

Daughter of the Empire

Book 3

## **Prologue: The Long Road Back**

by Fiona Messer

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*“Become the stillness, girl... you are not finished yet...”*

A voice I knew and trusted coaxed me into the void. I slipped gratefully away from the pain, from the sorrow and the inevitability of death. For the longest time there was nothing, no dreaming, no feelings and no memories. If I was alive I didn't know it and I suppose I was grateful but such things do not last and eventually I began my journey back into the world of the living.

My first realization that I was probably not dead was the sensation of warmth and a dream so vivid I thought it was real. I found myself standing in a room of some sorts which vaguely reminded me of the great hall in the old Jedi temple. All around me was a soft white light. It was so peaceful and so calm that I didn't mind not knowing exactly where I was.

I breathed in deeply. There was a scent on the air, spicy, exotic which reminded me of someone I had once known, a man, but he seemed very far away. I struggled to bring his face to memory but all I could conjure up were eyes of glowing red. In the back of my mind there were others, shadowy figures who never fully came into focus. One in particular was dressed from head to toe in black he, too, had meant something but this memory brought sorrow and I was glad to let it go.

I wondered how long I had been here. Time was meaningless. I was not hungry nor was I tired. There was no fear either just a strange sense of calm. I stood with my arms wrapped about my chest, my face lifted upwards and my eyes closed. There was warmth here but I couldn't tell where it was coming from. I didn't jump when someone touched me on the shoulder making me turn around. It was a little like staring into a mirror. The woman who stood slightly behind me looked a lot like I did. Only when I gazed at her face for a few moments did I see the differences and understand who she was.

“You do not belong here, daughter.” She said. Her fingertips touched my cheek.

“Akali L'uanna.” I said, “My birth mother.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “You have grown up well.”

I ignored her comment, “Am I dead?” I asked. It seemed only logical since I knew she was dead.

“No, but you linger in the in-between.”

“The in-between?”

“You are not dead but you are not fully alive either. You are in between these two states and have been for some time.”

“How did I come to be here?”

“You were injured. Bringing you here was the only way to save you.”

I looked at her in puzzlement. “I don't understand. You brought me here?”

She shook her head. “No, that was another's doing.”

“Lord Vader...?”

A look of pain and distaste marred the prettiness of her face for a moment. “We do not speak of him by that name, but yes.” She said.

I looked around me. “Is he... can I ...?” I was a little bewildered.

She gave me a little smile. “He is not here. He has much to atone for, guiding you into a healing state was a start. Do not mourn for him, daughter. He is more at peace now than he has ever been before.”

“And you?”

“I am here to guide you also. I have always been here for you.”

I shivered as a cool breeze rippled across my skin. “And what of Qui-Gon Jinn?”

“You will see him again, I am certain of that but now it is time for you to return to those who love you.”

I went to argue with her but before I could speak she tapped my forehead with two fingers. “Go back to the world you belong to, daughter. Do not fear. You are not alone.”

Before I could protest, everything around me began to spin, the soft light vanished and I was swept away. It was like drowning in reverse, like crawling out of a darkness that never seemed to end. From very far away I began my journey back into the real world, the world of flesh and bone, blood and pain and above all sorrow and loss.

It was the sound of male voices that let me know I was still alive. At first a blurred white-noise, sounds which I could not identify but over time I began to understand as words just as I was able to pick out certain voices. How long this process took I have no idea. I faded in and out of this state of consciousness and time had become irrelevant. I was surfacing but it was a slow and painful process. When I opened my eyes the light was a shock and everything was fuzzy and out of focus.

I sensed him first before I heard him speak to someone else, but I didn't know who it was or what he had said. Hands examined me. There was a strength and surety to his touch. Doctor, I thought. I blinked trying to get past the blurred vision but I was too tired. I slipped back into the dimness I had come from. Time danced about me once more. How long I

drifted in and out of awareness I do not know but each time it got easier until one day I woke up fully awake and aware.

“Fetch the Admiral, quickly.” I heard a voice say. A hand brushed hair from my face and the touch was comforting. “Hang in there this time, just a few minutes, just enough to let him see you awake. Then maybe I can have a moment’s peace.” A voice whispered in my ear.

I tried to open my eyes, they were dry and gritty. My eyelids were not cooperating. Finger tips gently pried them open and cool drops splashed into my eyes, I winced and blinked hard. A few seconds passed and the images which had been distorted and unfocused began to sharpen up a little. I looked up into a familiar face.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, young lady.”

“Dr. Thracer?” I whispered. My voice was rough. My mouth was too dry, my tongue felt thick and useless.

“You have not forgotten my name, I see.” He said, his dry bedside manner still the same.

I opened my mouth to reply but before I could say anything he stopped me. “Don’t try to talk just yet.” He said gently as he slipped a shard of ice between my lips. “This will help.”

The sensation of cold exploded in my mouth. Never in my life had water tasted so good. If I had been able to cry I would have. It was tiring to keep my eyes open so I shut them again and relished the taste of the ice as it lessened the desert like quality of my mouth. The pressure to fall back into the sleep I had woken from was very strong. I felt his hand on my forehead again, gentle and reassuring.

“Merlyn, I need you to stay with me, can you keep your eyes open?”

I nodded and fