, I didn’t know how many times though.” I said. “The Emperor doesn’t like being told he’s wrong.”

“It is a game the Emperor plays with him or maybe he plays with the Emperor.” He shrugged, “Thrawn is not scared of Palpatine and that makes him unusual in every way possible. Do you know what that must mean to a man like the Emperor who has it all, including the fear of an entire galaxy?”

“Are you saying the Emperor is scared of Thrawn?”

“Of course not! Don’t be obtuse!” He snorted “Palpatine doesn’t seem to fear anything but he is very intrigued by your Admiral and has been for a very long time. Curiosity, something that actually piques his interest is rare so of course he plays with this toy. Thrawn’s brilliance and alien nature are a never ending source of amusement to the Emperor.”

I drew a deep breath. “I’ve never really thought about any of this.” I could not imagine what Thrawn must have felt about any of this. Then again, Thrawn was quite adept at playing these games to the best of his advantage.

“Well, sometimes you can be a little self involved.”

His comment stung. “Is that your way of telling me I’m selfish?” I asked.

He shook his head, reached over and ruffled my hair with a smile. “No, not selfish, self involved there is a difference. It’s just that you tend to look inward rather than outward. You still see the world in terms of how it affects you and not a wider circle. It’s normal at your age; my sister was like that too. Most people are, but you’ll grow out of it.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you ask the right questions.” He said knowingly.

I just sighed. “Remind me never to whinge at you again.”

He laughed. “It’s easy to see you grew up an only kid.” Then his expression softened, “Look, I know you miss him. It’s not as if you have it

easy either. Been there done that, but I have to tell you I think you handle his absence way better than some of the officer's wives I know do when their husband's get sent off on some mission for a week. I half expected when you guys started to sleep together that you would moon over him all the time. I guess you're a bit tougher than even I thought."

"Glad I could surprise you, I guess." I said and then added thoughtfully. "I don't think Thrawn would have kept me around if I was the mooning mopey kind."

He grinned. "You're right about that." Then he added, "Listen kiddo, when this event does happen, I am certain you will know about it. You might not get to see it, but you will know."

I toyed with my wine glass, wondering what it was that the Emperor was really up to because if I had learned anything it was that he did nothing without subterfuge. Shiv noticed my expression but read it wrong.

"Don't worry about the Admiral, like you said, he can take care of himself. I'm sure you'll hear from him soon and he'll be back before you know it." Shiv said and before I could correct him the door chime rang, our food was here. We sat and ate in the living room in front of the Holo screen watching a fairly decent Holo version of Schiell Dannett's *The Corellian Curse*. Eating in the living room was something that would have horrified Thrawn who considered it incredibly uncouth to eat dinner anywhere but at the table, oddly enough I delighted in this act, it reminded me of being at home on Tatooine.

I was glad that Shiv was around. He was an excellent friend. Even though Tygs was gone, Jyrki was still out there and he was clever as well as obsessed, not a good combination. If he really wanted to he'd find a way to get to me which was not a comforting thought. Shiv left after the film was done and he had helped me clean the dishes.

The flat always seemed vast when I was alone in it. I went through the routines of going to bed knowing that if I slept through the night it would be a miracle. Nightmares had become a regular feature in my sleep. In between them were dreams I could not decipher and only half remembered upon waking. They included my birth mother, Qui Gon Jinn among others. I put the dreams down to too much time spent listening to my mother's diary.

It was a strange thing to hear and see the young woman who would give birth to me talk about her daily life, her dreams and her fears. I was learning a lot about the life of a padawan learner, a jedi in training but I was not sure if that was what I wanted to know. I wasn't sure what it was I was looking for. I was searching for answers but I wasn't finding any. I

suspected this was because I was not certain what my questions were. Even more frustrating was that I still hadn't been able to access the second holocron. It occurred to me that at some point I would probably have to go back to the Jedi Temple but I didn't want to.

I lay in bed, tossing and turning, my thoughts wandering all over the place. I felt as though my life had become a series of oddly placed events surrounded by surreal settings. Lack of a decent night's sleep made me maudlin, edgy and well aware that I not only did I miss Thrawn; I also ached for him, yearned for him. It was a weakness I hated myself for and usually left me reading trashy romance novels as a substitute into the very small hours of the morning. Sleeping had become something I dreaded and the nights stretched out long and unforgiving.

I was at my desk reading through memos when Jarack knocked on the door. It was late afternoon and he looked tired.

"Miss Gabriel, I feel I must apologise I should have been here at least a week ago but things got a little ... *interesting*." He said by way of explanation before I could even open my mouth.

"Oh?"

He just gave me a weary grin.

"Rough trip?" I asked, getting up.

"I've had worse." He told me.

"When was the last time you ate?" I asked looking at his pale face, which was gaunt and drawn.

He smiled but it never reached his eyes. "Do ration packs count as real food?"

I shook my head. "I can order you some really decent Zabracki food, I know a good place."

"Ugh, no thanks, I hate Zabracki cuisine, no offence, but it's too spicy, gives me heartburn." He grinned. "I'll take a cup of that Tatooine coffee of yours though, if you have some handy."

"For the man who delivers my letters, I can make mek'kefa. How about a sandwich instead, I have pelekki-fish or hadhiki salad? My droid feels that choice is important." I gestured to the small refrigeration unit under the counter.

"pelekki fish, man I haven't had that in ages, is it fresh?" He said as he shucked his jacket and sat down wearily on the couch.

"I hope so; they were made for my lunch so yeah, fresh."

"Your lunch? So why didn't you eat them then?"

“Because I had a really late breakfast, I’m still not that hungry.”

“Alright for some, I guess.” He grinned. I was lying, I hadn’t eaten anything, I just wasn’t all that hungry these days, especially in the mornings. Lately the only thing I could face without feeling ill was stimcaf, of which I probably drank too much. When I did eat during the day it was usually later rather than earlier. I’d probably end up taking whatever sandwich was left over home with me.

He let out a huge breath and sat back against the couch, rummaged around his satchel and placed a large courier package on the coffee table, nodding at it. “The Admiral sends apologies for the delay in replying.”

“I take it things have been ... busy?” I asked, making spiced coffee and unwrapping a sandwich for him.

“That’s one way of putting it.” He said rubbing his eyes and yawning.

“Is everything alright out there?”

He drew a deep breath. “Yes, it’s just intense. Not everyone is pleased to see an Imperial presence in the regions of space beyond the Outer Rim. It’s been a relatively stressful time.” He said. “The last two systems we visited were less than appreciative of our presence.”

“So what you are telling me in your round about way is that you guys have been having fun?”

He smiled and nodded. “Yes.” He said, “Although the Admiral would not be particularly pleased if I were to go into details.”

“Is he okay?” I hated myself for asking this question but I needed to hear the answer.

Jarack smiled and this time it made it to his eyes. “He’s more than okay. He seems to thrive on these sorts of engagements and problems that we have been having but of course it does mean that he’s very busy.”

I felt the weight I had been carrying around with me lift. “Well, busy keeps him out of trouble I guess.” I said trying to joke. “I’m glad to hear everyone is okay.”

“I guess that depends on your definition of trouble.” He grinned taking the glass of spiced coffee and plate with the sandwich I offered gratefully. “The Admiral enjoys the challenges presented to him.” He said.

While he ate and drank I gathered the three letters I had written and put them on the table beside the package waiting for me to open, something I would do when I got home. “But apart from that?”

“Apart from that, things are pretty good actually. The base we have been setting up is growing.” He continued as I sat sipping my own glass of Mek’kefa. “We have had a lot of recruits coming from both the Imperial side of things and also from the Admiral’s home world but communications

between the two are often difficult. The Chiss language is very hard to learn, most of the basic speakers have trouble with even trying. Hell, we can’t even pronounce their names right let alone communicate.” He paused to take another bite of sandwich then continued. “The Chiss are a strange group of people and they don’t really like to mix with humans so you can imagine that this causes some tensions. The Admiral tells me it will pass, given time, training and the right personnel. He’s currently considering his options as far as translators and training goes. Right now we rely heavily on the Outer Rim trade languages. It’s been a lesson in patience, that’s for sure.” He stopped and looked at me. “What about you? How are things?” He asked.

“Crazy, as usual.” I said. “I suppose you heard all about Hoth, yeah?”

He nodded. “Read some of the Intel reports. Sounded like fun.”

“Oh yeah just buckets of amusement. You know what kids and snow are like.” I made a face. “Still, maybe the victory will calm things down a bit.”

“You actually believe that?”

I stared at him for a moment. “Uhm, nope... not really.”

He finished the last of the sandwich, bobbing his head in agreement. “That’s what I thought. The Admiral thinks this defeat will only serve to fuel the rebellion’s fire, but you didn’t hear that from me.” He said draining the last of the mek’kefa and smiling. “Now, I am afraid I have to get going.” He got up, picked up the letters, tucked them in a courier envelope and then made me sign for everything. “I appreciate the pocket of calm though, the hot drink and lunch. It will tide me over till the next rations packet.”

“You really should eat better.” I admonished. I sounded like Bel, or worse, Shiv.

He gave me a look, “You’re one to talk.” He retorted giving me the once up and down.

I just made a face. I knew what he was seeing. Since the meeting with the Emperor on Wayland I had neither slept nor eaten properly. I was well aware of the dark circles under my eyes and that I had lost some weight. I figured it was just an adjustment phase and I’d get back to normal soon enough, provided I could figure out what normal actually was.

“You need to take care of yourself, Miss. When the Admiral returns to find you looking like a refugee from a war zone he won’t be all that happy, especially with me since I tell him you’re fine when he asks.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t suppose you can give me a time frame on the ‘when he returns bit’ can you?”

“That would spoil the surprise.” He said lightly.

I just cocked my head to one side and saw him to the door. “So it would. Take care of yourself.”

“Take your own advice.” He shot back with a cheerful grin and vanished out of the office.

As I cleaned up I thought about what he had said concerning the base on Nirauan. I knew how tricky Cheunh was to learn and I found it amusing to imagine a base full of stiff Imperials trying their best to learn it. What was even more amusing was the image of a frosty group of Chiss trying to decipher basic from a bunch of stuffy Imperials who didn't really like aliens to begin with. I wasn't sure this combination would work, but if anyone could pull it off Thrawn could. These thoughts made me smile. Once I was done, with Thrawn's latest mail in hand, I shut the lights off to my office, locked the door and went home.

I had been living in Thrawn's flat, away from the palace pretty much since the unveiling of the *Executor*. While, for appearances sake I still kept some clothes and some basic belongings at my palace apartment I was rarely ever there unless I absolutely had to be. The palace, despite all the security no longer felt safe to me. Leaving it was sometimes the best part of my day.

When I got home I was always grateful when I could close the door and walk inside to the one place on this busy, noisy planet where I truly felt at ease. Despite the fact that Thrawn hadn't been on Coruscant in a while, the flat still held a vague hint of his scent. I put this down to his soap and shower gel which I sometimes used. It was comforting in an odd way.

Once indoors I made my way to the bedroom, stripped off my work clothes and changed into more comfortable things. I decided to order in from the local Corellian take out place. While I was waiting for my food, I opened a bottle of wine, poured a glass, went into the living room, lit candles and sat down to finally open my mail.

The package contained one letter and two books. The books held memories, quick flashes of images, one of Thrawn buying them from a bookseller in an antique shop filled with shelves of books and some of the people who had read them before he had found them. Each reader had fallen in love with the books. They were warm memories that filled in the loneliness of the evening and they made me smile.

I put the books down and opened his letter; it was bulky which meant it was long. With a sip of wine and a smile I settled down to read.

A'mia Tekari,

I know this reply comes late and for that I apologise. It has been a busy time for us. As you can imagine, not everyone we meet out here in the Unknown Regions is sympathetic to our cause and sometimes a show of force is a necessity. As of late I have found myself engaged in several small conflicts which have had to be dealt with quickly and efficiently. No need to worry though, these particular skirmishes were minor and the results were in our favour.

I found your 'Daily Digest' version of the events at Hoth most amusing, especially as I was also privy to the official reports shortly after the events took place, and before you ask, I have my sources. I was satisfied to read that the victory was swift and without great losses for the Imperials but I am also certain, that like most fanatics this defeat will only help to fuel the Rebellion's fervour. Those who died will be revered as martyrs to their great crusade, held up as heroes and only serve to persuade others to join in the cause for which they have died, rather than act as a deterrent.

It did not surprise me to read of Admiral Ozzel's error in judgement, nor of Vader's swift and final punishment. While brutal and unyielding in many respects, Vader is, in his own right, a brilliant tactician. It must have infuriated him to have his plans overridden by an admiral who was never known for his brilliance in battle strategy.

It was your account of what took place at Bespin that was of more interest to me because there was no official report made about these actions. It does not surprise me that events which concern the capture of Luke Skywalker are kept quiet. Aside from the fact that he is the offspring of the man who is now known as Lord Vader, he is also a focal point of the Rebellion. He is their hero, the kid from the Rim who turned into their saviour at the last minute just when it counted the most and thus, their inspiration. If a young, somewhat uneducated farmer from Tatooine can succeed then anyone can. It stands to reason that any attempt to capture this very important figure will be kept as secret as possible. The rebels are surprisingly well informed, which leads me to believe there are leaks coming from within the Imperial ranks that should be dealt with swiftly.

Does it really surprise you that the son of Lord Vader would be sought after as prize by the Emperor? If the father's force powers are a thing to be reckoned with then would it also not stand to reason that so are the son's? You are living proof that a Jedi's offspring often carry on that particular family trait. Lord Vader's plan to trap the young Skywalker boy was ambitious but once again, it would appear that he has underestimated both his son's strengths and the will of the boy's friends to

survive. Desperate people who feel they have nothing to lose are often capable of the most astounding feats.

Your description of Bospin made it sound lovely and to answer your question no, I have never seen it. Your comment about being able to sleep in the pilot's chair made me smile, and trust me, I am well aware of everything you are capable of in a ship, probably more so than anyone else, especially in the engine room where, if I recall correctly, you are quite good dealing with heated situations. And before you complain, yes you did say 'no jokes', but you did not mention anything about innuendos so I will take full advantage of the situation and the opening you have left for me. While I do so enjoy these verbal skirmishes I should return to the topic at hand, there will be time enough to tease you later on.

I cannot imagine what must have been so valuable that Vader would risk the entire fleet including its flag ship to go tearing through an asteroid field just to capture one smuggler's ship. I must confess, my dear, there are moments when even I do not understand his thought process. Just as an aside, I can attest that space slugs are real. The Vengeance was all but destroyed by one near Ithor, but they are a rare sight and for most denizens of the galaxy as much myth and legend as the Dantassi so that you had difficulty convincing your young friend of their existence is of no surprise.

Speaking of the Dantassi I assume that you were able to use your talents and figure out that it was Kirja'navaar'inkjerii who made the small box which housed the pendant I sent for your birthday. I am not sure how much you were able to read from the box so I shall tell you a little more about it here.

He carved your gift from a tooth of the great crystal worm which is a species native to the planet Mygeeto. The great worms burrow and bore their way through the planet's frozen surface using rings of large teeth with which they chew through the ice, warm it up to liquid within their bodies, digest the nutrients and minerals they need, then secrete the waste as water which subsequently freezes behind them. You can tell where the worms have travelled because the when the waste-water they leave behind freezes again it is not the packed white glacial ice standard to such a climate but a clear ice that appears as the most astounding colour of blue one has ever seen. This ice is mined and used for drinking water as it is quite pure and clean. It is also said to have magical properties, but of that there is no proof.

A Crystal Worm's teeth are highly prized for their strength and their beauty. They are usually carved into a variety of things ranging from weapons to jewellery. The average size of a crystal worm's tooth will

have the approximate diameter close to the width of your hand and will be as long as the length of mine, so you can imagine, given the size of their teeth, how large the creatures themselves are. While these worms are elusive and rarely seen they are formidable fighters when hunted and renowned for their viciousness and cunning.

The Dantassi consider hunting the Crystal Worms an enormous challenge and such a hunt is usually done only as a rite of passage. The difficulty of tracking and then actually killing one of these creatures is barely balanced by the wealth of its meat, teeth and skin. As you well know, the Dantassi do not hunt for pleasure, it is a part of their culture. They do not kill for the sake of killing and use as much of whatever they have hunted so that there is no waste, nor do they take more than they need, thus they maintain the balance between them and nature.

When Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was a young boy on the brink of manhood he was taken on such a hunt. Young Dantassi males are given the right to choose the creature that will mark their passage into manhood. He requested the most difficult creature of all. As you can guess, he was successful. The tooth he carved your gift from came from the worm he killed. As the one who made the kill he had the privilege of keeping the worm's teeth. The tale of this hunt is gripping and it is often told, as is tradition. Despite the fact that I have heard it many times, it never loses its magic. One day I hope that you will get to hear it first hand from Kirja'navaar'inkjerii, it is not my story to tell and I would never be able to do it justice.

He often speaks of you when we are fortunate enough to meet up and while I do my best to keep him apprised of your whereabouts and adventures he is none the less concerned that I am not doing my duty as your Ta'kasta'cariad. The next time you meet with him, be prepared to be interrogated heavily on my participation in your life.

He was also most concerned about the continual harassment of Jyrki Andando and mentioned something about hunting this individual himself. I felt it important to inform him of the involvement of the Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh and his facial expression told me that they do indeed know each other. He would not, however, elaborate and I know Kirja'navaar'inkjerii well enough to know when not to push. I could not get a sense of whether or not the relationship between the two men was one of good terms or not, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is notoriously difficult to read when he wants to be and has what you would call an amazing sabacc face.

Speaking of faces, I can picture the expression on yours and the question that you are bursting to ask, namely, how is Kirja'navaar'inkjerii

doing, just as clearly as I can see you sitting at home, probably curled up in your favourite chair in the living room, with candles lit, and a glass of wine, most likely the dry Veronian. So before you explode with curiosity I will tell you that he is well. When I last saw him we were on our way to Ilum, an ice planet in the Unknown Regions known for its rare Adegan crystals as well as its inhospitable climate. There was a pirate base there which was used by Imperials at one point, but due to its fairly isolated location in relation to the rest of the galaxy was left abandoned some time ago, sporadically used by opportunists. I thought, given its prime location in the Unknown Regions it might be of use to revive it as a small outpost and we now have a working garrison stationed there.

I had contacted Kirja'navaar'inkjerii to aid us in navigating the planet's surface, as you know there are no better trackers than the Dantassi and as a Jhal'kai, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is among the best this galaxy has to offer. We two, along with a small detachment of snow troopers, explored and secured the base and I was pleasantly surprised to find it mostly intact. Once that task was completed I was able to spend some private time with him and catch up. While most of what we discussed will not be of particular interest to you, I can tell you that he recently spent time with his daughter and her husband on Csilla, citing you as the catalyst for trying to repair his relationship with her. From what he said, it was not unsuccessful and he seemed more at peace with this subject than I have seen in many years. He informed me that he would like you to come and spend time with him and the enclave on Hjal, to learn the Dantassi ways and to join him on a hunt or two. I think that behind this request is a desire to make sure that you are safely out of Mr. Andando's way. I told him that I had already discussed securing you to a desk under the guard of a garrison of storm troopers and he was as unimpressed with this suggestion as you were.

I do not say this lightly, he is concerned for you and the negative attentions you are receiving at the hands of your mechanic friend. I don't believe that respect or fear, if that is even the case, of Tze'yusha'Jin Akosh will prevent him from making it a personal mission to hunt down Andando and eliminate him as a threat should that situation not find resolution soon. Jyrki's use of the Anzati weapon in your last encounter made Kirja'navaar'inkjerii angrier than I have seen him in a very long time and while he is a man of great patience, it is not infinite. I would not be too surprised if he seeks you out at some point to see for himself that you are, indeed, in one piece and doing well. Don't say that I did not warn you if he should show up unannounced.

You spoke of the book by Aude'luan'tyvan that I gave you and I must admit, my dear, I felt a great sense of satisfaction hearing that you enjoyed it in the way that you did. Perhaps it will dissuade you from continuing to read the terrible rubbish that passes for Romance writing which Bel seems to love so much. While I understand, to a certain extent, the need for such reading material in her life, I am not so understanding when it comes to why you would wish to continue to have it in yours. From my point of view I can only say it gives men a terrible reputation and a very strange viewpoint on what love, relationships and romance even sexuality is all about. Or am I missing the point entirely?

While Aude'luan'tyvan's novel is considered a classic it is also regarded as a break-through in the genre of romantic, passionate bordering on erotic writing something the Chiss are not at all known for. When it was first published some two hundred years ago the scandal it caused was enormous. Thankfully this did not deter him from continuing to write and now, more enlightened that we are, my people see his works as an important part of our evolution as higher educated beings who have come to understand that devotion to a more logical side of thinking and behaviour does not preclude tapping into the more sensual aspect of our psyche.

I have sent you two more books which I think you might enjoy, one is by the same author as the previous one and one is written by an author called Chia'mylee'stranjeri who is a newcomer to the genre but very good at her craft. I thought that it might be of interest to you to get both a female and male perspective.

What I enjoyed the most about reading these books was the authors' abilities to express the erotic without actually expressing anything in a truly graphic manner. One can buy such graphic reading material in any dive on Coruscant, but I would hardly call it literature in any sense of the word. Perhaps I simply feel, from my somewhat snobbish point of view, that literature ought to have all elements of plot, character development and good use of language not just an extended how-to of the act of sexual union and a barrage of monotonous descriptions of what two or more beings engaged in the act of mating looks like. Of course Bel's romance books are less like that and more along the lines of long winded explanations of how the virginal heroine winds up in bed with the local buffed up bad boy, amusing to be sure, but hardly great literature.

As I said before, I had hoped that you would feel the same way I do about the book I sent and I gratified to see you do. You can, if you wish, wait until I have returned to the core to read the two books I have sent but

would it not be more enjoyable to spend our free time together in other more productive, more communicative ways?

Sj'iu tekari, you are a creature of extraordinary depth and passion despite what you may think. It did not surprise me to read that you experienced the writings of Aude'luan'tyvan so keenly. Your rather unique ability to not only sense emotion but shower it back at others is one that I have been privy to on more than one occasion but I swear will never quite get used to it. I do not envy you the powers that you have but sometimes I am grateful to be on the receiving end of that one in particular. It is good to know that you miss sharing my bed with me and believe me when I say, this feeling is mutual.

I am certain that you know me well enough by now to know that I do not sit in the dark brooding nor do I have the tendency to be maudlin and morose but suffice to say, sometimes in the quiet moments of my down time, you are on my mind. Every now and then, I am certain that I catch a hint of your perfume and hear your voice whispering in my ear but these are merely tricks of memory, and never as good as the real thing. My dear, should I describe to you how you come to me in dreams sometimes? That occasionally I wake up, the lingering sensation of your fingers still upon my skin? Perhaps these are conversations better left for face to face, when I can augment my words with kiss and caress. You, of all people, know that some things are worth waiting for.

Lastly, you caught me very much by surprise with your last question. I was not aware that any information about my possible change of rank had been made public, or is it that you have better sources than I give you credit for? Perhaps it is simply impossible for anything that is supposed to be secret to remain that way within the sphere of the Imperial Court. Of course, you do have access to more classified information than most, still this particular tidbit was supposed to be, how shall we say, unattainable. I can neither confirm nor deny these rumours but if I were to mention that we shall be seeing each other soon enough, would that answer your questions? I would also beg of you not to speak of this publicly, there would be serious repercussions if word of this got out. I would prefer it did not come from you.

On that note my dear, I must end this missive so that I can give it to Jarack before he leaves the ship. Take care of yourself and try not to isolate yourself too much when you return to the core, take advantage of all the Imperial City's culture and sparkle while you can. Despite your feelings for the planet, Coruscant has much to offer and you are in the fortunate position to enjoy it without impediment. And, for goodness sake, stay out of trouble I do not wish to return only to find you recuperating in

a med-lab. I, too, have plans which mostly involve you being healthy and whole.

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

I had just finished reading when the door chime rang to let me know that my food had arrived. I let the delivery guy up and cheerfully took the food box he handed to me. I must have been beaming because he gave me a beautiful smile back.

Looks like someone had a good day." He said with a grin.

"It was. I hope yours was too." I paid him and gave him a healthy tip. His grin broadened, he gave me a polite nod and left.

There was nothing like a letter from Thrawn, good wine, decent food which I didn't have to cook, and a delivery man who smiled like he meant it to make the day's end perfect.

I was grateful that things around the Palace were mostly quiet. With Thrawn away and Lord Vader in and out, I was left to my own devices which meant I could actually work to a decent schedule. I was glad of this because of meant I could return to training with Master Kjestyll on a more or less regular basis. However not all my lessons with him went as well as I liked. In difference to what he usually did when I was wound up and unmanageable, this time he surprised me. Instead of trying to bend me to change, he changed the environment.

The wind whispered through the trees, rustling the leaves gently. The constant hum of the Coruscanti traffic had faded into the background. The air was sweet here, filled with the scent of the flowers which bloomed in the well groomed beds and the grass which was perfectly manicured. This was a small pocket of calm in a city which never stopped moving, never slept and never knew peace.

I was both exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, something that came with hours of exercise and concentration. It was a state I was rarely able to reach but when I did, I knew a sort of peace which, these days, was hard to come by. I sat cross legged with my eyes closed, breathing in and out as though there was nothing else in the universe that mattered. Seated across from me was Master Kjestyll. For the first time in a long time I felt a sense of satisfaction radiate from him.

Dragging me out of the training room we usually used to this small private garden well away from the palace had been an idea I was opposed to

but in the end, as usual, he had been right.

He had known the moment he had seen me, for the first time since I returned to the core, that something was terribly wrong. He was not a man who pried, as a rule. He had been hired to train me in the Bunduki arts not act as a counsellor but sometimes a teacher had to be both, especially when the weight I carried around on my shoulders interfered with what he was trying to teach me.

“The burden of your fears constricts the ease of your movements.” He had said without reproach or annoyance when I could not seem to perform the particular move he had asked me to. This was an old issue, one that I could not seem to overcome and it frustrated me. The more frustrated I had gotten the less I was able to do as he instructed.

His words had provoked an immediate and unwanted flash of both anger and sorrow. I had had to turn away from him then because I had wanted to lash out and cry all at the same time. He had considered this for a moment then without explanation or further discussion he had told me to follow him. I had done so without question.

He had led me out of the palace, along the common walk ways until, after well over an hour I found myself in a part of the city I had never been to before standing before a wall with a locked door. He had unlocked the door and ushered me inside. I was surprised at what I saw. It was a garden of extraordinary beauty. The moment I entered and the door closed behind us, it was as if the rest of the galaxy no longer existed. I sighed, letting go of a breath I was not even aware that I had been holding and Master Kjestyll had smiled.

He had not spoken a word but I knew by the look on his face and his body language that now the real work would start. Warmed up from the brisk walk to this place we began to train, to spar without words. For the first time in a long time I felt uncluttered and free. Hours passed like moments. When he felt that I had done enough we went through the process of stretching to cool my body down and then he had insisted I close my eyes and find my center. I did as he asked and time slipped by like a whisper. With a deep, deep breath I ended the meditation and opened my eyes. I found myself staring into the eyes of my Bunduki Master. He had been watching me the entire time.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Light headed.” I told him honestly, “As though the world suddenly got brighter, easier to carry.”

He smiled. “You trained well today.” He nodded.

Compliments from him were rare. “Thank you, Master.”

“Now, perhaps in this place away from prying eyes and hidden ears you will tell me of what it is that troubles you.”

In difference to how I usually reacted when someone asked me this question, I didn’t make a face. Instead I considered my words carefully. It was not that I didn’t want to tell Master Kjestyll what was eating me up from the inside out, it was more about finding the right way to do it. He was patient and he waited.

As I sat, bathed in the warmth of the sun’s light, caressed by the soft breezes which made the leaves in on the trees shiver, I searched for the right words. In the end I began my explanation by telling him about what had happened at Wayland. I didn’t need to go into details; I suspected he knew far more about such things than most people could ever imagine, I just told him what had occurred. I told him about the nightmares that had plagued me since and about the nagging sense of wrongness I had been feeling recently with everything that had to do with the Emperor and all that he touched. Master Kjestyll listened without interruption or comment.

“Do you sympathise with the people who fight against the Empire?” he asked after a very long silence. It was not the question I had expected from him.

I shook my head. “No.” my answer was honest and immediate. “I understand why they fight but I don’t think they are right.”

“Why?” He asked.

“These conflicts are cyclical.” I replied. He cocked his head to one side in question; he had not expected this answer. I continued. “I have been reading about the wars the galaxy has gone through in the past. It seems to me that there is always someone at some point who decides the government needs to change. One side dictates the rules and another side decides they don’t like it. The galaxy is in constant turmoil, it is only the size of these battles that really changes. Sometimes it’s on a planetary scale and sometimes it’s on a galactic scale but it’s always happening.” I said. “At any given time in the galaxy someone is in some sort of conflict.”

“This is true, but do you not feel you should take a side?”

I shook my head. “If I had remained on Tatooine I would not be an active part of this conflict currently happening. It would have been words on a news cast, something happening some place else. It’s only because I work so closely within the government that I know so much about what is going on. Are we all really so oppressed by the Empire? Is it really that terrible? I don’t see a difference between how the Hutts run things and how the Empire runs things. What happens if these rebels win? What will they replace the current government with? How do I know that won’t be worse?” I drew a deep breath. “From everything I have ever read it always seems to

me that when there is a revolution to overthrow a government that is unpopular whatever replaces it eventually makes the same mistakes. It goes around in a huge circle.”

My master watched me carefully, his steel grey eyes thoughtful and a little surprised. “That is a cynical answer for someone whose spirit is not usually so dark.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is.” I told him flatly wondering what he knew about my spirit.

He regarded me for a moment then asked. “So what is it that you are afraid of?”

There was a moment’s pause then unbidden and without thinking I blurted out, “I am scared of being swallowed up by the darkness all around me.” I was surprised by this, he was not. This was the answer he had wanted but would not have gotten had this been his first question.

“This is the weight you carry around with you.” He said gently. “This fear clouds your judgement and your ability to move. You know what it is you fear, but do you know why?”

I shrugged and shook my head. “I can think of many reasons, all of them valid but none of them strong enough to be the answer that makes perfect sense.”

“You look for perfection in an imperfect galaxy. No such thing exists.” He chided.

“Then what do I do?” I asked, for the first time understanding I was lost.

“Let go of your fear.” He said.

“That is easier said than done.”

“Yes, it is.” He nodded.

I studied my nails for a moment, avoiding his steady gaze. I sighed. “I feel as though I am at war with myself. It feels like I imagine having brain parasites or some similar infection must feel.” I said finally. “It’s an itch in my head I can’t seem to scratch, a buzzing. It just feels wrong. Like a ship’s engine with something out of synch.” I paused. “I feel as though I am being pushed down a path I am not sure I want to take.”

He nodded. “That is a perceptive description of the Dark side of the Force.” He said thoughtfully.

“How do you know about the dark side of the Force?” I asked.

“When you have lived for as long as I have you tend to learn a thing or two about many topics and many systems of belief.”

“Are you a force user?” I dared to ask him.

His smile was slow. “Do you sense the force in me, Ke’ashj Merlyn?”

I drew a deep breath and dropped all my guards. I opened my self up to him, to the living world around me. I could feel the ebb and flow of the garden, I could sense the city that lay beyond the walls vaguely, as though the high duracrete walls kept most of that white noise at bay but of Master Kjestyll there was no sense at all. In the force he was just a shadow. This was unusual. Even beings who were head blind, like Thrawn, shone in the force like a beacon to me. The more I pushed to find master Kjestyll in the swirling dance that was the Force of all things, the more vague his image became. If I kept this up I would give myself a headache. I withdrew.

“No, not the way I would if you could use it, I’ve met other force sensitives. They leave a ripple. You don’t.” I said. “But my talent isn’t very strong.” I added.

He regarded me for a moment. “Perhaps not, but you are.”

I shivered a little as a cloud passed across the sky, blocking the sun’s warmth for a moment. I looked at him, waiting for him to clarify. He folded his hands together, resting in his lap, a motion I found disarmingly delicate.

“I have trained many at the palace during my time under Palpatine’s rule, seen many students, some of which were touched by the force and many more who were not. It is not often that a student comes to me as old as you were when I first began your training. Usually when this is the case, that person’s will had already been bent in a certain direction. You were not like that. Despite the directions that certain people wish to pull you in, you resist. You are strong, which is why, in spite of the fact that you are difficult to teach, I continue to do so.”

I looked at him for a while. Trying to figure out what it was he was trying to tell me without actually saying anything. He held my gaze until I dropped my eyes to study my hands.

“Child, look at me.” His voice was quiet, reminding me of my uncle’s. I did as he asked. He smiled a little. “The palace is full of negative energy, that you cannot settle there never surprises me.” He said.

“Why do you teach me?” I asked suddenly.

“Because I was asked to do so.” He answered. It was not a lie, but it was not the whole truth either.

“Why did you bring me here?” I glanced, indicating the garden we sat in.

He smiled. “So you might know peace.”

I just stared at him for a moment, weighing the merits of further questions. His expression never changed. There was something about him, about his manner that told me he was more than just one of the Emperor’s Bunduki masters. This had always been the case but up until now I had

ignored it because he worked for the Emperor and the Emperor always had an agenda no matter what. I assumed this agenda continued on with the people who worked under him, but now, in this garden I was not so sure this was the case.

I sighed and looked up into his grey eyes. "You are not what you seem to be, are you?"

His unblinking stare never wavered as he answered. "None of us are."

It was the only answer he could have given but all of a sudden it stirred up more curiosity than it had quelled. I opened my mouth to ask something but he waved at me with one hand.

"No more questions today." He said firmly. "Clear your mind. In this place the stillness you seek to become is easier to find. Take advantage of this."

I nodded and closed my eyes. Despite the fact there was only one sun, its light warmed my skin. I leaned back against the tree behind me and listened to the wind. I wasn't sure if I would ever be shown this place again and I wasn't ready to leave its quiet just yet.

Slipping back into that meditative state was easier than usual. Finding that quiet centered space where everything and nothing seemed to meet and become one was a little like coming home. It was a comforting and familiar greyness that held neither promise nor threat; it simply was so when the vision began, at first, I was very confused.

I opened my eyes but instead of seeing my master I saw vast forest that went on for kilometres. I had no idea where I was or, for that matter, when. I looked around but I was alone except for the lambda class shuttle that sat on the plateau a short way from where I stood. Off in the distance I could see smoke and I could hear the faint sounds of blaster fire. I shivered with a deep sense of inexplicable sorrow, there were tears streaming down my cheeks. I had not bothered to wipe them away. I looked up just in time to see something massive burst apart with such force that I expected I, too, would be wiped out by the shock wave that must surely follow but no such thing happened. I watched as billions of tiny fragments, meteors burned up in the atmosphere. A wind rippled through the forests and I thought I heard it whisper my name. I turned around as a shiver crossed my spine. Behind me shimmered a ghost like figure, a young man with long shaggy hair and a scar across his right eye. His face was familiar to me but I couldn't quite place it.

"You should go now." The ghostly figure said.

A blaster shot, much closer than before broke the moment and I turned to see where it had come from, when I turned back the ghost was

gone. The sense of loss was overwhelming and I had no idea where to go or what to do next. As I stood on the precipice hesitating, one word echoed in the air... 'Go!'

The touch of a hand, warm and strong upon my own brought me back to the here and now. This time when I opened my eyes I found myself looking into Master Kjestyll's. He was concerned. The disorientation I felt was disarming. It took me a few seconds to realise that there was no forest, no explosion and no ghost. There was just me and him in a garden somewhere on Coruscant. It did nothing to explain my tears.

"What did you see?" he asked.

I told him. It did not occur to me to question how he even knew I had seen something, anything.

"I have known Jedi who were able to see backwards and forwards through time." He said. "A powerful skill but not one I ever envied. The force sometimes sends its users visions of the past, of the future." He commented. "A Jedi master I once knew told me that time is always fluid and in motion. Visions are fleeting glimpses of what may be, and what has passed."

I struggled to shake off the terrible sense of sadness which lingered. "I don't know what this was, the future, the past, I have no idea." I told him. "I get dreams all the time but visions like this are rare. Why do they happen? What does it all mean?"

He shrugged ever so slightly. "For the answer to that you would have to consult a Jedi master or perhaps a Sith master." He replied. "But perhaps they are sent as warnings or as guides."

"I thought all of the Jedi were killed. How would I be able to ask them if they are all dead?" I asked more crossly than I had intended. I didn't relish the thought of discussing my dreams and visions with Lord Vader or the Emperor.

Master Kjestyll regarded me for a moment. "Of course, you are right." He said in that manner which told me I had missed the point, as usual.

I was suddenly very tired and it was getting late. I had not noticed the passage of time or the fact that the sun was now low in the sky, the bright yellow if its light turned to dusk orange. Master Kjestyll stood up and I did the same, taking once last long glance around at the beauty of the garden before reluctantly following him out of its sanctuary. I was startled by the noise of the city which had seemed so faint behind the garden's walls and the sorrow I had felt in my vision returned. As he locked the door to the garden it occurred to me to wonder why no one seemed to notice this place. A small walled off square in a less busy area of a city that just never

stopped. I knew we were not on ground level; there had been too much sunlight for that, so it must have been on top of some flat roofed building which had been somehow covered and layered into the ever changing landscape of Coruscant.

“Will I ever get to come here again?” I asked quietly as he began the walk back to the palace.

“Perhaps.” Was all the answer I got. I was content that it hadn’t been a ‘no’. The rest of the walk was silent.

At the foot of the stairs which led to the small entrance near the North side of the Palace, Master Kjestyll bid me good evening.

“We will continue our lessons the day after tomorrow in your training room. I have asked another student to come and spar with you; I believe you know Makki Iekki.”

I nodded. I could not hide my delight. Despite the fact he had told me I would be able to train with other students it was something that happened rarely. I had met Makki at the Bunduki trials and we had become friends after a fashion. I was happy to get to see him again.

“Then, Ke’ashj Merlyn, I wish you a pleasant night without any more disturbing dreams.” And before I could reply or bow in respect he had turned around and disappeared into the oncoming night.

got word that Thrawn had been sent to the Pakunni sector, aboard the victory class star destroyer *Stalwart* and was currently engaged in setting up a base there as well as fighting off pirates. His latest letter had described the attacks and his impressions about the mission in general with his usual flair but underneath his eloquence I got the feeling that he was a little bored and that policing the area against pirates was not particularly challenging. The one thing that had been of interest to him, had been a pilot named Stele.

...He’s quite clever, more so than the average Imperial pilot that the Academy spits out these days. While on escort duty he actually used his TIE bomber to defensively beat back an attack. Most impressive when one considers that TIE bombers were never designed with defensive manoeuvres in mind. I found it refreshing to see a young pilot think outside of the box when it comes to combat tactics. He will be reassigned to your favourite Grand Admiral, Zaarin’s command shortly, as I feel he will not get the notice he deserves serving under me. In the meantime we continue to deal with the pirates in this system and serve the Empire as best we can.

You asked if I had heard anything further concerning the rumours about Admiral Harkov and while I have, I am not at liberty to discuss this. You will, I am quite certain, learn what you wish to know soon enough. You are one of the most resourceful people I have ever met when it comes to securing information of any sort, when it piques your interest. ...

The rest of his letter had gone on to discuss a set of books I had been reading as well as more personal things which had made me smile. He was one of the few constant and consistently good things in my life. Grand Admiral Zaarin, on the other hand, was not especially when he barged into my office demanding information I was not prepared to give him.

“He’s away.” I said tersely.

Zaarin looked at me crossly. “Away? where?” It was a stupid question because he had high enough clearance he could have found this information out for himself.

I shrugged with one shoulder which irritated him even more. “If you want to speak with him you need to do so via the secure HoloNet.”

“I thought getting in contact with him was your job?”

“No sir, that would be his secretary droid’s job.” I said trying to keep my annoyance out of my voice. “I am not his secretary. I am not one of his aide de camps. I am his personal assistant.”

“What is the difference?” Zaarin asked leaning over my desk.

“I don’t make comm calls to my boss when he’s out in the middle of space on a military engagement.” I told him, it was sort of a lie but I wasn’t playing secretary for Zaarin. “His secretary droid is in the next room.”

He stood up and tugged at his jacket. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt you to be a bit more polite to me.” He said.

I raised an eyebrow. “I am being polite, Grand Admiral Zaarin.”

Instead of making a scene or getting annoyed he simply smiled. That kind of smile I was used to from Imperial men that said *Oh I see, you’re playing hard to get*. He stared at me for a moment then said. “I wonder, Miss Gabriel if you would accompany me to the dedication ceremony for the new wing.”

That surprised me. I hesitated just a fraction of a second too long before I said, “No. But thank you for asking.”

This surprised him. “May I ask why? Admiral Thrawn is not in town so you should be free to accompany anyone you wish.”

I arched the other eyebrow because I knew that annoyed people. “I prefer to go alone. I have been the subject of the *Daily Digest* gossip column enough thanks.”

He stared at me for a moment and then nodded. “Perhaps that is to be expected when you shack up with the Emperor’s pet alien, or is this just

another rumour?" He smiled as he said this but his eyes remained stone hard.

I just looked at him, not rising to the bait. "One should not believe all one hears on the gossip nets, Admiral."

His expression didn't change. "Well, Miss Gabriel, I hope to see you there. Perhaps you will share a drink with me."

I smiled coolly. "Perhaps."

He didn't react, he just left. He didn't need to ask me to contact Vader for him; he was quite capable of doing that himself. He just came in to bait and bother me. We both knew it but since this was how Imperials played games there wasn't much I could do about it. I was glad when the door to my office closed. I sighed and patched a short note through to Lord Vader that Zaarin was looking for him. The last I had heard he was off on a wild bantha chase somewhere out near the Lybeya system. I knew he would not answer any call I put through to him so I just sent a text message.

Grand Admiral Zaarin had been seen around the palace on and off, despite the fact that official reports placed him permanently placed in the Vilonis Sector doing research on new versions of TIEs. I assumed that he was back for briefings and planning sessions that had to do with the second space station the Emperor was having built and other military issues I was not in the least bit interested in. I had seen more than one White uniform running around so his presence was of little surprise. I supposed that the Emperor would also want an update on the projects Zaarin had been working on, after all his funding was worth millions of credits. He had spoken to me about his research some time ago at one of the Grand balls but since then I had not heard any more about the development of these designs.

I had to fight to keep my loathing of the man from surfacing every time he was near me. He had tried to kill me in order to disgrace Thrawn and when that had failed he had tried to get rid of Thrawn by means of a cloaked ship which had attacked the shuttle we were on en route to rendezvous with the *Avenger*, neither tactic had worked and I wondered what he would do for the third encore. If Zaarin had any inkling that I knew what he had done, he never gave it away, I suspected he didn't. Like so many men who worked for the Empire he made the standard mistake of assuming I was not terribly smart or perhaps it was just that he felt he was smarter. Either way, I wasn't about to try and educate him on the error of his ways. With a sigh I went back to reading the mail.

TO: Office of Lord Darth Vader

FROM: Human Resources and Development Department
RE: Notice of Employment Termination

Pleased be advised that effective immediately Agaddi ren'Nor, palace horticulturalist, will no longer be working for the Imperial Palace Botanical Gardens. Please join us in wishing Mr. ren'Nor all the best in his new position with Prince Xizor.

*Yvett Tourne,
Assistant Manager
Human Resources Development Department*

That raised my eyebrows. I had met Agaddi ren'Nor a couple of times and had chatted to him while he had been working in the gardens. He was very good at his job and it surprised me that he would accept a position with the Prince. I guessed that the offer Agaddi had been given must have been worth it. I would miss seeing him around; he was a quiet man with a gentle nature. The Imperial palace did not generally have a quick turn over in jobs, unless one worked under Lord vader. Most people tended to keep the jobs they had. I was never sure exactly why that was but I suspected it was partly out of fear and partly because working for the Empire had a great benefits package.

TO: Miss Merlyn Ty'Erijann Gabriel
FROM: The Imperial Palace Social Department
RE: Dedication Ceremony for New Palace Wing

Miss Gabriel, Please find enclosed your personal invitation to attend the Dedication Ceremony for the New Assemblage Wing of the palace. This invitation is for the closed reception which will follow the public dedication and will be held in the Tarkin Conference Room.

Please note that the reception is formal dress and / or dress uniform with no exceptions. There will be no admittance without the invitation. Should you wish to bring a guest you must register his or her name and pertinent details with the Palace Events Coordination team twenty-four hours prior to attendance.

The reception will be catered by Ta'lucci and Frolla, there will be an open bar. Music provided by the Imperial City String Quartet. The reception begins at 21:00 hrs and ends at 00:00 hrs CST.

Marlann Taralae

I looked at the invitation that had been tucked inside the form letter that had arrived on my desk along with a dozen other memos and letters. I set both my invitation and the one for Lord Vader to one side. I had reminded him about the dedication ceremony but I wasn't sure if he would be back in time for it. I confirmed my dress fitting appointment with Cati and then set about dealing with the daily barrage of nonsense that never seemed to end. I was fairly certain that if Lord Vader had to deal with and answer all the mail he received himself there would be a lot less bureaucrats in the Empire. I was in the middle of replying to the last memo when Shiv poked his nose in my office.

"Lunch?" he asked.

"Only if it's very quick, I have a dress fitting in half an hour, or can we do lunch afterwards?"

"Sure that works for me, I need to find a new suit for this dedication reception. Are you heading to Cati's? I take it you got your invite? Share a taxi?"

I nodded to all of his questions. "Yep. *Formal dress required* means I need to show up in a dress I haven't worn before."

He grinned. "Don't make that face Rim-Girl, you love being a fashion plate."

I shook my head. "No, I don't but I do like Cati's dresses." I slung my satchel across my shoulder and followed Shiv out of the office locking the door behind me.

While Shiv was searching for a decent suit to wear I was standing on the platform which I had dubbed Cati's alter of pain while the Rodian seamstress pinned the final adjustments to the dress she had designed for me.

"So, will your gentleman be there?" she asked casually as she took the delicate fabric in at the waist.

"I hope so but I don't know." I told her. "It's just a reception for the new wing dedication but you know the Empire, all fuss and fanfare."

Cati managed a shrug. "I don't complain, Miss Gabriel, it keeps me in business." She let out a little sigh. "You need to stop losing weight. This is the third time I have had to take this dress in for you. I'll never get it finished in time if you keep that up. Have you been ill or something?"

I looked at her and the dress she was taking in. "No, not really."

The look she gave me said *'Uh huh. I don't believe a word of it.'*

"I don't sleep well because I have constant bad dreams and I have no appetite to speak of." I told her tartly, anything to get her to stop looking at me in that manner.

"Well, you might want to stop that particular bad habit, this dress is for showing off curves not bones." She chided. "Your gentleman will not like to come home to find you withering away. The skinny waif look is very passé." She said.

"Well don't pin too tight then, I'm going to *B'schu'le's* for lunch with Shiv. I plan on eating lots because I'm famished. I didn't think I had lost that much weight."

"Enough it shows, you are not at the wasting away stage yet. Are you having your hair done at Bam's for the event?"

"Hadn't planned on it, I have an appointment for a wash and trim tomorrow though. I made the appointment ages ago."

She nodded and stepped back to take a look at her work. "Smart, he's booked solid." She said. "So, what do you think?"

I turned around and looked at my reflection in the mirror. She was right, I looked as though I had been ill but mostly this was a product of sleepless nights. The dress she had created was lovely. She had found the perfect shade of pink that matched my skin tone and hair colour. The fabric was soft and supple, and clung to what it touched. In difference to most of the dresses she had designed for me in the past, this one had a back and a pretty, not too indecent, sweetheart neckline. It also had both slender shoulder straps and flowing off the shoulder sleeves. It was very pretty.

"You should wear Corellian Sweetheart rose buds in your hair, the colour would go perfectly with this dress." Cati said casually and she took in her handy work.

I glanced at her and nodded. I had long since given up arguing with her in the area of accessories. I had come a long way from tying my hair back with bits of routing wire. I was about to step off the fitting platform when Shiv came in.

"Wow." He said, setting down his new suit which was all carefully wrapped up in a garment bag and another huge shopping bag whose contents I couldn't see.

Cati grinned. "Show him the shoes."

I did as I was asked and lifted the dress so he could see the matching shoes.

Shiv grinned, "Oh the little bows on the open toes are very cute." He teased.

I made a face at him. I felt a little like a prized eopie at an auction.

“Okay, that’s it, get out of the dress so I can finish it off and get it sent over to you. Don’t lose any more weight between now and the event!” Cati scolded. “Because if I have to re pin this dress one more time, I shall hurt you.”

I nodded, and went to get out of the dress and back into clothes than made sense. While a part of me loved the elegance of the Empire, it was just so unreal. I much preferred my standard Tatooine chic.

While I was changing I heard Shiv ask if she wanted to join us for lunch but true to Cati form she refused politely stating a busy fitting schedule. She had made time for me and I was grateful, while Thrawn wasn’t back yet I knew he would be and I wanted the dress to look perfect. I hadn’t told her this but she had figured that out anyway. I was a bit sad that she would not come with us because on the few rare occasions when she had joined us it had been a lot of fun. Their conversation had ended with Cati telling Shiv in not so uncertain terms *‘For goodness sakes Shiv, feed that girl before she fades away to nothing!’* I walked out of the changing room pretending I hadn’t heard a thing.

With a brief hug and the traditional kiss-kiss both Shiv and I said our goodbyes and headed off to *B’schu’le’s*.

I loved *B’schu’le’s* and so it seemed did the rest of Coruscant. The restaurant was very crowded when we walked in and I was thankful that Shiv had thought ahead to reserve us a table.

I ordered a big salad and a noodle dish. When he ordered wine with the meal I knew we weren’t going back to work afterwards which was okay by me. Now I understood why we had taken a taxi to Cati’s instead of his air-speeder.

“Are you going to talk about what’s been bothering you?” he asked as I stabbed my fork through leafy salad.

I glanced up at him, “I told you the last time you asked. I don’t sleep very well.”

He looked at me for a moment. “The palace doc could fix you up with something that would help with that.”

“I’m not going to start taking sleeping aides, it will pass. It’s just bad dreams and I get them sometimes.”

“See, I’d normally believe you but you’ve had this scary death warmed over thing going ever since you got back after Hoth and it reminds me a lot of how you looked after Jyrki, well you know... kidnapped you.”

I made a face. “I had bad dreams then too.” I said with a mouthful of salad. “It will pass; you need to trust me on that.”

For a moment I saw him hesitate, the decision of whether or not to push me wavered across his face. He was worried. “It’s not like you to lie to me.” He said a bit sadly. He had decided to push.

“I’m not lying. I don’t sleep well, I wake up with really terrible nightmares most of which I don’t remember and I can’t get back to sleep afterwards. It’s not like I have the luxury of being able to nap in the afternoon, you know.” I frowned. “Do you really want the absolute truth?”

He nodded.

“I hate sleeping alone when I am on this planet.”

That made him smile and for the first time all afternoon he actually seemed to relax. “I knew there had to be another reason.” He grinned. “You’re pining for the man you love.”

I sighed. “See, this is exactly why I don’t tell you things!” I said crossly, mutilating the last bits of defenceless salad on my plate so loudly that people sitting one table over looked at me. I glared right back at them and they returned their attention to their own plates so fast I thought they might get whiplash. “I am not pining!”

He just shrugged. “Whatever.” He leaned over to reach the shopping bag; a glossy red dura-paper thing with little string handles and shoved it over to me. “I thought that you might want some company in bed, seeing as how you get lonely....” He let his sentence trail off with a knowing wink.

I sighed and shook my head. “Honestly Shiv, you’re as bad as the gossip girls from HR.”

The waitress came and cleared away our empty salad plates and replaced them with the main course. Shiv had some sort of thinly sliced reddish meat, rizzoles, and vegetables all drizzled with a creamy looking sauce. It smelled wonderful. My pasta was covered with a chunky sauce made from a red fruit and was heavily spiced, just the way I liked it. While the waitress hovered around us, refilling our glasses and smiling, I held my tongue. As soon as she left I pulled the bag to me and peeked inside. Underneath a layer of delicate tissue was the largest stuffed toy bantha I had ever seen. Despite the fact that we were sitting in a good restaurant I hauled him out of the bag with a squeal of delight. He was perfect, with soft, long shaggy fur and horns made from some sort of roughed up leather. The detailing on him was astonishing, even his glittery eyes seemed real.

“I am way too old for cuddle toys Shiv, but he’s gorgeous... where did you find a bantha toy on this planet?” I said as I slipped him back in the bag and grinned.

Shiv beamed. “We special ordered him from Ji-Ji’s, really he’s for your birthday, I mean, birthdays. He’s from me, Ynyth, Bobbyn, Maxxi and Cati and I wasn’t supposed to give him to you until your other birthday but goodness knows if you’ll be here for that and I figured you could use the company at night. I got the call this morning that he was done, so it seemed like the right time all around.”

I shook my head. I didn’t know what to say. I had never really talked to Shiv about my love affair with Banthas yet somehow he had known. My guess was that maybe Thrawn had given something of that away but I was pretty sure no one would admit to anything.

“Eat your lunch before it gets cold.” He waved his fork at me. “I have to tell Cati that I saw you finish a meal with my own two eyes.”

I did as he asked, not because I had to but because I really was, for the first time in ages, very hungry. Like most things, my bouts of anxiety and sleeplessness came and went. The regular routine of being back on a planet again helped even more. The best of all was that the Emperor had not been around much either. Slowly the nightmare I had lived through on Wayland was receding, relegated to the same strange part of my life that Jyrki’s treatment had been and I tried not to think about the moral implications of working for the Empire. My on going training sessions with Master Kjestyll were helping to re-ground me and for a while I could forget about the Force and all of its sides, light dark and in between.

“What are you doing after this?” I asked him.

“I am coming back to your place and we are going to watch some of the latest season of *Smuggler’s Run*, which I happen to know you just picked up and then I am going home and you will get a decent night’s sleep.” He said, “Unless you have a lesson or something?”

I shook my head. “Nope no lessons tonight, so we’ll go with your plan.” I agreed and went back to finishing my pasta. By the time we had done with the main meal we decided to get desert to go because while *B’schu’le’s* made the best cakes in the galaxy, their ‘caf was awful.

Smuggler’s Run was a brilliant drama about a band of rag-tag nobodies, in a galaxy very far away but amazingly similar to ours. It was a funny, campy show with a great cast of characters. The brilliant but broken captain who is trying to get away from his past, the crazy alien mechanic who could fix anything, twin brothers who were mercenaries and finished each other sentences, the weapons expert who just happens to be a hot chick and the stowaway kid, who everyone except the mechanic thought was a guy but who was really a girl. They lived by their wits on their ship which loosely resembled an old Corellian tub and was always falling apart.

They usually ended up helping people instead of actually doing anything terribly illegal. It was hilarious but also sometimes sad and touching.

We ate our delicious deserts, sipped excellent spiced coffee and then topped it all off with a glass of Thrawn’s thirty year old Corellian brandy. I was stuffed and my sides hurt from laughing so much.

Once we had eaten I had hauled the large bantha toy out of the bag and slouching on the couch with my feet on the coffee table I had it balanced on my lap, face to face. He was the cutest thing I ever saw next to a real bantha baby. He had been made to perfection and I had fallen in love with him.

Shiv poked me in the ribs. “How can you see the screen?” He asked.

“I see fine over his head!”

“His?”

I looked up at Shiv and nodded. “Yeah, he’s a he.”

“How can you tell?”

“The shape and thickness of the horns.” I said tracing my finger around the loop of the sueded leather. “Females horns never grow to more than one circle and the ridges aren’t as pronounced. I love banthas.”

Shiv grinned. “I know.”

“Who told you that, because I’m sure it wasn’t me?”

“I am sworn to secrecy.” He said. I opened my mouth to say more but he wagged a finger at me. “Shut up, not another word, just watch the show!”

I smirked at settled back down, cuddling the huge stuffed toy, watching the ‘net with one of my very best friends.

“What are you going to call him?” Shiv asked after five minutes of silence.

“I’ll have to think about it. Naming a bantha is a big deal.”

“Will you tell me what you name him then?”

“I promise, now will *you* shut up?”

He laughed and grabbed the remote to backtrack so we could catch up on what we missed.

It was late when he left and despite his advice of letting the dishes sit until the morning I just couldn’t. Thrawn did not like clutter and chaos in the house and some of that had rubbed off on me, besides I couldn’t stand the sight of dirty dishes when I first got up and ever worse was a messy kitchen, I was never awake enough to deal with that first thing. Once everything was tidy I took my bantha toy and went to bed. I hadn’t slept with a stuffed cuddle toy in bed since I was a very small child. I sighed when I slipped under the beautiful linen sheets, wearing one of Thrawn’s pyjama tops and wrapped my arm around the bantha to snuggle it. A small piece of

furry comfort in the darkness the night had become. Unfortunately its presence didn't stop the nightmares but it was something to grip on to when I felt as though I were drowning.

The nightmares had become indefinable night terrors involving faceless attackers and endless chases through never ending labyrinths which usually ended up with me falling into the molten lava on the planet the Emperor had called Mustafar. It was not a particularly great way to wake up. Going back to sleep after such a nightmare was usually impossible so I would get up, make myself tea and use the portable computer terminal to get some work done. This way I could sit in the living room and have the HoloNet on in the background. While I was wading through the latest barrage of inter-office mail the late night programme that was currently on was interrupted.

The news anchor was shaken as he read out the latest report of fighting between the Empire and the Rebels. While these kinds of reports were not really new the disclosure that someone from the Imperial side had defected to the rebels was. The news programme did not have a name and details were sketchy at best which was typical.

With my portable computer terminal, I quickly logged into the palace network and began to scan through the internal imperial bulletin boards that I had access to via Lord Vader. The traitor was Admiral Harkov. It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did and I could not help wondering how many more so called loyal Imperials were not exactly as they seemed.

I was instantly awake. It was that weird state of hyper awareness that comes when you wake up cold in the middle of the night knowing something isn't right. My hand snaked under my pillow and curled around the lightsaber I been keeping there. I lay as still as I could and listened. I could hear nothing, but I knew that someone was in the flat; I felt a presence as sure as I felt the weapon I was clutching. I fought to slow my racing heart and opened myself up to the force which flowed around me like sand across the ground in a storm. I searched the flat with my mind and when I found the reason I had woken up I let out a silent sigh of relief.

Thrawn moved through his own home as though he were the intruder not the owner. He walked so quietly I would have had no idea where he was if I could not sense him through the force. When he reached the bedroom I was no longer holding my lightsaber.

"You can turn on the light, I'm not asleep." I said as he walked silently across the wooden floor. He had taken his shoes off, it made me

smile. He didn't turn the bedroom light on, instead he switched on the one in the bathroom so that it illuminated the bedroom just enough for him not to bang into the bed the way I always did but not enough to make me squint. He didn't actually need to turn any lights on, so I was pretty sure this was for my benefit.

"I didn't want to wake you." He told me as he came to the edge of the bed and undressed.

I looked up at him; he had his back to me. "That happened the moment you entered the flat."

"I should have known, I suppose." He said. "You really are quite scary, you know." He teased but he sounded tired. The light from the bathroom was soft, illuminating the outline his body as he stripped off his clothes. I longed to reach out and touch him but the sharp state of being awake had shifted back into a warm doziness and I couldn't be bothered to move. I yawned.

He got up, went to the bathroom, closed the door and the room was plunged back into the usual darkness. I rolled back over onto my side and curled around the bantha toy. I heard Thrawn come out of the bathroom, but he had turned off the light before he opened the door. I felt him pull aside the covers and get into bed. He spooned himself around me, my back to his front, his arm curled around my waist, stopping when his hand touched synthetic fur.

"Is there something you want to tell me, sj'iu tekari?" he murmured in my ear.

"That's Runi'." I answered. "Shiv and the gang's birthday gift to me." I said. I rolled over onto my back making him do the same. I pulled Runi' out from under the sheets and dumped him on Thrawn's chest. He gave a little laugh as he took the toy and looked at him.

"A very accurate likeness of a Bantha." He said, appreciatively.

"It's too dark to see him that clearly."

I felt him look at me and I felt his eyebrow go up. "My dear, I keep telling you, Chiss have excellent night vision."

I stuck my tongue out at him and he chuckled. "I saw that as well." He said. "I take it he was my substitute while I was gone?" He added.

"I wasn't sleeping well." I told him by way of answer, settling down again. He was quiet for a long moment, staring at the Bantha balanced on his chest.

"As in nightmares or as in working too much or maybe just staying up far too late with Shiv watching too much HoloNet?"

"Nightmares."

"This has to do with what happened after Bespin?" He asked. "I sensed there was something you were not telling me in your last letter."

I nodded. "It was bad." I said.

He shifted a little to look at me. He patted the bantha on his chest. "Can I put your little friend here on the floor?" He asked. "Or will he be offended?"

"Banthas generally don't like being cooped up, so he'll probably be happier on the floor." I said as I shifted so that one leg slung across his hips and my arm across his chest. I rested my head in the hollow his shoulder made for me, feeling him move as he put Runi' down beside the bed. Then he wrapped the arms around me. I breathed him in deeply, hardly believing that he was here. He smelled like spice and soap. He ran his fingers through my hair.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asked.

"The Emperor found out about my talent for reading objects." I said bluntly and quickly, as though saying fast would make it go away.

He let out a slow breath. A ripple of anger flashed through him and I could feel it when he clenched his jaw. "What did he use to test you?" There was a strange tightness in his voice.

"Something terrible and if it's okay with you I'd rather not talk about it in the dark."

He pulled me closer to him as if that could protect me from what had already happened. "When you are ready, I will listen."

"I am so glad you are back." I told him looking up at him.

"I know you are." He answered quietly. Something in his voice made me look up at him. I could see his eyes, a soft red glow in the dimly lit bedroom. He kissed me on the forehead in that wonderful manner he had which said, *you are mine, I am here so you are safe, and I am quite tired so can we please just go to sleep now?* I just closed my eyes and for the first time since returning from Wayland I slept the rest of the whole night through.

I woke up late, sunlight streamed into the bedroom, dancing through the gauzy white curtains which shifted in the little breeze coming through the open window. I was alone in the bed except for the stuffed bantha which occupied the side of the bed Thrawn slept on. It made me smile. I got up, slipped on a robe and made my way to the kitchen where I was handed a cup of creamy stimcaf with a smile that made my heart speed up more than the stimcaf ever could.

"You were so fast asleep that I didn't want to wake you." He said by way of explanation. He was already showered and dressed.

"Thank-you."

"No nightmares?" He asked, pushing a plate of warm, buttered scones in my direction.

I sipped the hot stimcaf gratefully. "No nightmares." I confirmed.

He simply nodded and went back to his own drink, reading the latest news flimsy that had been delivered.

"I see Xizor has dumped his latest girlfriend." He commented.

The corner of my mouth curled up in a smile. "Are you reading the gossip column?"

"No, it made the headlines." He snorted with distaste. "She is, apparently, devastated."

"Oh." I knelt up on the kitchen stool and leaned on the counter to read the flimsy with him.

"Oooh, Lord Vader's offensive at Vergesso Prime was successful." I commented, reading the headline *'Imperials Win Again!'* "Of course you know that he went out here on a tip from the Prince. He'll be so cross that Xizor was right."

"Well, I would wait until Lord Vader returns and tells you what really happened before I'd believe what was written here."

"And maybe he'll tell me about Harkov as well!" I said. "The Admiral was executed wasn't he? The reports don't say much, it's all very hush hush."

"A very bad business that." Thrawn commented with a nod. "Do you recall that young pilot I wrote you about?"

"Stele?" I nodded.

"Well apparently he, along with a couple of others, had a lot to do with helping in that capture. They managed to get Harkov but the fleet he commanded is still out there, presumably acting on Harkov's behalf, and has also turned rebel." He said. "Vader deal with Harkov personally, so you know the end result there."

I just looked at him. "A whole fleet defected? That wasn't in any of the reports I read. I am surprised that even after three weeks nothing has really been mentioned, it's even fairly quiet over all the official channels."

"Of course it is, my dear. It is bad enough that an admiral of the Imperial navy turned traitor but an entire fleet? Well, you can imagine if news of that got out."

"This rebel thing is getting out of hand." I said flatly.

Thrawn nodded. "Indeed." He said. "More 'caf?" He asked and then went back to reading the morning's news. Something caught my eye and without thinking I pulled the flimsy to my side of the counter. This earned me a raised eyebrow and an annoyed look.

"Oh my!" I exclaimed.

“What is it?” Asked Thrawn.

“Agaddi ren’Nor is dead.” I said as I quickly read through the short obituary.

“Who is that?”

“He was one of the Emperor’s best horticulturalists; he recently went to work for Prince Xizor. It says here that before he could even start his new job he was found dead. Apparently some freak accident with a lift. There’s an investigation but they don’t suspect foul play. How sad, I kind of liked him.” I handed the flimsy back to Thrawn who skimmed the small text quickly.

Thrawn shook his head and snorted. “No foul play indeed. The Emperor does not like to give up his best people, especially to someone like Prince Xizor.”

“You don’t think it was an accident?”

He just arched an eyebrow at me. “No.” he replied.

“Speaking of accidents, did you hear about the attack on Xizor?”

He shook his head.

“Happened a little while ago now, some moon-brain managed to get past all Palace security and attacked the Prince after he had a meeting there. Wanted revenge, blamed Xizor for the death of his family or some such thing. Now you have to wear your ID tags visible at all times, no exceptions. Security keeps arresting people for no ID tags. It’s very silly.”

“How did this assailant avoid security in the first place?”

I gave Thrawn a look. “How do you think?”

Thrawn shook his head in disgust. “It doesn’t become Vader to play these stupid, bickering games, you know.”

I just shrugged. “I think he just gets bored sometimes.”

That remark earned me a smile. “They mention the public ceremony for the new wing dedication tonight; they expect a lot of people to come.” He said. “Did you get a new dress for the reception afterwards?” He remarked, switching topics deftly.

“I did.” I said with a grin.

“Has Cati performed her usual magic?”

“She has.”

“Do I get to see it?”

“Only if you’re planning on attending.” I told him coyly.

“I’d say that chances are good I will be there.” He replied as he refilled my stimcaf. For a moment our eyes met and that world shattering sensation flashed through me like a seismic charge. I swallowed, bit my lip, blushed and looked away. He smirked.

I sipped my drink. “I told Zaarin I was attending alone when he asked if I would be his date a couple of days ago. He figured that since you were not around I would be easy prey.”

Thrawn’s eyebrow shot up. “Oh?” he said. “I imagine he did not enjoy being told ‘no’ yet again. He’s quite persistent with you, I’ll give him that. Most men would have walked away by now.”

“He’s not persistent, he’s just stupid. Most men would have taken the hint by now.” I scowled. “He’s an arrogant Imperial male who thinks he can have what he wants at the snap of his fingers. ‘Getting me’ has become a personal mission, I think. He won’t win; he’s just too stubborn to figure that out!” I made a face. “I told him I was tired of being gossip fodder by way of an excuse, he said if that were really the case I should probably not be shacking up with you.”

Thrawn had to work hard not to spray the mouthful of stimcaf he had just taken all over the counter. “He actually said that?”

“Yes, he actually said that.” I confirmed.

“I am all ears as to your response, my dear.”

My shrug was nonchalant. “I just smiled at him and told him he shouldn’t believe the all the gossip.”

“Really?” He did that annoying eyebrow thing. “I see some of my lessons on diplomacy are rubbing off on you.”

“More like I can’t be bothered to deal with him, it’s tedious and besides, he tried to kill me. If he wanted me to go out on a date with him he should have thought about that before he tried to poison me and blow you up.” I said crossly. “Smiling at him confuses him.” I added. “One of these days I shall be smiling when I throttle him with my bare hands. Which I could do quite easily, you know!” I made wringing motions with my hands to make my point.

He shook his head in mock despair. “I can see that some of Vader’s tactics have *also* rubbed off on you.”

“Hardly! I don’t go around force choking everyone who pisses me off.”

He smiled. “No, you shower us unsuspecting males with enough desire to drown an entire battalion.”

Our eyes locked a second time and another seismic charge exploded in my belly. “Neither you nor he can complain if I am being polite.” I said. “Frosty smiles are about as nice as I get these days. I’ve run out of patience and I’m all out of nice. It doesn’t get me anywhere anyway. I could still do him in though.”

“I would much rather you were frosty and polite to him than you took matters into your own hands and eliminated him.” He said with a hint

of reproach. "Removing him from the galaxy is not your job and I doubt it would make the Emperor very happy if you were to attempt it."

"Puh! You don't let me have any fun!" I told him, taking a scone to munch on. "And the Emperor is..."

"...never happy, I know." He finished for me. "Speaking of fun, I take it your wish to attend this thing solo means that I cannot ask you to be my date for the event?" He was teasing.

"You can ask, but you'd get the same answer Zaarin did." I said with a shrug. "In light of self interest and self preservation I think it's best that I go unattached or shadow Lord Vader if he will be there. He got back to the core a day ago but he's been pretty busy with meetings with the Emperor so I have not really seen a whole lot of him. You are supposed to be in disgrace. I am supposed to be trying to keep a low profile. Besides, I am getting tired of having my face splashed on the *Daily Digest* flimsies and the HoloNet entertainment nightly shows just because the gossip mongers have nothing better to write about."

He laughed. "So you mean you actually plan behaving at this event?"

I made a face. "I always behave." I told him crossly. "I can't help it that trouble finds me."

I glared at him when his eyebrow shot up. "I seem to recall the last time you attended an official function it ended rather disastrously." He remarked tartly. "And that particular trouble was self inflicted."

"You will never let me forget about that, will you?"

"You are very funny when you are inebriated." He said with a little grin. "I really wonder if it is at all safe to let you loose without a chaperone."

"You know, just because I don't feel the need to fuel the fires that already circulate around you, me and our odd little relationship doesn't mean I won't behave myself at this stupid event. Last time, as I recall, it was because I got pecked at by the powers that be I ended up going off the deep end. If I hadn't been drinking I would have hurt someone." I told him hotly, all the while watching him try very hard not to laugh. "Anyway, you don't have to worry; Shiv has taken it upon himself to act as the big-brother watch dog this time around. He was pretty ticked at me for getting so drunk at the last event and he blames you. He wasn't happy about your inability to keep an eye on me. I told him it was hardly your fault, after all, it's not as if anyone actually instructed you to baby-sit me, you didn't force feed me the bubbly and I could have and should have just gone home. Ugh, I don't want to even think about fizzy champagne let alone drink any." I shuddered.

Thrawn laughed and caressed the side of my face with a brush of his fingers. "Why is Shiv even complaining? He wasn't the one picking up the pieces the day after, I was."

I sighed. "I can move back to the palace, you know!"

He just continued to smile. "That is an empty threat, you like my bed too much and I like having you in it." He said. "But if you must have an answer to the unasked question behind that statement, I think I'd prefer you stay here where I can keep an eye on you." He punctuated this statement with a light kiss on the top of my head.

I didn't know how to reply to that so I just nodded and sipped my drink. The silence between us was so utterly comfortable that I didn't want to break it.

"I noticed your speeder isn't here. Do you want a ride to work?" He asked after he had finished reading and drained his cup.

"Sure."

"Then I suggest you get yourself ready, my dear, I have to leave soon. I have meetings all day and I probably should not be late."

It occurred to me, while I showered, that this must be what having a normal life felt like, that billions of beings all around the galaxy lived this way, every single day. It was magical. As I dressed for work, I felt a touch of regret that it couldn't stay this way forever.

Like Prince Xizor, Lord Vader had a large extravagant castle near the Imperial Palace. Unlike the Prince or the Emperor, Lord Vader did not bother himself with interior design and décor. His home was sparsely furnished and the walls were mostly bare. For the most part I found it incredibly gloomy and despite the glowing write up it had been given in the Coruscant lifestyle magazine, *Famous Homes and Famous People*, it was anything but warm and welcoming, although the description of minimalist was pretty much spot on. Even so, Lord Vader preferred to spend his time here whenever possible. He said there were fewer distractions which, for him, was mostly true.

From my office at the Imperial Palace to my work space in his home it should have taken about a twenty minute walk but that was never the case. Usually it took closer to forty minutes to an hour depending on how cranky security was feeling. Despite the fact that pretty much everyone on his staff knew me, the rigorous screening and security checks that everyone had to go through in order to be granted access were mandatory and the guys delighted in stopping me at every single turn. Mostly, I didn't

mind because it was more an excuse on their part to hear any gossip that was going on in the palace than out of spite. Sitting at a check point all day guarding the entrances to Lord Vader's home and the Imperial Palace was not the most exciting job in the world and I usually had some tidbit of gossip to keep them happy. It was a decent excuse to procrastinate getting there. I hated it when he wanted me to work from his home.

For the longest time it had meant sitting in the depressingly cold room he called a study with bad lighting and uncomfortable greel wood furniture. Even worse than the freezing cold gloom was that there was no place to make tea or have lunch unless I found my way through the palatial labyrinth of corridors to the servants' quarters and swipe stuff from them. Needless to say they were not pleased about my intrusion on their space and a little war of wills had ensued.

After a while my complaints must have annoyed him into action because he eventually had the study renovated into a warm, bright office with an adjoining small kitchen and refresher that was more or less solely mine. It didn't mean I liked working from his home any more but at least it was more comfortable than it had been. Located in the west wing, near his training rooms and the room with the hyperbaric chamber it was usually a quiet place, but not always.

I was in the middle of making stimcaf when I felt rather than heard someone behind me.

"He'll be cross that you bypassed his security again." I said when I figured out who it was.

The man standing behind me laughed. "How do you always know?"

"Well this time it would be because you smell like a dying bantha, Jix." I turned around and gave him a look. "What did you do run through the waste management plant?"

He grinned. "Aw come on, darlin' you like my manly scent."

"Uh huh. That's why I'm wrinkling my nose in disgust and walking away." I sipped my stimcaf, "Why are you breaking into his home this time?" I asked as I went back into my office.

"He called a meeting, sent his boys to come and remind me." He said with a shrug. "I like to beat 'em at their own game."

"You like to piss off Lord Vader by breaking into his house." I said. "I don't know why he keeps you around."

He smiled. "Could ask the same thing about you, you know, you're a lousy secretary; you didn't even offer me a refreshing beverage."

"That would be because I am not his secretary, I am *his* personal assistant, not yours and you snuck in uninvited."

"I didn't scare you like last time though." He grinned.

"Last time you didn't stink so much." I told him. "And I was in the middle of a shouting match with one of Lord Vader's droid suppliers."

"Yeah, right I remember that." He laughed. "So, will you go tell him I'm here or shall I just sneak into his egg chamber thing room again?"

I shuddered. The last time he had done that Lord Vader had been furious and the fallout had been lengthy and unpleasant. "Wait here and don't touch anything!" I wagged my finger at him.

He just smirked and planted himself down on the couch near the desk, putting his feet up on the small table. "I'll just make myself comfy then!"

I sighed as I left for the training room. I didn't need to comm him to know where he was I could hear it. The door to the training room was open. The sound of the lightsaber's hum was marred briefly by the sound of broken droid parts crashing to the floor. The combat droids were supposed to be the best in the galaxy but Lord Vader swept through them like a Hutt eating kreetle eggs. He knew I was there, standing just inside the entrance to the training room but he ignored me. Until he acknowledged my presence I kept my mouth shut. I liked watching him at play which amused him to no end. I didn't mind waiting.

"What is it girl?" he asked after the third droid went down in a hail of glowing metal bits.

"Wrenga Jixton is here to see you." I told him. "I found him loitering in my kitchen." I said. "Maybe you could ask him to sneak through the servant's area next time? Or better yet use the main entrance like everyone else has to?"

There was a moment's pause while Lord Vader digested this information. He decided to ignore it and said, "Send him in then and get back to your work, I need those figures and the information I requested today not when you feel like it!"

"Yes, my lord." I nodded and left the room, the scent of molten metal, lightsaber and ozone following me out as I went.

By the time I made it back to my office Jix had helped himself to stimcaf and cookies. He looked perfectly at home. Despite his scruffiness and roughness around the edges, I liked Jix. He had an easy manner that was familiar to me. He was a tall, well built man with very long brown hair which he always kept tied back. He almost always dressed in faded brown utility pants, well worn standard issue boots, a soft hide vest, his riding gloves and a pair of swoop goggles which permanently sat around his neck. Shirts did not seem to be a part of his wardrobe, but the two blasters he carried slung cross-wise low on his hips were. He liked to carry himself off as a tough guy and I was certain he was not someone I wanted as an enemy

but there was something more to him than met the eye, a kindness he kept well hidden but I felt it sometimes. He routinely broke into Lord Vader's home, just because he could and he didn't seem to be afraid of anything or anyone. He had been instrumental in saving Lord Vader's life once. He had also struck some sort of a deal which had indentured him to the Dark Lord's service forever, no questions asked. I liked him but I didn't need to let him know that.

He looked up at me as I walked into the office. "You make a mean stimcaf, darlin'."

"Did you eat my lunch as well?" I asked.

He grinned, finishing what was left in his cup. "No, I hate salads, but thanks anyway. When you get some real food maybe I'll join you for a meal next time."

"Huh, who said I'd even invite you to lunch, let alone share?"

"Awww I love it when you flirt with me!" He gave me the once up and down. "But I thought you were seeing someone."

"I am." I told him. "And it's none of your business."

"Too bad, I like red heads!" he gave me a grin. "They're sassy!"

"Yeah, you and every other man in the Empire!" I snorted. "As much as I'd love to stand here and banter with you all day, Lord Vader will see you now." I said when he raised his chin a notch.

"Maybe I ought to avail myself of your facilities and pretty myself up first." he said with a grin.

I gave him a look, "Lord Vader breaths filtered air, he won't care that you smell like a Hutt."

"You always say the sweetest things!" He smirked. "Should I go find him myself or are you holding my hand?"

"The nice gentlemen in pretty white suits will lead you." I said waving the two stormtroopers in who had been waiting to take Jix to see Lord Vader.

"Hey, babysitters, how thoughtful." He said.

"Play nice!"

"Next time I'll bring you flowers!" He said with a wink.

"He's in a mood, so mind your manners!" I called after him as he walked out the office. His answer was a wave and a chuckle.

I shook my head and went back to work. Vader liked having Jix around because he was useful but he didn't always tolerate Jix's rudeness. I think it mostly annoyed him that Jix wasn't scared of him the way almost everyone else was and he also hated the fact that Jix had once saved his life. Lord Vader wasn't really big on owing anyone anything

I was just about to sit at my desk when the comm buzzed. "Yes?"

"Er Miss Gabriel, erm...Prince Xizor is here to see Lord Vader, what shall we do?" A nervous young man's voice told me.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Xizor! He had a scheduled appointment and Jix had been uninvited. Well, I thought, I had already made the trip down the hall once.

"Well for goodness sakes go and tell Lord Vader then, he's in his large training room." I snapped at the young man.

"Yes ma'am." He said and I switched the comm off. I looked at the dirty dishes Jix had left on the small couch table and sighed. How the hell was I supposed to get any work done in this place with all these interruptions? This was why I hated working from Lord Vader's home.

I got up and went to greet the Prince.

He was waiting in the main foyer with his usual and unnecessarily large entourage. He looked both regal and bored all at the same time.

"Prince Xizor, if you would please follow me." I said politely.

The Falleen looked at me and gave me a smile that never reached his eyes. "Miss Gabriel, how delightful to see you again." He spoke casually as I led him and his people to the conference room Lord Vader had requested be used.

There was no conversation as we walked down the hallway to the meeting room. Xizor had long since lost any interest he might have had in baiting me. He was frostily polite and I was happy with that. Thanks to Shiv I knew what his trick was when it came to enticing females into his bed but knowing what it was and being able to fight against the lure of his pheromones were two different things. I wasn't anxious to test my ability to resist him should he ever wish to try this again.

The Conference room was large, comfortable in a utilitarian sort of way but devoid of decorations. This specially designed room that was so full of surveillance equipment that one could almost here the hum from the circuitry. Xizor was as paranoid as he was powerful so I knew that he would also have some sort of surveillance equipment with him. He and Lord Vader never seemed to tire of playing spy verses spy.

One of the servants had already made certain that refreshments had been laid out but I knew nothing would be touched. Lord Vader did not drink or eat in public and the prince would be worried about poison. However, this game that was being played also consisted of who could out polite who. The Emperor prized courtesy and there had been repercussions in the past for Lord Vader when he had been especially rude to the Prince.

"Please, your highness, make your self comfortable. Lord Vader will be with you shortly." I said.

That irked Xizor, who did not like to be kept waiting. "I have a busy schedule, Miss Gabriel. I do not have time to waste."

I gave him one of my best smiles. "Yes, your Highness." And with that I left him to sit and work out where all the hidden spy equipment was.

I wondered how anyone could go through life the way the Falleen prince did. Always scheming and plotting. He was ruthless and calculating, not to mention ugly. All my force senses told me he was dangerous in every way possible. I hated being in the same room with him. He made my skin crawl.

His business with Lord Vader, on the surface was nothing more than standard negotiations about ships and equipment but really he was after something bigger; Lord Vader suspected that he was after Luke Skywalker. If that was the case it would not have surprised me, although how the Prince knew that Luke was Vader's son was a bit of a mystery. I didn't think it was a coincidence that both Jix and then Xizor showed up on the same day within thirty minutes of each other.

I went back to work and salvaged what was left of my day. By the end of it I had accomplished most of the tasks I was supposed to, resorted out Lord Vader's schedule for the sixth time, dealt with the droid dealers and given him the results he wished for.

He read the data when I handed it to him and nodded. "This will suffice." He said, then changing subjects asked, "I suppose you will be attending the reception after the dedication ceremony with Admiral Thrawn?"

I shook my head. "No, I decided in the interest of not being gossip fodder I'd go on my own. Why, do you need a date?" I asked cheerfully, knowing this would probably annoy him more than amuse him.

He turned around and I could feel the glare from behind the mask. "I take it you are actually avoiding Zaarin's attentions as well as the media?"

"Zaarin is a pompous idiot who doesn't get the hint!" I retorted. Zaarin had become a touchy subject and he liked to push that particular button. It amused him, although I had no idea why.

"In some respects yes, he is. However he has expressed great interest in you, perhaps I should order you to attend with him anyway. You can find out what has been on his mind. His reports from his various projects have been somewhat thin as of late."

I sighed. "You could but it wouldn't accomplish much. Zaarin's mind is very strong and I can't read much from him. If he is lying about his work, I never pick it up."

"Interesting how that works. I would have thought, if you put your will to it you could entice information out of him."

I glared at him and for a moment we just stared at each other, although really it was like staring at a mirror because all I saw in his mask was my reflection. I looked away first.

"If you actually forced me to do this you'd have to find another personal assistant because I'd rather jump in the Great Pit of Carkoon than be *intimate* with that man."

He chuckled. "I believe you would at that." He said. "However, that might be amusing to watch."

I shook my head; there was no suitable retort to this statement. "I could accompany you and quietly try to read him while you talk with him." I suggested.

"Yes, perhaps, although I will only plan on attending the actual dedication ceremony. I will not be attending the function afterwards, unless my Master demands it. I have better things to do with my time." He said. "Still, you will have plenty of opportunities at the reception to read him and perhaps after a few glasses of the Emperor's champagne he will be more open to suggestion."

"Perhaps." I said. "I will see what I can do, but I am not playing doxy for you, he has enough courtesans who like to bed with him, I won't be one more."

He chuckled and then said, "A driver will pick you up promptly at eighteen-thirty hundred hours. Be ready. I will not be kept waiting."

"As you wish, my lord."

"You may leave now." He flapped his hand at me in that all too familiar dismissive gesture and turned his back to me once more.

"Yes, my lord." And before he could change his mind or say anything else I swirled around and left to go home.

In difference to Cati's advice I did not put rosebuds in my hair. While the idea sounded lovely it was a little too cute for my tastes. I tied it up with a set of bone Zenji sticks, nice and simple, with ringlets to frame my face. I studied my reflection in the full length mirror in the hall. I had told Cati that if she wanted to make me a pink dress, it couldn't be strapless, it needed to be comfortable and above all it needed to be something I could kick someone's teeth in while wearing it, if I had to. The last pink dress I had worn had been a hindrance in a situation where teeth kicking would have been useful. I sighed at the reflection of the person in the mirror. There were days when I didn't recognize myself any more.

"That was a terribly big sigh." Thrawn said as he walked out of the bedroom.

“Just thinking.” I said as I moved aside to let him use the mirror.
“About?” He straightened his jacket and brushed off some non-existent dust from his left arm.

“The girl I used to be and the one I am now.”

He glanced at me as I leaned against the wall. “Are the two so very different?” He asked moving aside.

“Yes, maybe, I don’t know. Some days it feels as though I only just arrived here from Tatooine and other days it is as if my life there almost never happened.” I just shrugged and went back to standing in front of the mirror so that I could put on my necklace. “And I was just thinking that if this stupid reception wasn’t considered mandatory I’d be curled up in my favourite chair reading a book.”

“If this reception was not mandatory I would be whisking you away to a dark corner, no reading just conversation.” Thrawn purred in my ear as he stood behind me. “We have not yet had a chance to ...talk since my return.”

On any other night his teasing would have been enjoyable but right now it was just annoying. “You can steal me away afterwards.” I told him tartly, getting frustrated as I fussed with the pendant I was trying clasp around my neck.

“Here, allow me.” He took the pendant from my fingers. I had decided to wear the very first one he had given me, the tiny delicate one. It matched the dress better and I figured no one would ask questions about it. He kissed the nape of my neck when he was finished, and despite my mood, goose bumps prickle up and down my arms.

“You look lovely, my dear. That dress suits you very well.” He brushed the backs of his fingers along the sides of my bare arms.

“Cati does work miracles.” I said with a shiver.

He nuzzled the side of my neck, “Your perfume is intoxicating.”

“Of course it is, you bought it for me.” I told him moving away from his affectionate play.

I felt him smile. “I thought it would suit you.” He whispered in my ear. “And I was right.” My heart thumped painfully in my chest. While my mind wasn’t on seduction, my body sure was. I sighed again.

“If you keep that up I’ll be late and you will have to explain to Lord Vader why.”

“It could be worth it.” He said, enjoying the game he was playing. He knew I wasn’t really in the mood for his seduction but sometimes he liked to push anyway.

I turned around to face him. His dress uniform had been pristinely cleaned and pressed, his hair had been recently cut and he also smelled

wonderful. “I seem to recall you saying something about me not ending up in a med lab.” I told him. “Something about having plans? But if you tick Lord Vader off I will be the one who suffers for it, so behave!” I poked him in the chest to let him know I wasn’t kidding.

He arched an eyebrow and caught my hand in his before I could jab at him again. “Why are you so cross? Usually you enjoy these functions.”

I made a face. “Usually I am not expected to play human lie detector for Imperial officers.” I snapped.

There was a flash of anger in his eyes. “Ah, Lord Vader is requiring you to be pleasant to a certain Grand Admiral again?”

“In a manner of speaking, he thinks Zaarin is up to something, or better to say lying about his work.” I said.

“Everyone in the Empire lies about their work, it comes with the territory.” Thrawn said coolly.

“Well, Lord Vader doesn’t seem to trust Zaarin any more. I don’t trust him either but for completely different reasons.”

“Understandable, my dear, I would prefer you not engage in spy games with Zaarin, the Empire has people trained for this job but I suppose simply trying to sift out truth from lie while conversing with the man at a public event could not hurt.”

“No, probably not but if he tries to hurt me, or touch me again I’ll hurt him, I swear it.”

That comment made Thrawn clench his jaw. “That would not be an advisable action. Zaarin still has the Emperor’s favour and is a valued member of the Imperial Navy. Do not get yourself into something you cannot get out of. Please be careful.” I wasn’t sure what irked him more, the thought of Zaarin putting his hands on me or me putting mine around Zaarin’s neck.

“I’m always careful.”

He shook his head and smiled. “No you are not, what you are is lucky. There is a difference.”

“Puh!” was the only thing I could think of in reply. He smiled at that and caressed my face gently.

“Stop worrying so much about things you have no control over. Zaarin is not your concern.” He said.

“Lord Vader makes it my concern. Zaarin’s attentions make him my concern.” I shot back.

“If you are not careful I shall start to worry about this other man you spend so much time obsessing over.” He said.

“Jealous?” I asked.

“Cautious.” He countered.

“Why? Are you afraid I’ll suddenly run off with the Grand Admiral?”

“Is that something you feel you are likely to do, sj’iu tekari?” His fingers moved from my face to stroke the back of my neck. I glared at him, doing my best to mask the desire that he was creating. The look he gave me in return was pointed and intense. The massive seismic charge which exploded in my gut made me drop my gaze from his. I just sighed and shook my head.

“No. The thought of him anywhere near me is repulsive.” I shot back.

He gave me a grin. “That is good to know.” He said. “I should hate to think I could be replaced.”

“I haven’t had time to find anyone else.” I shot back. “Besides I rather enjoy your company, when you are around.”

“We do have some catching up to do, don’t we.” He smiled.

“I thought that’s what we were doing now?”

He gave a small shake of his head. “Right now I am doing my best to dissuade you from doing something foolish.” He said. I made a spitey face but he continued speaking before I could say anything to counter this statement, “I would much prefer our intimate conversation not include thoughts over this other man whom neither of us particularly likes.”

I glanced up at him. “Well, if you’d let me deal with him then I wouldn’t have to think about him.” I drew a finger across my neck.

He smirked. “Yes, and that would present you with a whole other set of new problems. While Zaarin maybe distasteful to you he is still a valued member of the Imperial Navy not some renegade turned rebel.” His fingertips played up and down the nape of my neck. “Let Palpatine deal with the Grand Admiral and allow me to deal with you.” He leaned in and murmured in my ear. His breath was warm. I closed my eyes, drawing a deep breath to take in his scent of soap, spice and something I could never define but made me shivery and achy.

“Well, don’t start something you can’t finish now.” I grumbled, my palms flat against his chest.

He lifted my chin upwards with the tip of his forefinger. His smile was charming. His kiss was teasing, slow, and made my knees tremble. When he pulled away from me I was both cross and aroused.

“That was so not fair.” I said when I found my voice.

“Of course not, but tactically it was the best way to distract you.” He brushed his cheek against mine, “A little reminder of my prowess in the art of non verbal warfare.” He murmured. His skin felt cool against the blush of my own.

“I can hurt you, you know, with my hands not my tongue.” I told him without any real conviction.

He smiled slowly, “Promises, promises,” he said, which earned him a smack on the arm.

“I have to get ready; the driver will be here soon.” I said. “This little extra curricular activity you may or may not be a part of after the public reception better not tire you out too much!” As soon as the words were out of my mouth the mood between us changed from playful to serious.

He lifted an eyebrow and gave me a cool look. “It would be wise not to even think about mentioning that outside of this flat, tekari.” He said. “You are not supposed to know about this.”

“This is a really big deal isn’t it?” I asked.

His answer was taciturn. “Yes.”

“Then why so hush-hush?” I asked.

“Because I am the Emperor’s dirty secret.” He said stepping back from me.

I looked at him in puzzlement. Sometimes the games that went on in Palpatine’s inner circle were utterly perplexing. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He drew a deep breath and made that face I had come to associate with lengthy and unsatisfying answers. “It is a very complicated real life game of dejarik. There are a lot of things going on right now, none of which I am at liberty to talk about and none which I want you involved in. I don’t want you to be any more of a target than you already have been.” He caressed my face with his fingertips. The teasing tone from earlier had vanished.

I cocked my head to one side, put my hands on my hips and stepped back from his touch. “Do you think I am too stupid to understand the complicated game of internal intrigue?” I couldn’t keep the annoyance I felt out of my voice. I was tired of being kept at arm’s length when it came to his political affairs, especially when they somehow managed to involve me.

His jaw tightened. “On the contrary,” He said coldly, “I keep you out of this side of my business because if I have to worry about you, on top of everything else, I may lose my concentration. You are the one element in my life I cannot seem to predict. You make things chaotic. This is a very dangerous game I am playing and I need to know you are not in the line of fire.” He played with one of the strands of hair which curled by my cheek. “Leave this alone. Tonight just play along and be pretty palace decoration because while I know what you are capable of, know how strong you are and how dangerous you can be when pushed in the right direction, most of

the people who have power out there don't. At the moment you are not a threat to any of the major players. I would prefer it stays that way. Zaarin happens to be one of those players and believe me when I say this; he is far more dangerous than you like to think. As with so many others in this Empire he plays his role to perfection. He may come off as a lecherous bastard but I am certain this is just a ruse for something else, something bigger and not pleasant."

"So he's not actually interested in me?" I asked, not bothering to keep the bite of sarcasm out of my voice, "and all his attentions are just for show?"

Thrawn smiled slowly. "Oh, tekari I have no doubts that he would bed you in a heartbeat if you gave him the slightest chance but there is more to his advances than meets the eye. It is not like him to be so persistent in his pursuit of a woman who clearly does not want him. In all my time in the Empire and for as long as I have known him, he has never been so single minded about a female before. This leads me to conclude there is more to his desire to have you than simply satisfying his lust. You are, after all, the one person, aside from the Emperor who knows Lord Vader better than anyone else. Such knowledge would be invaluable to a man like Zaarin."

"You make it sound so sinister." I said with a scowl.

"That would be because it is sinister, my dear. Zaarin is intelligent, powerful and dangerous. He has tried to kill me and he has tried to kill you. He is not what he appears to be and Vader should know better than to place you in the middle of it all." He said sharply. He stared at me making sure I got the message he was trying to send. When I didn't answer, he sighed. "A'myshk'a, the very last thing I planned for was having someone I truly cared for in my life, you know this. Yet here you are, exactly the distraction I don't need while I am engaged in these political campaigns. Eventually you will know everything, so please back down; this isn't a contest of wills between you and me, don't turn it into one just because you don't get your own way." He spoke earnestly; the concern in his voice outweighed the frustration of arguing with me. I knew two things for sure. He wasn't lying and he was a little worried, the latter was very unsettling. For a moment we just stared at each other and then I gave way.

"If you insist." I said giving him a slight, tight smile.

"I do." He replied. He cupped my face with both hands, making me look up at him.

"Okay, for you I'll do the palace fluff thing tonight but you'll owe me for it." I didn't bother to hide my annoyance and frustration. I was getting tired of these games.

His smile turned wolf like. "That is a debt I am certain I will enjoy repaying then."

I just rolled my eyes. The door chime rang letting me know the driver was here. "I have to go."

"Best not to keep Lord Vader waiting then, he's not the most patient man in the galaxy." He nodded, handing me my wrap.

I planted a quick kiss on his cheek, grabbed my purse and left. He would not be far behind me and although we would not be attending this event as a couple, I took a lot of solace in knowing he would be there.

Lord Vader stood statue still, with his hands behind his back, watching the crowd. I stood at his side and waited quietly. He liked to make a dramatic entrance so he always paused before entering a crowded room. The buzz of voices in the great audience hall died to a dull whisper when he swept down the stairs to the grand foyer with me in tow, desperately trying not to step on his billowing cloak.

Lord Vader was many things but the life of the party was not one of them. As he passed through the crowd, people stepped back from him, giving him room to move through the crowd. He paid no attention to the hush and once the shock of seeing him had passed the conversation level rose back to normal. I watched as the momentary stillness was broken by elegant wait staff winding their way through the throng. They did not even stop doing their jobs for a moment. I was tempted to snatch a glass of what ever it was they were serving but decided not to. The drinks had that tell tale sparkle which let me know they had been laced with glow spice.

As he stalked through the room, with me trailing in his wake, several people stopped to speak with him, mostly Grand Moff's and members of the Admiralty. The conversations were dull and I stayed in the Dark Lord's shadow, letting my mind drift. I nearly jumped out of my skin with fright when someone touched my shoulder from behind. I turned around to stare in to Grand Admiral Zaarin's face.

"My apologies, I did not mean to startle you, Miss Gabriel." He said with a pleasant smile.

"Good evening, Grand Admiral Zaarin," I smiled back at him.

"Please Miss Gabriel, call me Demetri."

We'd been through this dance before. I just nodded and smiled. "As you wish."

"Will you be watching the ceremony from here or from the balcony with Lord Vader?" He asked.

“That depends on Lord Vader’s wishes.” I answered. “What about you?”

“As a member of the Council of Twelve I shall be with the Emperor as he gives his speech. It would, of course, be made all the more pleasant by your presence.” He punctuated his statement with a casual caress of my forearm. I moved so that the contact was broken. His smile slipped a little.

“I must admit I am surprised to see you here, I thought that you would be busy with your engineering projects.” I said. “I understand they are quite time consuming.”

“Ah yes, well the Emperor wished all twelve of his Grand Admirals be present for the dedication ceremony.” He said casually, “and of course we live to serve.”

“Of course.” I smiled. There was a lie underneath his words and he was not at all happy to be here. “So your projects are going well?” I asked again.

He gave me a tight smile. “The last time we spoke you did not seem terribly interested in me or my work.”

“On the contrary, as I recall, you discussed your work at great length ruining several fine linen napkins in the process. I am very interested in the newest technology the Empire is creating.” I said. *I am just not interested in you*, I thought.

“Ah yes, of course. Well, the designs I spoke of with you have been finalised and many new ones in various test phases.” He said.

“I heard a rumour that you were working on trying to cloak ships, that sounds very exciting.”

He paused for a second but I just gave him a smile. “It has been a project in the planning stages for a while but there is no real project to speak of, plenty of ideas and plenty of problems.” He said. I didn’t have to dig to even feel the lie underneath the words.

“So there is no prototype yet?” I asked.

“Not yet, but the conceptual designs are worth looking at. It is quite exciting actually; perhaps if Lord Vader is so inclined you would be permitted to visit the facility and you could see them for yourself, I understand your clearance would allow that, if not I am sure I could find a way to have an exception made.”

“I’ll try to catch him on a good day and ask.” I replied with a light smile.

He paused for a moment and studied my face then said, “You know you might want to consider changing jobs and working for a less ... *difficult* member of the Imperial Navy.” He spoke casually but underneath his words

was an anger I couldn’t quite place. “I am certain the Emperor would permit you to transfer to assist another officer, or department.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’d want to transfer. I like my job, it is always interesting.” I said sweetly.

As he leaned in closer to me, he said. “You seem genuinely interested in my work, you have the engineering skills to make you a useful assistant to me and I would enjoy working closely to you. Surely your skills are being wasted under Lord Vader?”

“Well, I think you would have to ask him about that, I cannot judge if he wastes my talents but I think he might disagree with you.”

He simply smiled. “I could provide you with an interesting job and I guarantee you it would not be so dangerous.”

I moved back from him just a step and gave him a polite smile. “Oh, I don’t know about that, believe it or not my job is extremely interesting and,” I said, “I imagine you can be quite dangerous when you wish to be.”

A shadow crossed his face as he sorted out the meaning behind my words but he hid it well. “I shall take that as a compliment, Miss Gabriel.”

I played with a lock of my hair and smiled coyly but before I could say anything else Lord Vader came to stand beside me and engaged Zaarin in conversation. While the two men spoke I listened with that strange inner sense but despite the impression Zaarin was hiding something, I could not tell much at all. He was very strong willed and not easily bent to the force. It was frustrating.

“*Merlyn!*” Lord Vader suddenly snapped in my mind.

I blinked up at him then realised that Zaarin had been speaking to me directly.

“Oh I’m sorry Grand Admiral, you were saying?”

Demetrius Zaarin smiled tightly. “I was just telling Lord Vader of your interest in my work and then I commented that you look quite radiant this evening.”

“Uhm, Thank-you. I have to give the credit to my dress maker, Cati, she really does create miracles.” I said, a little taken aback by his sudden compliment.

Zaarin watched us for a moment and then continued to speak to me. “I noticed that you did not accompany with Admiral Thrawn, although I saw that he arrived shortly after you did. I did not realise he had returned to Coruscant and I am surprised he did not require your company for this event.” He was fishing.

I shrugged, “Admiral Thrawn does not require my company for anything.” I answered coolly. I did not like the ripple of hatred that had slipped into the words Zaarin spoke.

“So you are here on your own?”

I smiled. “No, I am with Lord Vader.” The dark lord glanced at me but said nothing.

“Ah, yes, of course. Will your delightful assistant be accompanying you to the balcony to watch the Emperor’s speech?” He asked Lord Vader.

“I suppose she may join us and watch the festivities.” He replied. I hated it when men spoke about me as though I were not standing right in front of them.

“That’s kind of you, my lord.” I said a tad more tartly than I had meant to. Lord Vader said nothing but I felt the tiny Force nudge to behave. I knew that he wanted me to read Zaarin and if that meant forcing me to be near the Grand Admiral, Vader would play that game. I bit my tongue, I could get away with being a smart mouth with lord Vader in private but never in public.

Zaarin’s smile widened just a little. “Perhaps after the official ceremony is over we shall have more time to discuss my work.” He punctuated this statement with a brush of his hand on my arm.

“Perhaps.” I said lightly, moving back from his reach. I did not like that he kept touching me as though suddenly I was his property.

“Then I shall look forward to later on.” He said.

I was saved from having to answer by the announcement that the ceremony was about to begin. The speeches and the actual dedication would take place out on the huge balcony which over looked the main palazzo allowing the general public, who waited eagerly beyond the barriers set up by security, to see and hear the words of the Emperor. I followed Lord Vader up the stairs to the balcony where seating had been arranged. I felt the glances and heard the whispers that swirled about as the crowd moved back in to fill the space we had made. I wasn’t sure what the buzz was for this time and the attention I was being shown was a little more than I usually got but I didn’t mind. I was more than used to being the topic of people’s idle chatter and the subject of their gossip.

The new Assembly wing had been in construction for just over a year and contained a very large theatre style auditorium, a set of new conference rooms, a new daycare center for palace workers and a public access library. A great deal of fuss had been made about the new wing because it had been incredibly expensive to build and there had been several nasty articles on the HoloNet about the waste of tax payer’s money. The writers of these articles had all met with surprising and sudden accidental deaths.

The Emperor arrived with all his usual fanfare and entourage, including six royal guards. The guards never ceased to amaze me, they

moved like red ghosts, silent and eerie. Standing in semi circle around the Emperor as he sat on the chair provided for him. Along with the guards were his advisors, pale, pinch faced men with beady eyes and a lust for power so great they seemed swallowed whole by it, and the beautiful courtesans who adorned the Emperor’s entourage like the pretty jewels they all wore. I noticed that Mara Jade was among them and sat close to her master. A great hush washed over the masses of people and while I was never sure quite how the Emperor managed to inspire such awe I was certain his use of the Force had a great deal to do with it.

Lord Vader, being who he was, did not sit but instead chose to stand directly behind me, freeing up a chair which Grand Admiral Zaarin decided he could take instead. I glanced at him and he gave me a sly smile. I sighed, wondering if my plan of using Lord Vader as a shield had backfired a little bit. I glanced around and saw that the entire council of twelve were present, but of Thrawn there was no sign. I guessed he had not been invited up to the balcony, after all, in theory, he was still in disgrace.

‘How long will this take, do you think?’ I asked Lord Vader silently.

‘How should I know?’ Came his cross reply. He hated these functions even more than I did and he was very unhappy that attendance for this one had been mandatory. *‘No more than half an hour, the Emperor has other things to deal with tonight.’*

I turned around to look up at him. *‘Oh?’*

I felt his scowl as he looked down at me. *‘For Sarlacc’s sake, girl, mind your own business, stay out of things that do not concern you!’*

I turned back to sit straight and gaze out over the crowd of people. While the overall mood seemed festive enough the under currents were anything but. Recent battle at Hoth, general unrest and small skirmishes out on the Outer Rim had people in the core concerned. The Core worlds, which enjoyed the most Imperial protection, did not like disruptions in the shipping lanes and the effects of what had happened to Alderaan still lingered in people’s minds.

The Emperor stood as he began to speak; loudspeakers amplified his voice for all to hear. His speech contained a lot of words like *great* and *glorious*. He was an excellent public speaker, I suppose that came from his days as chancellor of the senate but as I sat with my hands clasped on my lap; one leg crossed over the other, I mostly tuned him out. I had heard a variation of this speech many times and I no longer believed it.

My thoughts turned to what Thrawn had talked about earlier. The *Emperor’s dirty secret*, he had said. I didn’t understand what he had meant by that. I had always been under the impression that Palpatine liked having Thrawn around and that the two worked closely together, conspiring to

bring the vast Empire under tighter control but after our conversation I was not so sure any more. I was so deep in my thoughts that when Zaarin put his hand on my thigh I jumped in fright. He leaned over and whispered a comment about how glorious the new wing was.

I turned to look at him. The hand on my thigh moved in a slight caress. Even though there were people seated in front of us blocking any view of what he was doing I didn't think causing a scene would be the smartest move. I took his hand in mine gently and gave him a sweet smile. He returned the smile with one of his own and I could feel his surprise. He was about to be surprised further. I let my fingers run over his hand until I found that tender spot between the thumb and palm and then I applied enough pressure to cause pain. Zaarin snatched his hand away with a hiss that made Lord Vader stir behind me. I felt the dark lord's subtle warning to behave.

"He's being a nerf herder, can't you force choke him or something?" I asked by way of explanation.

"No."

'If he touches me again, I'll have to seriously hurt him.' I told him.

'Behave yourself or I will deal with you!' Came the terse reply. I was on my own with this latest problem.

I didn't have time to reply because the Emperor had finished his speech and we were all expected to stand and applaud while he turned his back on the crowd, swallowed up by his royal guardsmen and was whisked away to the safety of some inner sanctum.

With a sigh I followed Lord Vader out, Zaarin walking behind me decided to push his luck by placing his hand on my back, a few centimetres too low to be polite but not low enough to be down right improper. I gritted my teeth as we left the balcony and used the force to shift one of the chairs we walked past just enough so that he stumbled on the leg. I quickened my pace to put enough distance between us so he couldn't touch me again. It was a relief to reach the main hall and even more so when Shiv found me standing beside Lord Vader.

"Lord Vader, good to see you, sir." Shiv said politely. "I trust you are well?"

I watched as Lord Vader regarded Shiv for a moment and then gave him a slight nod. "Yes." He said pointedly and then walked off to speak with a Moff, whose name I didn't know.

"He's in a chatty mood, isn't he?" Shiv said with cheerful sarcasm.

"Don't be a Hutt-head." I smiled.

"Listen, I have to go pick up Ynyth and Bobbyn. Do you want to come with me?" There was almost an hour to go before the private reception started.

I shook my head. "Not really, I was thinking that I'd go to my office, finish up some work and have a cup of tea." The thought of negotiating Coruscant traffic with Shiv driving made me inwardly cringe. He was not the best driver I had ever seen and usually I spent any trip I made with him with my eyes half closed.

"Work?"

"I always have work to do." I said. "But there is a last minute project Lord Vader wants done as soon as possible. I thought I would take advantage of the quiet time to get a start on it."

"He's such a slave driver." Shiv said. "Hey, I see your Admiral is back on planet." He commented nodding over in the direction of the main entrance.

I looked up and saw Thrawn speaking with one of the Emperor's advisors. "Yes, he came in late last night."

Shiv grinned at me. "Oh?"

"No 'oh' just good to have him back for a while." I told him. Then I asked, "Why didn't Ynyth come with you for the public part of this shindig? I thought we all had to be here?"

"*Mandatory* is just the Empire's way of making sure some people come to these functions. No one really cares. She couldn't be bothered to sit through all the speeches; it's not as if we haven't heard them before. No one important misses us minions at these things but they will probably ask about her at the reception so I told her I'd pick her up after the public dedication."

"True enough. I wish I could have avoided coming though." I said ruefully, glancing around to see Grand Admiral Zaarin staring at me in a way that reminded me of how scyks looked at prey. I glanced away from his gaze.

"Do you want us to stop by your office and pick you up or shall we all just gather at the reception?" Shiv asked.

"Oh at the reception is fine. Things won't get going for a while anyway so take your time. You can comm me if you need to." I said stifling a yawn.

Shiv grinned. "No sleep last night?"

I shook my head. "It will surprise you but actually, I slept the whole night through. The Admiral came back very late so it's not what you think. This event is just dull."

He nodded. "Well, you could go talk to Zaarin, I've noticed him giving you the eye." Shiv teased.

I made a face. "Ugh don't talk to me about that slimo. He's all hands on tonight; I don't know what's gotten into him. It's as if someone gave him the go ahead to feel me up at every opportunity."

"Well, maybe the rumour that you and Thrawn broke up might have something to do with that." Shiv said studying his nails.

That raised my eyebrows. "What? Where did that one come from?"

"He's here, you're here but you didn't arrive together, you haven't said a word to each other in public and I suppose someone figured he'd dumped you. It's been a while since anyone saw you two actually together at an official function. It's not as if you advertise your relationship with one another in the first place. That's how rumours start and they spread like wild fire. So far in the last hour I have heard three variations on exactly how he dumped you. It was very dramatic and you are devastated by the way. There are two accounts on how you cheated on him with someone. No one is sure who it was you cheated with but good money is, of course, on Zaarin. According to one of the courtesans I spoke to, Thrawn is so heart broken he cannot even bear to look at you. And lastly, one very odd story about you being pregnant with Thrawn's love child which he refuses to acknowledge. According to my source, you should start showing in a couple of months and it's a boy."

I shook my head. "I do so love this crazy place and its penchant for insane gossip, but that would explain why Zaarin suddenly thinks I am free for the taking and has been pawing at me since I arrived. Guess I am going to have to educate him on the error of his ways."

Shiv smiled. "I take it that none of those rumours are true then?"

"Not even close." I told him. "Things on the home front are good, I think. He's only been back since late last night so we haven't had much time to catch up yet, but so far things are fine."

"Glad to hear it, you two are my faith in romance."

"Oh, like you and Ynyth aren't a solid, albeit secretive, couple." I teased him.

Shiv just smiled. "Speaking of Ynyth, I suppose I'd better go so that I get back here in time to enjoy the wonderful canapés and dull conversation. The traffic will be hell with everyone who was watching the speeches trying to get back home from here."

"Yep, not good to keep her waiting and you know how Bobbyn gets if he thinks he will be late."

Shiv laughed. "And people think I'm neurotic." He gave me a kiss on each side of my cheek. "Okay kiddo, we'll see at the reception. If we get back before the doors open we'll stop by your office."

"Drive safely." I wagged my fingers at him and watched as he sauntered out of the hall. I glanced at the chrono on the wall; I had about an hour before the private reception in the Tarkin room began. I turned to leave only to come face to face with Zaarin holding two glasses of some sparkly drink.

"I took the opportunity to fetch you a drink." He said with a smile. "I thought you might be thirsty."

I looked at the glass and shook my head. "That's very kind of you, but I am afraid I cannot drink that."

"Oh?" He asked. "Why is that? Is the drink not to your liking?"

I was about to answer when Thrawn suddenly appeared at my side. He saluted Zaarin who had to hand one of the glasses he had been holding to me so that he could return Thrawn's salute. I had to fight the urge to giggle. The two men may have despised one another but that did not mean they did not observe proper courtesy.

"Miss Gabriel is allergic to glow spice." Thrawn said as he removed the glass from my hand to place it on the tray of a passing waiter in one fluid, elegant motion.

Zaarin looked at us both but neither Thrawn's nor my body language was telling him anything other than we knew one another. Thrawn was his usual cool, reserved self and I made sure I did not show my delight and relief at his sudden presence by my side.

"Oh, I see." Zaarin said after a moment. "I was not aware of this. Is it a serious allergy?"

The lie in his words was so strong it felt like a slap. I simply nodded at him. "It can be." I said simply. I didn't need to go into details. He knew them intimately despite his words to the contrary.

"And how is it that you are aware of this Admiral?" Zaarin asked Thrawn coolly.

"I remember her telling a waiter of this fact at the Grand ball several years ago." Thrawn replied in an offhand almost bored. "It was an usual allergy so it stuck in my mind, causes severe headaches if I recall correctly" He added looking at me. I nodded in agreement.

Zaarin nodded and sipped his drink. "Yes, that is unusual." He said. "You have my apologies, Miss Gabriel, shall I order you something else not so detrimental to your health?"

I opened my mouth to say no but Thrawn interrupted. "I must apologise for being impolite but I would be grateful if I could have a few

moments of your time alone, Grand Admiral. There are some items I would very much like to discuss with you. I have a meeting I must attend to in a few moments and I have no idea how long it will take, so I am afraid I must intrude upon your time here and now.”

Zaarin looked at Thrawn for a moment and then nodded, “Of course, Admiral. Miss Gabriel, if you would excuse us?” he said politely dismissing me.

I was only too happy to comply. “Gentlemen.” I said with a little nod of my head and turned to vanish into the crowd which was beginning to thin out. With the public dedication finished and some time until the private reception began people had either decided to go home in between or sit and wait in small groups, chatting quietly. I glanced about looking for familiar faces but there was no one I knew well enough to chat with and although a few people stopped me as I meandered through the crowd to make polite small talk I was, for the most part, left alone.

I glanced at the chrono on the wall and figured out that I had just enough time to go to my office, make myself a cup of tea and finish up on some things I had to do. As I took one last glance around the room I saw that Lord Vader and a few other key figures had left the main hall. I caught sight of Lianna, who was really called Mara Jade, coming to stand beside Sate Pestage. Their conversation looked tense.

As usual, she looked lovely and I wondered what Pestage was saying to her because surprise and suspicion crossed her face for a second. I watched them converse for a few moments longer and then she nodded at something Pestage had said and turned gracefully to leave the hall. I watched as Pestage walked to where Thrawn and Zaarin were having their discussion, interrupting them. As Pestage spoke, Thrawn glanced around the room, his eyes caught mine, I went to give him a little wave but an almost imperceptible movement of his head made me change my mind. He held my gaze for a few seconds longer than necessary and then at Pestage’s urging he too left the hall. I glanced back briefly to where Thrawn had been standing only to find Zaarin staring at me. I pretended I had not noticed and left for the solace of my office.

The palace was very quiet. I liked it when it was this way. I walked through the dimly lit hallways quickly, the sound of my high heeled shoes echoing loudly off the marble. I knew two of the guards on security duty and told them they hadn’t missed much when they asked about the

ceremony. It would be holo-cast later on anyway; the HoloNet News team had been all over the place.

My office was a refuge of peace and tranquility. I turned on the small corner lamp, filled the kettle up and turned it on and then I went to stand at the window to watch the never ending movement of lights as the traffic flew around the city. When the kettle boiled I made a pot of white chaya leaf tea, poured a cup which I cradled in my hands for warmth then went back to staring out of the window ignoring the work I had intended to do.

This city, this planet which never stopped moving, never slept amazed me almost as much as it repulsed me. Technically, it was a wonder such a place even existed at all but that was more spectacular mechanical engineering than anything else. It was a sort of jungle made from duracrete and metals, life forms of all sorts and processing plants which scrubbed the atmosphere, cleaned the water and provided never ending power. I wondered how many of the millions of beings who lived here really cared about whom was actually in charge. Did it matter who actually ran the government as long as essential services kept working, and salaries got paid, public transportation ran on time. Did the average citizen worry about the inner political workings at all? I didn’t really think so. All most beings cared about was how they would feed, house and clothe themselves and their families, what they would watch on the HoloNet when they got home from work and how much they hated or loved their jobs.

These questions led me to think about the pursuit of power. I wasn’t sure I understood that either. What was the purpose of more power, more fame and more money? Surely there must be a point at which too much was just too much. Greed was a concept I didn’t really get, I had never lusted after material wealth or things. How much junk could a person have in their lives? All the clothes, books, expensive jewels and so on didn’t make one a better person, it just weighed one down. Living on and off of ships had taught me that too much stuff was a burden not a good thing. The less one owned the more freedom one had. I supposed, as I thought about it, that my desires and wants lay in different directions, I just wasn’t sure exactly what they were. I sighed. It hurt my head to think about this topic.

I sipped my tea quietly, enjoying the peace that my office provided. I was so lost in my own thoughts that a knock on the door made me jump. I smiled, thinking Shiv must have driven his speeder like a mad thing to get back so quickly and I used the force to unlock and open the door, a trick he usually made fun of but never tired of seeing it.

"You guys must have broken all the speed limi..." I started but by the time I had turned around I realised that it wasn't Shiv and Ynyth standing in the doorway it was Grand Admiral Zaarin.

"Good evening, Miss Gabriel." He said as the door behind him. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

There was a pause in time while I assessed this situation. He had a look on his face which said he had made up his mind about something and I probably wasn't going to like it much.

I kept my voice light. "Grand Admiral Zaarin, what can I do for you at this late hour?"

"I thought you and I might have that little chat about my work now and perhaps I could get to know you a little better." He said. "I saw you leave the assembly hall and wanted to make sure that you were alright so I followed you. It hasn't been safe lately to wander around the palace alone. Did you not hear what happened to Prince Xizor?"

I walked over to my desk, put my cup down and turned on the small desk lamp to add more light to the dim room. "Yes, but I am quite sure that was an isolated incident. I'm fine, so there is no need for you to concern yourself with my well being."

"On the contrary Miss Gabriel, I am quite concerned for you. You don't seem to understand the sort of trouble a young lady such as yourself might attract." He casually walked towards the desk, picking up a book then laying it back down again. There was something in his voice that made me look at him carefully.

"I think you underestimate my ability to take care of myself, really I'm fine. You should return to the great hall and enjoy the event." I said.

He looked at me. "I think I would prefer to enjoy the pleasure of your company in private."

"That is very flattering but I afraid you will find me quite dull."

"I doubt that Miss Gabriel." He said "I rather find you quite fascinating."

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. This was beginning to sound like a bad Holloway script. "Then I would be happy to chat with you at the reception later but right now, it would be best if you allowed me to return to my work. I am rather busy and Lord Vader is unforgiving if I am not on top of things." I told him putting a little edge in my own voice.

"You didn't look terribly busy to me," He said in a casual manner, "staring out of the window drinking tea."

I sighed, dropping my *I'm being nice* face. "Okay seeing as how being polite doesn't work what about this? Please leave." I moved so that the desk was between us, making him have to come around it to come to

stand in front of me. I wanted my desk and the office door at his back. He took a step forward forcing me to step backwards to avoid closer contact with him.

"You know, Miss Gabriel, I am getting rather tired of being turned away and told 'no' by you." Now we were getting to the truth of the matter.

"Then maybe you should stop asking me for things you can't have." I replied. Anger, lust and something I could not quite define rippled through the air. I took another step away from him, wondering how far he would go and how far I should let him. I was not scared. I didn't think he was a threat to me in any real physical sense and in the back of my mind I saw an opportunity to accomplish what Lord Vader had requested, but that didn't mean I wasn't feeling the adrenaline rush through my body.

"There is nothing here I cannot have." He said casually as he backed me slowly and carefully against the wall behind the desk. Now he was facing me and the wall, he could not see my desk or the entrance to the office.

"I am willing to bet the Emperor would see things a little differently." I replied, keeping my voice light. We could have been talking about tea instead of what he really wanted.

"The Emperor has no say in how I conduct my private affairs." He snarled.

"Really?" I asked a little more tartly than I meant to. "I was under the impression that the Emperor rules this galaxy so I would assume he actually does have a say in the affairs of those who work for him."

He said. "Well, maybe for now that is the case but it won't always be that way."

"Oh?"

He moved in front of me, caging me in place with his arms on either side of my body. He was taller than me so I had to look up at him to meet his stare. "Have you considered what would happen to you if the Emperor were no longer in power?" He asked.

I shook my head. "No." I said. "Why would I ever even imagine such a thing?"

"The Emperor is human." He said as if that explained it all.

I shrugged. "Well if something ever were to happen to him, I imagine that, as second in command, Lord Vader would take up the slack and I work for him so I don't think my life would change very much." I said.

He didn't like that answer much. His eyes had become cold and hard. He hadn't done anything yet to make me defend myself so I didn't have a reason to hit him but I itched to do so. My skin crawled at his closeness. The sour scent of recently drunk champagne on his breath,

which was warm on my face, as he spoke to me made me queasy. I didn't want to provoke him into violence because I hoped to avoid that but he was making me cross. I doubted that if he was on the receiving end of my Bunduki training he would be very chatty about his nefarious plans, if he even had any. I wasn't entirely sure that Lord Vader was just over-reacting to Zaarin's ambitions.

Zaarin's voice was icy as he spoke, "Lord Vader is obsessed with finding one rebel. He is consumed by anger and hatred. His leadership skills are next to non-existent. His ridiculous notions cost this Empire precious time, credits and man power! Do not think for a moment that he would take the Emperor's place. He is a lackey, dressed to put fear into the minions who live only to serve."

"I am not so sure that he would see it this way." I commented dryly, not liking how he spoke about the man I worked for.

This clearly puzzled him. "Do you not wish to better your station? Are you not tired of working for a man who does not appreciate your talents?" He asked. His voice was suddenly soft and coercive, but I had heard this speech before, although last time it had been from a man I actually liked and respected. Zaarin's words did nothing except stir up the spark of anger in my gut.

"I like the work I do, Grand Admiral Zaarin. I also enjoy working for Lord Vader and I have no desire to change that any time soon."

When he caressed the side of my face I pulled up some of my own power, took the lust I felt from him and showered it back. I knew he felt it because his pupils dilated and he gasped slightly. I hoped it would put him off balance but he just smiled.

"I could make you so much more than you are now, you could be at my side and have everything you ever desired."

"How would you do that? I don't think Lord Vader would let me switch jobs and work for you." I asked not bothering to even tell him I had everything I desired already.

"You would not be working for me, dear, you would be my companion."

"Oh really." I said flatly. "Well, I don't think that would work out." and then added before I could censor myself, "I already have companionship." I didn't miss the flash of anger in his eyes, "Besides the Emperor has made it clear how he feels on relationships between palace girls and members of the Imperial Navy." I added.

"That rule has not seemed to hamper you any when it comes to Imperial men. I've seen how you and that red-eyed abomination carry on and I've heard the rumours about your ... exploits. You have no problems

ignoring the rules when it suits your purpose." He said sharply.

"You really believe all the gossip you hear about me?" I asked.

He ignored me and continued, "There will come a time when the Emperor will not have a say in such things at all." I caught a flash of hatred. He was not lying, he truly believed that soon enough the Emperor would not be around to dictate any longer. I tried to read more from his words but my skills for that were not very strong. I tried a different tack.

"How do you know this?" I asked. "Is the Emperor ill or something?"

He gave me a predator's smile and leaned even closer against me. "The Emperor's health has been failing for many years now. Nothing lasts forever, even stars eventually die." He said. "It is good to be prepared for all eventualities."

"I see, so what exactly is it you want of me?" I asked. I was getting tired of this.

"The same thing you apparently give every other man who asks." He toyed with my hair, tugging one of the Zenji sticks out. "You are quite versed in the art of seduction, I hear. You have Thrawn and Vader seemingly wrapped around your little finger, so I think you already know the answer to that."

I sighed. "Ah, you think, like everyone else, that I can read your mind?"

"You have a sharp tongue, Miss Gabriel. Not a very attractive trait in a woman." He said as he pulled out the second Zenji stick and my hair tumbled down about my shoulders. The air around me was suddenly filled with the scent of my shampoo and perfume. He tossed my hair sticks on the floor and ran his fingers through my hair. I winced as he caught a knot and pulled through it.

"Did you come here to chastise me for my lack of manners?" I asked crossly, "Or just play with my hair?"

He smirked. "You're a feisty little thing, I'll give you that. I can see why someone like Thrawn would find you fun to play with. I believe he enjoys breaking down difficult challenges. How often did you say no to him before you let him seduce you?"

"What makes you think I ever told him no?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. It probably wasn't the smartest thing in the galaxy to say but I didn't care. I was getting annoyed with him touching me. I was beginning to feel like one of the slave girls at Jabba's and I didn't like it very much.

His expression turned ugly. He grasped my jaw roughly, forcing my head back against the wall with a dull thud. For a split second anger flared through me and all I wanted to do was kill him. I bit this back in favour of baiting him just a little more. "Hurting me won't win you my affections." I told him.

"I do not wish your *affection!*" He smiled. He said as he began to touch me in a manner that made me want to vomit on him. His lust was powerful and I used it the same way I had on Myrkr when Thrawn had used my talents to seduce Ormante and his men. Desire clouded men's judgement and made them loose tongued and dopey. I hoped it would work here as well because if it didn't I was going to have to end this before it got utterly out of hand.

"Brute strength won't get you what you want either. Not even the Emperor who is more powerful than you are and rules this Galaxy could force me to do what you want." I said.

"The Emperor's power is fleeting."

"I don't think so."

I tried not to wince as Zaarin continued to hold my jaw in a vice like grip and fondle me. He was not gentle. "You are as naive as you are lovely." He said. "There are always ways in which to bring a tyrant down. Would you not rather be on the winning side?" he asked.

It crossed my mind briefly that the way in which he was manhandling me was how most people tested fruit in the market to see if it was ripe or not. I wondered how any of the women who slept with him put up with it. He had the romantic skills of a rancor. When he pinched me hard enough to hurt I pushed his hand off my breast.

"This behaviour is inappropriate." I told him. "And you are talking about treason. I won't be a part of this. I am loyal to the Emperor and I am not yours to touch!"

His eyes narrowed to thin slits. "Did you think you could just tell me to go away and I would? I always get what I want and that includes you, *little girl.*" He brought his face close to mine and whispered in my ear. "Just because you work for Vader doesn't make you special. You seem to think you are too good for anyone else but that's not the case. I know exactly what you are." His breath was sour and the sudden flashback I had of being in a similar situation when I was younger caused a tiny flash of panic, it lasted only a moment but he had not missed it and I felt his sense of triumph as he pinned me against the wall with one hand.

"You know nothing about me, you repulsive snake, and you never will." I hissed between clenched teeth.

He backhanded me violently across face. "Oh really, we'll see about that. By the time I am done with you not even the dregs of Coruscant will want to touch you."

"You disgust me!" I spat at him, my temper now getting the better of me.

"You need to learn respect, Miss Gabriel." He said tightly, hitting me a second time. I let my head roll with it this time. When I brought my face back to meet his eyes there was no mistaking the hatred I felt for him in my expression.

"Respect needs to be earned." I replied and just stared at him. I suppose he read the defiance in my eyes because he suddenly tore the bodice of my dress with both hands. I was glad this dress had allowed me to wear a bra. I shivered as the cool air hit my skin. He leered at me and suddenly the lacy lingerie I had on didn't seem to cover enough. Of course, I hadn't worn it with him in mind. "And tearing my clothes won't earn you mine. It just pisses me off." I told him.

"You are prideful for Outer Rim trash." He said. His eyes narrowed when he caught sight of the tiny ma'arilite pendant around my neck. He picked it up between his thumb and forefinger. Something in my expression alerted him that this meant something to me. "What's this? A gift from the Emperor's pet?" He spat. "Payment for services rendered? There is another thing I shall get rid of when I am in charge of this Empire. There is no place for freaks like Thrawn."

So that was what he was planning to do, a coup of some sort. When I didn't answer he yanked on the chain hard, breaking it and flung the necklace behind him spitefully. I heard it clatter across the desk. I had to swallow my fury but the hate that was boiling away in my belly was starting to get the better of me. Zaarin smiled and ran his finger along the edge of my collar bone. I shuddered. This had nothing to do with sex; this had everything to do with power. I wondered how much longer I should let this continue. His wandering hands decided that for me.

"You are really very pretty; it is too bad that alien has spoilt you for the rest of us. I might have considered making you my wife but I won't keep tainted goods."

I drew a deep breath and concentrated. As he pawed at me, I made my first move carefully and used the force to send my tea cup flying across the room where it smashed against the opposite wall loudly. The noise startled him and he turned around to see what it was, worried about getting caught in a compromising situation. The momentary distraction was just enough that I could move. I grasped the hand he had planted on my breast and I twisted it using pressure points causing him pain. He gasped in

surprise, pulled his hand free allowing me to shove him further away from me, giving me just enough room to strike.

With a move Boba Fett had taught me called the serpent's kiss I struck him. It required a little concentration and a lot of accuracy. The hand held straight and stiff, so that the energy from the sudden jab, quick and sharp, flowed through the arm and out of the fingertips like a lightning strike. I hit him just below his Adam's apple and he stumbled back from me gasping and clutching his throat. It wasn't as intimidating as Lord Vader's force choke, but it had the same effect. It was painful and it would feel like dying although it wasn't fatal. Chances were good that it probably wouldn't even leave a mark. While he stood trying to breathe I went on the offensive. Using the same technique, I found a second point of pain just under his collar bone and he grunted as his left shoulder and arm went numb. There was a little nerve there that hurt like hell when enough force on exactly the right place was applied.

I knew exactly how painful this was because, when he had been teaching me about pressure and pain points, my uncle had made sure I knew what everything felt like. "*So that you know the right points to hit at the right times lei-lei.*" He had said. My arm had tingled for at least an hour afterwards and I had been furious with him for doing that to me, but now I was grateful. I wanted Zaarin to suffer and I knew he would.

The surprised expression on Zaarin's face told me he had not expected this outcome. He had come here with the full intention of taking from me what he thought would be easy to get. To him I was just someone who had said no one too many times. He had wanted to hurt Thrawn and maybe even Lord Vader by hurting me. He had not bargained on me being able to fight back in a way that was not exciting for him. I stared at him in disgust. He was a pathetic, unattractive, older man who was grasping for power that was never his to have. I didn't care what Thrawn had said, I thought Zaarin was a moron.

He tried to straighten up and for a split second I debated what I should do next, how best to really hurt him because that is what I wanted to do. I wanted to damage him beyond repair and this desire rippled through me like wildfire. I had to fight the urge to let my powers loose and simply attack him without thought at all. Killing him would have been surprisingly easy but would land me in no end of trouble, besides Thrawn had repeatedly told me not to and the last thing I wanted to do was make Thrawn angry at me. I took a deep breath and forced myself to get a grip on the silent rage that flowed through me. I felt the wall of white noise recede and went to turn away from Zaarin but then he opened his mouth.

"You little bitch," He croaked, his voice was hoarse with pain. "You're nothing but Outer Rim trash and that damned alien's dirty little whore. You should be..." Before he could finish his next insult my anger got the better of me and I smashed my knee up into his groin as hard as I could. I felt rather than heard the rush of air he involuntarily exhaled. Groaning, he sank to his knees with a thud, his face utterly contorted in the white hot agony. I bent down beside him so I could whisper in his ear.

"If you ever touch me again Demetri, I will kill you and I'll do it in such a way that you will experience the most pain you have ever known in your life. When I am done I will dispose of your body so that no one, not even the Tze'yusha'Jin, will ever find you afterwards. Do we have an understanding? Nod if we do."

He nodded, his face red from pain and anger.

"You owe me a dress. I'll be sending you the bill, make sure you pay it."

I stood up and left the office as quickly as I could. Holding the pieces of torn bodice together, I made my way through the quiet halls to my old flat and let myself in. It had been a while since I had come in here at night. For a single moment I thought I saw something in the shadows move and imagined I heard the whisper of Jyrki's voice but when I turned on the lights the flat was empty. Ghosts, nothing more. I let out the breath I had been holding and went inside, locking the door behind me. A wave of shock shot through me and I was suddenly shivering and cold. I made my way to the 'fresher to clean up, washing my face with ice cold water hoping it would clear away some of the shakes. As I stood in front of the small bathroom mirror, stared at my reflection and sighed. My face and jaw were beginning to ache and my hair was a mess. I went into the bedroom to find something to wear. I had pretty much moved everything I owned into Thrawn's flat but I still kept enough clothes here in case of emergencies. I found a dress that was both suitable and pretty.

The deep cerulean blue set off my eyes. I studied my reflection in the mirror, feeling glad I had left a couple of formal dresses here just in case. I kicked off the pink shoes and slipped my feet in to the strappy little sandals that matched the dress I was now wearing. It was more revealing than the pink dress Zaarin had ruined and because I had lost some weight after it had been made, it was a little loose, but I didn't think anyone would care too much. It came with a matching shawl which I was grateful for because now in the aftermath of the adrenaline rush, I was cold.

I touched up my make up, taking special care to try and hide the slowly blossoming bruises Zaarin had left. It would not be the first time I had attended a public function with marks like this and everyone would put

it down to Lord Vader's brutality. Still I hid them as best I could. I brushed the tangles from my hair and decided to leave it long and loose. Once I had managed to make a passable job of makeup, I then went into the kitchen to see if there was anything decent left to drink. I was in the process of pouring brandy into a glass when my comm beeped. It was Shiv.

"Hey Rim-Girl, the reception is starting. Where are you?"

"In my old flat, I had a bit of an accident and needed a change of clothes."

"What sort of accident? Are you okay? You sound a bit odd."

"I tripped on that stupid rug in my office and tore my dress, I'm fine. I'll be there shortly."

"Okay, see you soon." He said sounding concerned. I could tell he wanted to ask more but I switched my comm off before he could and before anyone else could message me.

I sipped the brandy thoughtfully, going over in my head what had happened. Zaarin had not been very forthright about concrete information on his plans. I would have liked to have learned more but I was certain that he would never have told me, not even if I had slept with him voluntarily. Still, I thought as I let the brandy wash over my tongue, I had an idea of what he wanted to do. He wanted to get rid of the Emperor and take his place. Zaarin wanted to rule the galaxy. I just had no idea how he was going to go about trying to make that happen. It seemed to me, as I sat in the dimly lit kitchen that men like Zaarin just did not understand that nothing taken by force ever lasted. I swore silently to myself that the next man who ever tried that with me would just die. No more playing around. I was not a piece of merchandise to be manhandled and pawed at. With a sigh I drained the glass and made my way to the reception. The evening was off to an interesting start, I hoped that no one else tried anything with me because I was definitely in the mood to kill.

By the time I had finished changing and sorting my self out, the reception was well underway. As I entered the hall, I looked around but didn't see the Emperor or Thrawn. I did see Shiv and Ynyth who along with Bobbyn were waving like mad at me to get my attention. As I made my way through the crowd to meet them I stopped one of the waiters handing out drinks.

"Do you have anything besides that fizzy stuff?" I asked.

"Yes miss, whatever you like, I can get you from the bar." He replied politely.

"In that case I'd really like a Corellian double brandy kiss." I said and with a nod he vanished to fulfill my drink wish.

Shiv was the first to comment. "There you are, we were about to send out a search party." He said.

I grinned. "No need. I'm here. What did I miss?" I asked.

"Not much. It would appear that all the important people have vanished on some secret meeting and left us to fend for ourselves." He said in a mock whisper. "What about you, what happened?"

"A little accident. I was not watching where I was going." I said with a small shrug.

"Well, good that you keep extra clothes here, I guess." Shiv said as he gave me the once up and down. "But the other dress fit you better."

I nodded. "I know, but I kinda like the blue and all that pink does tend to make me feel like a china doll."

"Did you hit your face?" Ynyth asked suddenly, the light catching the bruising starting show under the make up.

"I don't want to talk about it. I feel dumb enough as it is." I had hoped no one would really notice but my friends always did.

She looked at me and nodded. I could see by the expression in her eyes that she, like the others, thought Lord Vader had done this. He had hurt me often enough and left his mark on my face that it was an easy thing to assume. I did not correct them but something about my hesitation had alerted Shiv and he would not let the matter drop.

"It's not like you to be clumsy; in fact you are one of the most graceful people I know. You wouldn't be lying to me would you?" He said quietly, taking me aside.

"If I was would you understand that if something else had happened this is neither the time nor the place to speak of it?"

He drew a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, but you better fill me in later or else." He waggled his finger at me. I just nodded and when the waiter came with my drink I took it from him gratefully and drank a large steady gulp.

We kept the conversation light, laughed at the silliness we saw around us, made fun of guests and courtiers alike but if I had been asked what had been said I couldn't have answered. It was a blur.

The reception was surprisingly well attended which meant that Shiv and Ynyth were busy making small talk with whomever came over and joined our little circle. Neither Bobbyn nor I minded being left to our own devices and for the most part we were quite content to just watch the crowd in silence. Bobbyn was always the quiet one but ever since Antygra's arrest and execution he had withdrawn even further in to his shell. I never knew if

he blamed me for what had happened to Tygs or if it was just that with Tygs gone the group dynamics had changed. I had been accepted as one of them only through Shiv's insistence, Ynyth as his mate had backed him up and somewhere along the line we had also become friends after a fashion but I was Vader's handmaiden, and no one really trusted me despite what appearances they gave. I didn't mind not having many friends, it meant less hurt when one of them betrayed me.

It was easy to tell when the Emperor had entered the hall because the electrified quiet that washed over us made me shiver. I looked to the entrance and saw Lord Vader follow in his master's footsteps. The hushed awe that had settled over the room receded slowly and soon the noise level was back to where it had been before the Emperor and his second in command walked in surrounded by a sea of red from the Royal Guard and the gaggle of colourful courtiers.

I was surprised to see Lord Vader in attendance because he had told me he would not come. I guessed that the Emperor had ordered him to show his face, so to speak, and this meant that Lord Vader would be in a foul mood. I made a mental note to stay away from him because the two of us in a mood was never a good combination. Despite the cheery happy face I was putting on underneath all the fancy dress and finery what I really wanted to do was hurt something. The last thing I needed was a reason and someone to goad me into it. Lord Vader had a knack for picking up my moods and he always knew how to needle me. I didn't want him to try that in public, bad mood or not.

The Emperor, on the other hand, must have been a great mood because he was actually mingling, something he rarely did any more. There had been many rumours about this failing health. In the few public appearances he had made where I had been present I had noticed he seemed older, shrunken somehow, as though the use of the Force was consuming him from the inside out. I had often wondered what toll using the force as he did must take. I knew from my own small experiences that after it I was very weary. *Everything was energy and all that energy had to go some where, my uncle had once said to me. The Force is energy, using it takes its toll, be careful how you wield your power lei'lei.* I watched the Emperor carefully, looking for signs of illness or weakness but I saw neither and the power that radiated from him was as strong if not stronger than it had ever been. He moved through the crowd with exquisite grace, Lord Vader at his side a towering, clumsy nightmare, dressed in black to scare. I wondered how many would be scared of him if they knew what he had been before the mask? A reckless hero, desperate for the recognition and love of those too haughty, too blinded by pride, to give it to him. In many ways, I

thought, he was still like this, looking to Palpatine for acknowledgement and praise. Despite all the evil he had done, I did not hate Lord Vader, the same could not be said for the shrunken old man at his side.

I was lost in thought when Thrawn, speaking with one of the Emperor's advisors, made his way gracefully down the stairs that led from the entrance. He was elegance personified and I could not take my eyes off him. I was not alone; other heads turned to look at the blue skinned, red eyed alien whose favour came and went at the Emperor's whim. I wondered what the courtiers would say if they ever learned the truth. They thought Thrawn was a puppet, a distraction of the Emperor's whose grace at court was tolerated only because he was good at battle tactics. I wondered if the Emperor even knew how deep Thrawn's brilliance went, and who it was that was manipulating who. He moved with a languid ease through the crowd and my heart raced at the sight of him, though I did my absolute best not to show it. I watched him until he made eye contact with me, and wove his way to where I was standing. Shiv and the others decided that now would be a good time to give me a little space and drifted off into the direction of the buffet table.

Thrawn smiled when he reached me but it didn't reach his eyes. "I distinctly recall you wearing pink when you left the flat earlier this evening, my dear." He said quietly.

I nodded, returning smile with one of my own. "And as always, your memory would be perfectly correct." I sipped my very strong drink.

He gave me a curious glance, the tone of my voice let him know that something wasn't quite right. "Is everything in order?" He asked quietly.

"If we are talking about the pink dress rule, then yes." I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Zaarin had finally made his entrance. He was too proud to retreat and it would have looked very bad for him, not showing up as all the other members of the Council of twelve were there and had been long before I had arrived. He didn't look so well. I was glad.

Thrawn followed my gaze, watching me watch Zaarin. "The pink dress rule?" he asked, his eyebrow lifting slightly.

"Every time I wear a pink dress something bad happens to me." I said lightly, glancing at Zaarin again from over the rim of my glass. His hand went to his throat often which made me smile.

Thrawn gave me a look which said '*Explain!*'

I turned my attention back to him. "I want you to do something for me."

He nodded. "If I can."

"I want you to smile and nod as though the conversation we are about to have is light and fluffy."

“Merlyn, what is going on?” He asked, frowning slightly.

“Smile.” I urged and glanced around quickly to see where Zaarin was now then turned my attention back to Thrawn. “We are having a lovely time at this wonderful event but I will be heading home soon.” I said through clenched teeth. The flirtatious tilt of my head did not quite match the venom in my voice.

“Are you ill?” he asked.

“No, but I am angry. If I stay here all evening I might do or say something that won’t make anyone very happy.” I chattered gaily. Then once again looked about to see where Zaarin was heading. Thrawn’s gaze followed mine and for a moment we stood in silence. Then I said. “This event is well attended, don’t you think? All the Grand Admirals are here, even Zaarin.”

“Indeed, although I am surprised to see him arrive so late.” Thrawn said. “I thought he would already be here, there was no Council of Twelve meeting before hand and he is neurotic about punctuality.”

“Well, maybe some fluffy distraction detained him.” I said cheerfully.

Something in my voice made Thrawn study me carefully. “What really happened to your dress?” He asked coldly.

“The dress was unfortunately damaged beyond repair.” I answered. It was the truth.

I watched the muscle in Thrawn’s jaw twitch as he clenched his teeth. “How?”

“Delicate fabric doesn’t tend to do well against brute strength.” I replied.

I knew when he had noticed the bruising I had tried to hide under the makeup because he frowned ever so slightly, his eyes narrowing, and reached over, moving my chin with the tip of his finger to see it better. I felt a ripple of anger from him. “Did you and Vader have a disagreement?” His voice was hard but he kept his expression neutral.

“I will answer that question of yours with a no.” I giggled, sipped my drink and glanced in Zaarin’s direction. “The Grand Admiral doesn’t look so well this evening, does he?”

Thrawn watched where I was looking but said nothing. From under dark lashes he studied the Admiral’s demeanor carefully then looked back at me. “Is he limping?”

“It would appear he has some sort of groin injury judging by his walk. Perhaps he pulled it trying out a new sport, a one on one sport that requires aggression and submission to work properly.” I bantered lightly.

Thrawn stared at me for a moment. It didn’t take him long to put it all together.

“Something happened between you and Zaarin.” His voice had gone flat.

I tilted my head to one side, “Nothing a good knee to his groin couldn’t solve.” I smiled sweetly.

“Merlyn, did he...?” He began.

“He tried.” I answered, cutting him off quickly from voicing his thoughts. I sipped at my drink.

I watched as Thrawn worked to maintain his calm. “Are you...?”

“I’m fine. I am a big girl and I can take care of myself against the likes of him. I’ll have some bruises on my face but nothing worth writing home about.” I said with a casual shrug. “Believe me, he didn’t get what he bargained for and he won’t try it again. He’ll be having... performance issues for a while.”

Thrawn turned away from me. I felt his anger came off him in waves. I watched as he drew a deep breath under the guise of flagging down a waiter. When he turned back to face me he had his emotions under control. I didn’t think that anyone else in the room would even notice that he was upset. He hid his feelings so well that even I would have not seen it unless I had known exactly what to look for.

“Shall I take you home?” He asked coldly as he touched his glass to mine and pretended to sip at his drink.

“No. I need to show him he didn’t win, which is why you need to smile at me.” I told him.

He did one better. Not only did he smile but he reached over and caressed the side of my face tenderly as though we were simply flirting with one another not discussing Zaarin’s attempted assault. It was a gesture that did not go unnoticed. I hoped that it would quell some of the negative rumours and maybe give the gossips something to talk about that did not lead in a Merlyn - Zaarin direction. I did not think it would be prudent for anyone to even imagine anything had happened between he and I, especially not the truth.

Thrawn’s hand slipped behind my hair, around the back of my neck and he drew me close to him, his grip unyielding, so that he could whisper in my ear. “You had better damned well be prepared to enlighten me in full when I return home.” He said, his voice was whip sharp and ice cold. “Now, Miss Gabriel, I do believe it is your turn to pretend everything is light and fluffy.” I had never know him so angry but he hid it remarkably well.

I pulled back from him and turned away shyly and pretended to smile even though his quiet fury had unnerved me. "You should mingle now, otherwise people will talk." I told him nibbling on my pinkie finger.

He glanced at my trembling hands and said, "People will talk anyway. This evening appears to be rife with rumour, particularly about you and me. I did not know we had such an interesting private life both together and apart." He replied with such disdain that for a moment I let go of the part I was playing to stare at him, hurt and angry.

"Remember where you are, A'myshk'a." He spoke softly in Cheunh.

I drew a deep breath and found my smile but it made my jaw ache. "The Imperial Court does love its intrigue." I said in Basic. "But this keeps the gossips from digging up the real news from behind the scenes, so I don't mind. Perhaps we can swap stories later on?"

He nodded. "Certainly I shall wish to hear yours." He replied with a cold smile that went nowhere near his eyes.

I gave him a sweet, girly giggle. The strong drink I was slowly sipping helped me play the coquette. "Enjoy the rest of the evening." I told him quietly and then I walked away from him without looking back.

I found my way to where Shiv was standing, laughing at something Ynyth had said. I joined in their conversation for about half an hour then I told Shiv I was going home because I wasn't feeling so well.

"You do look a bit pale. Maybe that accident you had some more damage than you thought? You could stop by the med-lab on your way." He said.

"No, I'm fine really, it's just a headache and I am quite tired."

"Do you want me to run you home?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks you stay and enjoy the party. I'll get one of the palace drivers to drop me off."

"Okay, kiddo. I'll talk to you tomorrow then." He said and we all went through the kiss-kiss ritual.

I handed my still half full glass to the nearest waiter and meandered through the crowd to leave.

I was almost to the entrance when the Emperor intercepted me. Standing at his side was Grand Admiral Zaarin and several royal guards.

"There you are my dear," He said. "I was hoping to see you here."

I curtsied. "Your Highness. The dedication you gave earlier was lovely. The new wing is quite spectacular." I babbled. I had hoped to avoid seeing Zaarin again so close, so soon.

"Thank you my dear." He said. "You know Demetrius Zaarin, don't you?" he asked, gesturing to Zaarin at his side.

I smiled as genuinely as I could. "Yes, we are acquainted with each other." I said looking at the Grand Admiral. He stared back at me, his eyes were as cold as the smile he managed to give me. I could feel the hate coming off him in waves and knew that if I could sense it so could the Emperor. I shivered involuntarily.

"I was just telling Demetrius about your Bunduki skills and how well you carried yourself at the trials you last took."

My smile stayed exactly as it was but my anger grew. "Is that so? I didn't know the Admiral was interested in that sort of thing."

The Emperor smiled. "Demetrius commented on what a delicate little thing you are. I merely told him that looks could be deceiving, you are quite talented." He said.

"As always, your Highness is very kind with his praise." I said demurely.

"Oh come now, child, you have done very well in your training. Your skills in defense are to be admired and spoken of." The Emperor smiled. Then he turned to Zaarin and added. "She was challenged to a death match and killed her opponent, even though she had a punctured lung and a dislocated shoulder. Our Miss Gabriel is really quite lethal, you know." He said, "Goodness knows what she would do if her fury was truly unleashed."

Zaarin glanced at the Emperor. "Oh really?" he asked. His voice was still a little hoarse. "One would never suspect such a thing of a simple office girl."

"Indeed, as I said, looks can be terribly deceiving." The Emperor said, with a wide, toothy grin.

Zaarin wouldn't look at me directly and that made me smile a little more. "I have excellent teachers." I said. "I owe everything I have learned to your kindness, your Highness." I wondered what he would say if I suddenly dropped the bomb that the Grand Admiral at his side really wanted to kill him and take over his place as ruler of the galactic empire. Then I wondered if that was something the Emperor already knew. It certainly wouldn't surprise me in the least; he seemed to know everything else.

The Emperor chuckled. "Indeed, child." He said. "Oh and speaking of looks, what happened to the pretty dress you were wearing earlier? I rather liked the pink, it suited you."

"I had a little accident and the dress was unfortunately torn." I said. It was the truth, sort of.

"Oh I do hope that it wasn't anything serious." He commented. "Did you hurt your face at the same time?"

I glanced at Zaarin before I could stop myself. He had the good grace to flush and look away. I smiled and then shook my head. "Your Highness's concern is most touching but really I am fine, I tripped and stumbled, nothing to worry about."

The Emperor patted my arm. "Then I am glad to hear it. I should be distressed if anything were to happen to you. I do so enjoy your company and your unique talents make you a valuable asset to my court."

I could feel Zaarin's discomfort coming off him in waves and I was almost certain that the Emperor knew something of what had happened. I feigned embarrassment and glanced away shyly. "Your Highness is very kind." I said.

"Well, child, I have other guests I must attend to, enjoy your evening. I make certain we have further opportunities to talk when I have more time. I shall let you know."

"I would be honoured, your Highness." I dropped another curtsey and smiled waited until he had left, with Zaarin at his side, then as quickly as I could I got out of the reception hall. I could not get home fast enough and the driver had broken several speed limits for me when I had threatened to sic Lord Vader on him.

In the quiet of the flat, I wondered as I stripped off the finery and ran a bath, why I didn't just get on the nearest transport and get the hell off this planet. It was a question I had no answer for.

I was sitting out on the balcony when Thrawn returned. I had bathed, scrubbing my skin so hard it had almost glowed pink, and changed into comfortable clothes. I had a Dantassi blanket wrapped around my shoulders against the cool of the night and was nursing a large brandy. My face ached dully despite the pain-killers and the bruising by my swollen lip was a pretty shade of reddish purple. I did not move as he went through his usual routine. Once he had changed out of his dress uniform, washed up and gotten something to drink he joined me. I sat in one of the balcony chairs with my feet up against the railing; he came to stand with his back against the same balustrade, facing me. For a very long time neither of us said anything we sipped our brandy in silence.

Finally he broke the stillness. "So, do you care to explain what happened this evening without being cryptic?" He asked. He was tense and I could feel his annoyance and anger underneath his calm facade. This would not be a happy conversation.

I drew a deep breath and I told him. I kept it simple and as close to just the facts as I could. He listened without interruption or comment and when I was done it was his turn to take a deep steadying breath.

"Are you certain you did not misinterpret his intentions?" Thrawn asked carefully.

"He had his hand all over my breasts, he slapped my face when I told him to piss off and he ripped my dress, so I would say that me misunderstanding his intentions is a definite no." I retorted hotly. I wasn't exactly happy with what had happened but I was certain I had not instigated it nor misread the situation at hand.

"Why did you let it get that far? Why did you not simply evade him?"

"Evade him? Like how? It's my office not his and I did ask him to leave. Things didn't get *interesting* until after he'd backed me up against the wall" I said. I didn't tell Thrawn that I had kind of let that happen in the first place. "He was the one who said he was tired of hearing me say no to him. *He* was the one who decided to push."

"So you just decided to play his game instead of getting away from him or calling for help?"

I scowled at him. Call for help, I thought? Who the hell would have come running at that time of night in a deserted part of the palace. Instead I said, "That's complicated," which was entirely the wrong thing to say.

"Well, un-complicate it for me. I want to know why you let it get that far." He said dryly.

"It didn't get *that* far at all." I snapped.

"He tore your dress, he touched you in an inappropriate manner and he hit you. I'd call that far enough." His voice had gone stone cold.

I sighed. "I wanted to stop him once and for all. I wanted to make it clear I am not part of the palace stable of pretty girls free for his taking." I sipped my brandy. "If I had not made my stance there and then he would have just tried again some other time, maybe when he would have had more of an advantage over me. He made the mistake of thinking he was stronger than me and that fear of him would keep me in line. It didn't even occur to him that I would fight back in the way I did, much less hurt him." I said calmly. "Besides, I thought it would be a good opportunity."

"A what?" He asked, clearly puzzled by this. I had momentarily stunned him. "The man wanted to physically assault you and you thought this was a good thing?" He hissed through clenched teeth.

"Well, yes, sort of."

"Care to enlighten me on this particular line of thought because your logic escapes me."

I drew a deep breath knowing he was not going to like what I said next at all. "Lord Vader wanted me to read him." I said. "I thought that while he was distracted with other things Zaarin might let something slip."

I could feel Thrawn's anger swirl about him as he tried to contain it. "And did he?" he asked coldly.

I made a face. "Sort of, I got the impression he is planning some sort of overthrow of the government. A coup, maybe. He kept hinting at how different things would be after the Emperor was gone. That the Emperor's rule would not last forever and I should make plans for a job change. For sure, he wants to get rid of the Emperor and wants to take his place. I got the distinct impression that what ever he has planned, he is very sure it will succeed and that it will happen sooner rather than later."

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. "I don't suppose you managed to *seduce* any actual details for these particular plans out of him, did you?" he asked, his voice still cool but now it carried a nasty edge I had never heard from him before.

I stared at him for a moment. His attitude was starting to piss me off. I drained my glass in one gulp. "No, and for the record I did not plan on seducing him at all. In fact I tried to stay the hell away from him but he had other ideas!" I said crossly. "I simply took advantage of an existing situation."

"Yes," He nodded, "an existing situation. His attentions to you at the dedication ceremony did not escape my attention. I should have thought that alone would have made you think twice about engaging him in any sort of conversation in private."

"Engage him... in private...?" I didn't know how to respond so I resorted to girl logic, "You're making it sound as though I invited him to meet me in my office for exactly that purpose!" I said hotly. "If I had *known* he was following me I'd have gone someplace where he could not find me! I thought it was Shiv who was at the door when he knocked so I opened it. It didn't occur to me that it would be Zaarin."

Thrawn ignored my statement. "He was making a play for you at the dedication ceremony. The drink he handed you this evening was full of glow spice."

"Yes and he knew exactly what it would do to me if I actually drank it."

There was moment's pause while Thrawn took in my words. "He lied about his knowledge of your allergy, then." It wasn't a question. We both knew that it had been Zaarin who had arranged the glow-spice laced cake which had damn near killed me.

I nodded.

"So, while he knows about your allergy he does not know about your force talents for reading truth from lie then."

That hadn't occurred to me. "I guess not." I said with a little shrug. "I was hoping to maybe get something out of him that I could report to Lord Vader, something concrete not just a vague sense of ill will."

"Instead you got attacked and he knows a whole lot more about you than he did several hours ago."

"Would you rather that I'd played the victim and let him have his way with me?" I asked snarkily.

"I would rather none of this had happened at all! I told you to stay away from him!" He said sharply, losing some of his eerie façade of calm.

"Well, you failed to tell *him* to stay away from *me*!" I shouted.

"I am beginning to wonder if you deliberately manage to get yourself into these situations just to see how angry you can make me!"

"What?" I exploded, "This is not about you!"

"You court danger the way most people eat fruit." His eyes were hard as he glared at me.

"Oh, for Sarlacc's sake!" I exploded. "Zaarin wasn't a threat to me! He's an old man with grandiose ideas and a libido to match his ego!" I got up from my chair. Now I was cross. "He's lucky I didn't permanently damage him, which I could have and probably should have!"

"You didn't report this did you?" Thrawn asked completely ignoring my outburst.

I made a noise of disgust. "Just how stupid do you think I am? Do you really think anyone would believe the truth? He is one of the Empire's highest ranking, most respected officers and while you and a couple of other people know I am a tad more than palace fluff that's not what would come across in an investigation. I am certain that no matter what the truth was, the reality of the situation would be distorted so that he was the victim and I was the one leading him on. I don't want that, I don't want my life, my relationships and everything I am dragged through the muck. No one really cares about the attempted rape of a '*palace girl*'; it happens all the time and gets ignored. Imperial men seem to think they can do what ever they please. I've heard enough horror stories from Shiv about this that I know no matter how much in the right I am it would never be presented that way. If I have learned anything by working here it is that sometimes the best thing to do is nothing at all. I'll bide my time, sooner or later Zaarin will get what he deserves."

I took the long pause that followed for agreement. "Have you spoken to anyone else what you gleaned from your little foray into the world of seductive espionage?" He asked.

I shook my head. “No. I was going to tell Lord Vader when I see him next.”

“Don’t.” He commanded.

“What? Why not?”

“Because I asked.” He said in a tone of voice that said this was anything but a request. “Because I would rather let Zaarin think you had decided to forget the whole incident and say nothing about what he did.”

“Now who is playing games?” I shot back.

“Merlyn, stop it!” He raised his voice. He was finally angry, I had pushed enough. “It’s bad enough you land yourself in hospitals when you tangle with your friend from Tatooine but you make it far worse when play the spy for Lord Vader and get mixed up in things you have no idea about. You meddle in affairs better left alone. You have absolutely no idea what is going on so stay out of it!”

“I do not set these situations up!” I shouted at him. “Why are you making this so complicated?”

“I am not the one who makes things complex, my dear.” He said icily.

I stared at him for a moment. “What is really pissing you off here? Is it the fact that I didn’t do as you asked and stay away from Zaarin, even though he was the one chasing me or the fact that he tried to take by force what I give to you freely?” If Thrawn had been even remotely inclined to violence chances are good he would have slapped me after that statement instead a deadly stillness crawled over him. I would have welcomed violence in contrast to his unreadable calm.

“Have a care with how you speak to me on this incident.” He said softly. “Under Dantassi law this would be a very serious matter.”

For a moment he had floored me then I said, “Dantassi law has nothing to do with this!”

“I am your ta’kasta’cariad.” He replied. “I am required by our Dantassi laws to protect you, to keep you from harm.” That was not the whole truth of it but I didn’t think this was the right time to ask for clarity.

“Oh, like you kept me from harm by dragging me to Myrkr?” I asked as I hiked up my skirt and pointed to the large white scar on my thigh, reminding him of the injuries I had sustained on that planet. Technically this was unfair as he had taken me to Myrkr before he had taken on his Dantassi role in my life. His jaw clenched and his body language said he had not expected me to throw that back in his face. It was entirely the wrong button to push but I couldn’t help it. “And none of this has anything to do with the current situation!” I wondered, briefly, how far I could wind him up and push him before he would explode at me. I

decided I wasn’t sure I wanted to experiment with this right and bit my tongue to keep from saying anything else that might dig the hole deeper.

“It has everything to do with this situation.” He countered. “You are a chaotic menace to order and careful planning in every single way possible.”

I blinked at him for a second then let my mouth get the better of me. “Oh, I’m sorry, am I stepping on your toes? Have I stumbled on some plan or nefarious scheme I wasn’t supposed to? Do you actually know what is going on with Zaarin?”

He drew a deep breath, trying to keep his temper in check. “It’s no secret to me and a few others that Zaarin wants more power. It is also no secret that he does not appreciate the Emperor’s method of ruling. I have been studying his moves at great length for some time now and I believe I know him well enough to gain some insight into what he will do but you are making this job difficult.”

“I am making your job difficult?” I almost exploded. “How can I make your job difficult when I don’t even know what that is?” I asked. “May I remind you that Zaarin is the one who came after me! I just went to my office to get some bloody work done. I did not ask him to show up uninvited and prove how big of a man he is!” I yelled. “You make it sound as though I deliberately enticed him to come after me!”

“Did you?” He asked frostily.

I didn’t think about it I just flung my empty brandy glass at him. When he actually caught it in his hand it infuriated me to the point of being irrational.

“I’ll take that as a no.” He said calmly as he set my glass down on the floor.

“Is it so unbelievable that he would actually come after me without me doing anything to encourage him?” I asked. “Or do you, along with everyone else in this Sarlacc forsaken galaxy, think I am just a cheap palace whore?”

He jaw tightened and he drew a deep breath, “I did not think Zaarin would be so desperate to prove his manhood that he would chance coming after you like this. It would appear I underestimated his libido and the bruising his ego has taken at your hand.” He said tartly. “Never speak of yourself in that manner again. You dishonour me, you dishonour Kirja’navaar’inkjerii and most of all you dishonour yourself. This I will not have.” We stared at each other for a moment. We had never fought like this before and I didn’t know how to untangle the mess we were making.

“So what you are really saying is you underestimated me.” I stated flatly.

His answer held a nasty edge to it. "I only underestimate how well you seem to manage getting into ridiculous situations that land you in a med lab!"

I shook my head and stormed back inside the flat. He was making me cross, this conversation was making me cross and what had happened earlier on in the evening made me cross as well. It was not a very good way to end an evening. I heard him follow me in, closing the door behind him. He caught my arm and pulled me around to face him. I didn't fight his grip but he let go of me as soon as he saw my expression. I was fed up of being man handled and some of that must have shown on my face. The air between us crackled. I folded my arms across my chest defiantly and waited for the lecture I knew was coming.

"What you did tonight was foolish. Brave on some level maybe, but truly foolish and Vader has no right to ask you to spy on Zaarin, force talents or not." He said firmly. "Zaarin thinks that he is unobserved and free to do as he wishes. If he even suspects his plans are discovered he'll change them and make it that much harder to deal with when the time comes. He may come off like a stupid middle aged man whose desire for a young palace girl clouds his judgement but let me tell you he is far more intelligent than you seem to give him credit for. I am assuming that he thought you would be an easy target tonight due to all the rumours that were flying around you and me. Perhaps he had a little too much port at dinner or something and once he came after you, I strongly suspect you helped him out in the desire department hoping to egg him on in a misguided attempt to lure some information from him. Now he has a real reason to hate you and he knows just how sharp your teeth are. He won't underestimate you again. You had just better hope he doesn't think you've figured out something of his plans because he will stop at nothing to make sure he eliminates any threats to his power. This includes you. While you have a place of some small importance in the Imperial court, make no mistake, you can be replaced. Aside, perhaps, from the Emperor, everyone in this galaxy is expendable."

I knew he was mostly right but I hated to admit it so I didn't say anything. Thrawn took my silence for stubbornness and pressed his point. With my arms folded, I gritted my teeth and glared at him. He stared back at me. Neither of us was backing down.

"Stay away from Zaarin. I am not asking you. I am telling you." I knew this tone of voice and it was non negotiable.

Petulance made me snarky, "Fine!" I snapped.

"Then we have an understanding." He said in a manner which told me he thought everything was settled.

"No, I don't think we do!" I said crossly. "I don't understand you at all!" I yelled at him. "And you sure as hell do not understand me!" My outburst puzzled him but I wasn't about to try and explain why I was now so pissed off because I wasn't sure I knew myself. It was probably a girl thing.

We stared at each other for a moment then I turned around and stormed away from him, into the spare bedroom and slammed the door as hard as I possibly could. I could not ever recall a time when both of us had been so angry or said so many unpleasant things to each other before and I had no idea how to undo it all. I stood with the door at my back and swallowed down my anger, letting out the breath I felt I had been holding since the evening had begun. It occurred to me that I did not have the upper hand in this situation, and by locking myself into the small bedroom I had essentially backed myself into a corner. With a snort, I went and flung myself down on the bed. I wondered if my world was crashing down around me, if I should pack my things and go back to living in the palace and never see Thrawn again but somewhere in the back of my addled brain I knew this was over reacting.

My father and I had often fought, especially after the death of my mother. The shouting matches in the house had been spectacular and usually ended with me storming off. Unlike Thrawn, my father had a temper that matched my own and I used to wonder why we didn't cause lightening to crash inside the house when we sparked against each other, usually over something stupid I had done. At least fighting with my father had been satisfying somehow, as though airing the anger and frustration between us somehow cleansed the spirit. Fighting with Thrawn was like fighting a great wall of impenetrable silence. I did not know how to battle his calculating logic and icy calm and I had really wanted to make him mad, to get him shouting at me because that the only way I knew how to fight. Loud, emotional and with sparks flying I could deal with, unnerving quiet calm put me completely off balance.

As I lay on the bed with my arms folded crossly over my chest it occurred to me that just maybe Thrawn was not so wrong in his over all assessment of what had happened. It had probably not been the brightest move to allow things to play out as they had and now instead of Zaarin just being an annoying pest, he had become an enemy. I closed my eyes and sighed. I was suddenly very tired. It had been a long, awful evening and I just wanted it to go away. Despite my anger, curiously enough, I fell asleep almost instantly.

Sand swirled about my bare feet but when I looked up I found myself in the Jedi Temple not the desert. A young woman grabbed my hand and began to pull me through the sunlit hallways. I knew her face, A'kali L'uanna as a girl.

"Come on, they're here!" She said and all but dragged me to a place where we had a clear view of a wide entrance. She pointed to the people arriving, specifically at a small blond haired boy.

"Who is that?"

"He's the Chosen One." She whispered. There was no mistaking the reverence in her voice.

I turned back to look at the boy not noticing that A'kali had slipped away. He looked frightened and lost. I sensed a great sorrow around him and the people he was with. It pierced my heart with its intensity.

"He mourns my death." Said a new voice at my side. I looked up into the face of Qui Gon Jinn. "He has too much attachment, it will be hard for him to let go. This was our first mistake." His words puzzled me.

I looked back at Anakin only to have him stare up into my face. "You." He mouthed but I didn't understand. For a moment our eyes met then everything around me morphed into something else.

I found myself still in the Temple but in the great Library. All around me was chaos, while I could not see anything I heard the screams and knew what night it was. The night the five oh first came, following Anakin who had turned to the darker side of his passions. The five oh first would forever be known as Vader's fist after this, the terrible Fist of a man who would kill children to serve his own needs. I often wondered how those cloned soldiers had felt following the duty that Vader had tasked them with.

I didn't understand this dream but I couldn't get away from it either. I shut my eyes tightly and covered my ears with my hands hoping to block out the screams and sounds of blaster fire and lightsaber's slice. Only when someone touched me on the shoulder did I open myself back up. The silence was more deafening than the sound of the furious slaughter. I glanced at the shimmering image of Qui Gon and then followed his own gaze. I shuddered at the sight.

"You have done well, my young apprentice." I heard the terrible voice of Palpatine say. His words echoed through the stillness.

Anakin, a young man torn by grief, anger and the knowledge that he had betrayed everything, knelt on the floor before his master's feet. What went through his mind I did not know but I could guess. I wished I could have saved him, turned back time and stopped it all from happening. I had to choke back a sob that threatened to engulf me.

"He doesn't understand. He never understood." Qui Gon told me. "Neither did we." The sorrow in his voice was heart breaking. I watched as the scene once again shimmered and changed.

"Why do you show me these things?" I asked. I knew I was crying but I didn't bother to wipe away my tears.

"So that you might know."

"But why?"

"Because someone has to, because you see beyond the mask." He said cryptically. Before I could ask another question he faded away leaving me in the empty library. I looked about and realised that it was completely bare. Everything that had been in it had been stripped away.

I walked about the room trying to find a trace of the history it had once held but there was nothing at all. The place was finally dead. It didn't make me sad, it was a relief. I could touch things but felt nothing.

"You often come here, don't you my child." Palpatine's soft voice whispered from behind me, making me jump in fright.

"Your Highness." I said and began to kneel but he made a gesture with his hand and I remained standing.

"What do you hope to find in this place?" he asked gently.

"I don't know." It was the truth. "I never know."

"There are no more answers here." Palpatine said.

"I don't understand any of this."

Palpatine smiled. "Exactly, neither did he ... until it was too late."

I looked at the Emperor trying to decipher the hidden meanings underneath his words, but this was a dream and nothing made sense.

"You should not come here any more." He said in that avuncular manner, as though I were a favoured niece not one of his pawns. "You should return home now."

The room shifted and I found myself in a med lab but not one I was familiar with. This one was dark and intimidating. It smelled like charred flesh and metal. When I heard a scream I turned around and at first could not understand what I was seeing.

Medical droids bustled around the terribly burnt body, stripping off charred clothing, strips of flesh, in some places down to the bone and the man on the medical bed was still aware, still awake and screaming in agony. The droids seemed oblivious to his pain. They busied themselves

with the artificial limbs which would take the place of the ones Obi Wan had severed.

“Suffering will make you strong, Anakin.” A voice behind me chided. “Use your anger and rise above the pain!”

I shuddered. Suddenly I felt sick. The Emperor had done this to him. No anaesthetic, nothing to dull the terrible pain. The med-droids began their terrible work, attaching metal to flesh, making Anakin whole again. No wonder Anakin hated the Emperor so much. No wonder Lord Vader was the way he was. How could one man endure so much pain and anger? I tried to turn away from the sight only to find someone holding my arm. When I looked to see who it was I found myself staring into Anakin’s charred face, his eyes had turned a dreadful colour of fire. I couldn’t bear to look at him but I couldn’t turn away.

“Wipe them all out!” He screamed. “Cut them all down! Traitors all of them! Even you, you betrayed me!” He stared straight at me but he wasn’t seeing me, he was seeing someone else. Ghosts...I was surrounded by them.

I snatched my hand from the metal claw that held me and backed away. I bumped into Palpatine who, with his hands on my shoulders, spun me around to face him. “You see, little one, there is no escape, eventually everyone becomes mine. I have plans for you and your talents, but not just yet.” He caressed my face with the backs of his fingers. I shivered. His smile was grotesque, as though a thousand years of malignancy had eaten away his flesh. “Go home now, he’s waiting for you.” He said, propelling me towards a door I had not noticed. It opened onto nothing and before I could do anything he had pushed me through it into the void where I fell, screaming.

I woke up with my cries still echoing in my head, gasping for breath and disoriented. This was not the bed I was used to and for a moment I wasn’t sure I really had woken up. When the reality of what room I was in hit and the memory of everything that had happened flooded back I knew I was not sleeping any more and got up. The chrono said it was just after two am.

I stumbled into the bathroom and cleaned up then headed for the kitchen to make a cup of tea. While the water heated up I went to the balcony to get some fresh air. At first I didn’t see Thrawn, standing in the darkness staring into the night, the lights from the city illuminated his skin softly but when I did my heart gave a little jolt. I stood very still thinking he had not noticed me, that I could just go back inside and not have to face any more of his angry accusations but then he spoke.

“Are you alright?” He asked without turning to look at me. “I heard you cry out.”

“I didn’t mean to wake you, I’m sorry.” I said and turned to leave.

“You did not wake me.” He said turning to face me, “and you didn’t answer my question.”

“It was just a dream.” I said, “A bad one, but just a dream, I don’t think it meant anything. I’m fine, I’m just ... I’m fine.”

“Does this have to do with what happened after Bespin?” He asked.

I shook my head. We had not talked about that and although he knew something terrible had occurred, something that gave me nightmares so bad I was often afraid to go back to sleep afterwards, he had not pushed for information yet. “No. It was just a bad dream and it didn’t make any sense. If it had any meaning I don’t know it.”

We stared at each other for a moment. Then he broke the stillness between us when he stretched out his hand to me, gesturing that I should come to him. I did so hesitantly.

He reached out and caressed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers. “I’m sorry.” He said.

I blinked up at him in disbelief. “You’re apologising?”

“Yes,” He said, “I had no right to speak to you the way I did. You sound surprised.”

“It’s been my experience that men don’t usually say sorry for anything, right or wrong.”

That earned me a smile. “Well perhaps you have been keeping company with the wrong men.” He said. “When I am wrong, I will admit it.”

“Oh,” I said as I looked up into his face. This was the last thing I expected him to do or say. His eyes, which glowed with an eerie reddish light, held concern and something else I couldn’t read. “And here I was thinking that you were partly right about some of the things you said.” I was grateful that I had wrapped a warm shawl about my shoulders, the night air was cool.

His eyebrow arched. “Oh, I was.” He replied, “But that does not excuse the way I behaved.”

I nodded. “Okay.” I said slowly. “Were you going to just stand out here all night then or had you planned on coming in and telling me this?”

“When I went in to talk to you earlier you were sound asleep, I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Ah.” I said quietly, turning away from his intense stare. “I kind of wish you had.”

“I’ll be honest with you, A’myshk’a, you drive me to distraction.” He said plainly. “Never in my life have I come across anyone quite like you. Nor

have I ever experienced the wide range of emotions you seem to delight in putting me through. This relationship of ours is problematic at best and at worst, wrecks constant havoc on my well laid order and plans.”

I held my breath and my heart thumped in my chest as I readied myself for the *we should stop seeing each other* speech which I was sure was coming. I opened my mouth to say something but he shut me up by placing his forefinger gently on my lips and continued to speak. “I have never thought of myself as a man with a jealous nature. I am ambitious and probably also proud, but not jealous. Tonight’s little incident proved me wrong and I handled it very poorly. I took my anger at what Zaarin did out on you. It was not my intent to raise my voice or imply the things I did.”

I looked up at him puzzled. That had not been what I had expected. I took a deep breath. “Well, as disagreements go, this was a pretty normal one, if you ask me.” I said slowly. “Tame in comparison to some of the fights I used to have with papa.”

He nodded. “The Chiss do not fight. Nor do we have loud, angry arguments about anything. We are taught from very early on to contain our feelings and choose a logical not an emotional course of action. Humans are utterly chaotic in this respect. It is a wonder to me sometimes how anything in this galaxy ever gets accomplished.” He paused. “Having an orderly discussion with you on a topic that you are emotionally involved in is nearly impossible.” He said. “I am unused to this method of conflict on such a personal level. You make things not calm, not logical. Sometimes it is like living with a never ending, wild and unpredictable storm.”

“Well,” I said quietly, “At least it’s not boring.”

He gave a short laugh. “No, you are anything but dull, my dear.”

“The Sand People have a saying. *Without the wild winds there would be no beautiful dunes.*” I told him.

“Yes, there is a Dantassi saying much like that only it has to do with snow not sand.”

For a moment we were quiet, just looking at one another. Then I asked a little uncertainly. “So...I won’t have to pack my things and move back to the palace?”

He opened his mouth then shut it again and gave me a look which said *remind me which planet are you from again?* “What in Da’haj’n’s name made you think that?”

“I tend to assume the worst these days.” I said with a little shrug. “You were very angry.”

He smiled. “You do have a knack for stirring me up, as it were.” He said, I just looked up at him and sighed.

“I don’t mean to, most of the time.” I replied. “So, I don’t have to leave then?” I gave him a little grin to hide the fact that I really needed to hear him say it.

“No.” he said then added, “I have told you before, I am bound to you.”

“What exactly does that mean?” I asked.

“That I won’t be breaking up with you over something that was not entirely your fault to begin with.” he replied.

“That’s not really an answer.”

“Yes it is, just not one you were expecting.” He countered. “How is your face?”

I touched the place where Zaarin had backhanded me, the swelling on my lip had gone down and if he had not mentioned it I would have forgotten about the bruise. “It’s fine.”

He said, “So it won’t hurt if I do this.” His hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers snaking under my hair as he drew my face up to his. He kissed me slowly, tenderly. Relief washed through me as I kissed him back. When the kettle peeped to let me know the water had boiled, he broke from me to ask, “Do you still want to make tea?”

“Uhm, not really.” I breathed.

“Good.”

“Why?”

“We have a conversation to finish.”

“I thought we were done fighting.” I frowned.

“We are.” He said. “I am speaking of the discussion we began *before* you left the flat this evening.”

“Oh.” I replied. “I guess arguing with me wasn’t on your list of fun things to do this evening?”

“No. It was not.” He said and he began to show me what was on his list of fun things to do.

The culmination slow and elegant seduction through our letters, the verbal foreplay from before the evening’s events coupled with our anger at what had happened was so powerful I felt as though we would implode from it. Fighting, it seemed, built up a lot of passion and all that energy had to go somewhere; I liked his current solution better than the one from earlier on.

Thrawn was fierce and dominant, stirring me up like sand dancing in a windstorm. With his mouth, his hands and his body he marked the territory of what he had claimed was his. I didn’t argue about ownership rights and I matched his intensity with my own, untamed and wild. I, too, had teeth and nails. The Chiss prided themselves on their cool logic, and

had done their very best to train their kind to eschew all public displays of emotion but I knew better than to believe this all went bone deep. Thrawn was a man of intense passions, though well schooled by his people in the art of playing it cool, he allowed himself, on occasion, to be free of the constraints his lineage demanded. Ice to my fire, he melted and in doing so quenched the heat that threatened to incinerate me from the inside out. If I could have physically burned his name on the inside of my soul I would have. I wondered briefly if such passions as these would eventually die off and if so, what would be left in their place but these tiny doubts were soon forgotten as he made sure he my full attention.

In the quiet of the bedroom we moved like light on water. Our bodies rippled together as I sat astride his lap, riding upon him. His hands rested on my hips, holding me as he leaned against the headboard of the antique bed which I gripped tightly, trapping him within the circle of my arms. This was one of his favourite positions and when I had once asked him why this was, he had simply replied *because it is one of the few times we see eye to eye*. I had thought he was playing with words, just a joke answer but that was not the case. I had not really understood what he had meant.

There was so much power in our coupling that it sometimes amazed me we didn't spontaneously combust from it. He had taught me well in the art of giving him pleasure just as he had learned how well to please me. I had come a long way from the first night he had taken me to his bed, wounded and nervous. I enjoyed giving as much as I received. It was the one place where I did not feel as though he were constantly trying to teach me a lesson in politics or tactics of some sort and occasionally I was able to surprise him. I wondered, for a moment, if it was possible for two separate beings to meld into one because that's what it felt like, that's what I wished for. As the world boiled around us and when the energy between us finally exploded, I felt as though I had shattered into a billion pieces.

I could feel his heart pounding in his chest as I shuddered against his body, now holding onto him tightly, my legs around his, thigh to thigh and my fingers digging into his back. Our laboured breathing was in perfect synch. For a singular point in time it really seemed as though we had become one, but that tiny moment passed in the wink of an eye.

In the wash of serenity that followed the manic passion, still wrapped about his body, I inhaled his scent deeply and, sighing contentedly, I rested my head upon his shoulder. He mistook it for a sigh of something else.

"Contrary to what you often seem to feel, the weight of the galaxy does not rest on your shoulders you know. That would be the Emperor's job, tekari." His fingers ran through my hair.

"I know that." I said indignantly but his words made me smile, which had been his intent. I looked into his eyes. It awed me how much I felt for this man, the ache it gauging a great hole in the pit of my being. *Too much*, a little voice in the back of my mind whispered but I ignored it as I touched his face with the tips of my fingers, taking in the shape of his bones, the surface of his skin which was all shadowy lines in the bedroom's dim light. For a moment we simply looked at each other. Then, drawing my face with both hands, to meet his, he kissed me before I could speak. I wondered, not for the first time, how a kiss could be so tender and yet at the same time so incredibly possessive. I did my best to return it in kind.

"Peyla'mer a'mal'yn." He whispered in my ear. *You belong to me.*

"Zav'niaask nen kahden." I murmured back without hesitation. *Forever and always.*

"Yes." He growled so fiercely and so protectively that I looked up at him for an explanation. He gave none. I was his and that was that. It had never occurred to me before to ask if it worked the other way around. There was something unsettlingly familiar about these words and how they were said but I couldn't place it.

"But you are also mine, aren't you?" I asked, trying to shake the sense of having lived this scene already.

He studied my face carefully and nodded slowly. "Yes, bound by word and ritual." He said very softly.

There was more going on here, underneath the surface of the words he spoke, but I could not decipher them. I felt the same weird electricity now as I had during the middle of the unmasking ceremony on Hjal. Some deeply meaningful thing being observed without me knowing or really understanding it. I looked him in the eyes and asked, "So this means that I am bound to you as well?"

I could not read the expression on his face. "Yes, in a manner of speaking, if that is your wish. Although it is not formally binding."

"What does *that* mean, exactly?"

He caressed my face with the backs of his fingers. "There are some things which must be spoken aloud, witnessed and marked." He said gently.

"This is some weird Dantassi thing you won't explain to me and I will have to badger Navaari to tell me what it all means, isn't it?"

"Something along those lines." He said with a smile. "But for that to happen we must visit Hjal."

"I'm game for that. Navaari's always telling you to bring me and besides," I grinned, "I miss him."

"As he misses you." He replied. He moved slightly so that he could see my eyes. I watched his face but I couldn't read it. "A binding pledge is not given lightly and words spoken in the heat of passion can often be recanted or even regretted." He said.

I just looked at him. "There is no one else, now or ever. I am yours. I don't regret this, so deal with it."

He laughed and kissed my forehead. "Such are my trials." He smiled and I knew that this was all I would get from him on this topic but something in his tone of voice said my answer had greatly pleased him and some little missing puzzle piece had fallen into place between us. Goosebumps rippled down my arms and I shivered.

With the passion receding and the affection between us a quiet thing, I was cold now with no clothes on in spite of the warmth from his body. We moved apart then, one becoming two, and he pulled me down to lie beside him, tugging the covers up over us both. His long fingers traced the contour of my body, shoulder to hip and back. I would have thought that in the aftermath of our coupling we would have been sleepy but that was not the case. Instead we lay thoughtful as though there were unfinished business to deal with.

"You know, the Empire is going to all nine Corellian hells and back." I said, breaking the silence as I nestled into his body.

He moved to accommodate me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Things have not been running as smoothly as they should lately, that is true."

I snorted. "It seems to me this entire galaxy is coming apart at the seams."

"I suppose it must feel like that on occasion but really when one puts it all into some sort of perspective, what is going on is very small compared to the entirety of the galaxy."

"So these defections that have been occurring lately are normal?"

There was a moment's pause and I glanced up at him so I could see his face better. "Perhaps not so many in so short a time, but given the number of people who work for the Empire both from a military stand point as well as civilian, I don't think it is so unheard of. It is however, unacceptable." Thrawn replied. There was anger in his voice. Loyalty was one of the things he prized above all else.

"How did your little private promotion thing go?" I asked, changing the subject, there had been enough anger for one night.

He looked at me. "It was small and fairly unremarkable." He said. "Attended by the Emperor, a few of his most trusted advisors, Lord Vader and a certain young lady he seems to hold in high esteem."

That caught my attention.

"You know her as Lianna, I believe."

"But that's not her real name." I said pointedly.

Now I had his attention. "I'm listening."

"Her name is Mara Jade; she's one of the Emperor's agents."

"Yes, I learned this tonight. She is an Emperor's Hand, although I was under the distinct impression that she thinks she is the only one." He said.

"Why would she think that? The Emperor has many agents."

"Yes, you and I both know that. I suspect it is his way of controlling her, manipulating her." He said.

"So why was *she* there anyway?" I asked failing to keep the sudden pang of jealousy I felt out of my voice.

Thrawn glanced at me, and caressed my face gently, lifting up my chin so that I knew what he had to say next he meant for me to pay close attention to. "Envy is not an emotion that you wear well, tekari. Put your claws away, you have no reason to feel threatened by her. She works for the Empire, as do you. She was there because the Emperor felt it was necessary I learn her true identity. You should feel sorry for her, not envious of her."

I gave him my '*what do you mean*' look. He continued. "She was taken from her family at a very young age and raised by Palpatine as his ward, raised by the Empire as it were. She has been bent and shaped to his will her whole life. She has never had what you had, a family who loved her or a proper childhood. She lives only to please Palpatine and do her duty. She has never known anything else. You have nothing to be jealous of and she has every reason to envy you."

I just glanced at him. "Well I guess that would explain why she doesn't like it when the Emperor shows favour on others."

"She has never been allowed the luxury of friends. I am also certain that under Palpatine's hand she has learned far more about distrust and disfavour in her young life than you ever will. Palpatine is a master at manipulation when it comes to bending others, something you have also experienced."

I just nodded. I got the message and changed the subject back to the original topic. "Is it true that the Council of Twelve isn't aware that you are one of them?"

"Yes, this is true." He said.

"Why is that?"

"You would have to ask the Emperor that question." He said with a slight shrug.

"I think I'll pass." I said, "So how long will your promotion be kept a secret?" I asked.

"Until the time is right to make it public and that is up to Palpatine. He has his reasons for all the secrecy."

"He always does." I said a little crossly.

He shifted, leaning up on elbow to stare at my face. "Do not underestimate the Emperor in anything he does, tekari, and do not assume to know the way of things. Not everything with Palpatine is as it appears to be. He is a man capable of such manipulations and machinations; I have never seen anyone as skilled in this art as he is." He chided gently but underneath the softness of tone was an edge of cold steel.

"So why doesn't he want anyone to know you are a Grand Admiral?" I asked.

He sighed as he lay back down, allowing me to reassert my territorial claim over his shoulder. "The quick answer is because he has stated there would only ever be twelve. I make thirteen. He wishes it to be a secret so it stays that way. The truth is, my dear, I don't know who does know and who doesn't. I only know that the Emperor has his reasons and I did not care to argue with him on them for the time being."

"You think it has something to do with what ever is going on with Zaarin?"

I felt him smile as he stroked a lock of hair from my face. "That possibility had occurred to me. The Emperor has a disturbing knack for seeing the future of things."

"That's a force trick." I told him. "But it isn't always right or even accurate."

"Have you ever seen into the future?"

I sighed. "I have had visions on a few occasions but I don't know what they mean. Without context there is no way to discern meaning."

"Give me an example."

"I had one of you once. At the gallery show where we saw the Bernau pieces, do you remember?"

That caught his interest. "I remember you went as white as a Csillian snow field. You had claimed to have not eaten enough but that was a lie."

I nodded. "It was a flash, really nothing more but so real, as if I had been some how transported into a different time and place. I saw you seated on some sort of command chair on a star destroyer, dressed in white, a Grand Admiral's uniform. You were clutching your chest. There was blood

running over your hands. What ever had happened had surprised you. You were not expecting it." I shuddered involuntarily at this memory.

"Well, as you can see I am very much alive." He said thoughtfully.

"I have no idea what it all means, when it will happen or even if it will ever happen. But I can tell you this, it had that feel to it. I know when I get a real vision because there is a quality to it that is just unlike anything else, not a dream or a memory. The only time anything I have seen has come true was when I was on Rothana but I read it wrong. I thought it meant that Lian...I mean Mara Jade would be killed, instead she was just wounded. So you see, without context there is no way to know meaning. And if it is the future, it can change because the future is fluid and relies on the past. It's all terribly confusing."

He was quiet for a log moment then he said, "So the skill is in actually learning how to read these visions then and not just having them?"

I nodded. "I guess so. I don't know much about how it works and I don't talk to Lord Vader about this subject any more because he got tetchy and violent the last time I tried. I don't dare ask the Emperor because Sarlacc knows what he might do if he knew I had this ability as well."

"Do you not think that the Emperor would have the experience and the skill to more accurately read visions of the future than you would?" He asked.

"I am sure he does, but would you not agree that even the Emperor is not perfect and could make mistakes?"

"Yes."

"And if he is wrong about something important, something that could affect the entire balance of power?"

Thrawn drew a deep breath. "Well," he said slowly, "that will be an interesting moment in time."

"I think it would be terrible and chaotic. If he relies on this power to see ahead but misses some small detail or doesn't account for some tiny element of surprise then everything could collapse." I shivered at this thought. "I mean can you imagine a galaxy without the rule of the Emperor?"

"I imagine it would be messy." He said quietly.

I glanced up at his face. "Not if you were around to step in and take over."

He laughed a little. "Your faith in my abilities as a leader is overwhelming, sj'iu tekari."

"People would follow you." I said and I meant it.

"Only if they overcame their fear of my differences first." He replied in a voice that said *no more talk of this*.

I sighed. "Are you sure you don't want to just retire to Hjal, father my children and go hunting with Navaari?"

He smiled with a sigh. "That idea has such sweet appeal but I am duty bound to serve the Empire and my duty comes first. However, there is nothing stopping you from leaving Lord Vader's employ and heading out to Hjal if you wanted." He was teasing.

"Yes there is." I said, poking him in the chest.

He wrapped his hand around mine. "And that would be?"

"You." I said. "It's too damned cold there and who would keep me warm at night?"

"Who indeed?" He murmured in my ear, sleep creeping into his voice.

I just nodded and sighed comfortably. He completed a part of my world I had never even known was lacking. What it was he got from me, I didn't know but I hoped it was enough. We lay drowsy until just before dawn but we also did not speak. There were no more words. When I woke up it was late and he was gone.

The note he had left for me on the Kitchen counter said;

Mia tekari,

I hope that you slept well. There is stimcaf ready to go in the pot and fresh scones in the warmer. You were so fast asleep I thought it best to let you rest. Lord Vader has been called off world. He did not say how long he would be gone for. You officially have the day off. Given the events of yesterday I do not think you will complain. Shiv left a message asking if you were alright and he will try to get a hold of you later on this afternoon. I am sure that will entail lunch and you explaining a great deal.

I am not certain when I will be home but it should not be terribly late. I have dinner taken care of and plan on not letting you out of my sight this evening so for the sake of peace and quiet, will you please try to stay out of trouble between now and then?

Za'ar

I just stared at the note and waited for the stimcaf to brew. I grabbed the latest news flimsy, warmed up the scones he had left for me and sat down to read. I could not think of a better way to start my day. It was the last truly peaceful day and night I would know for a very long time.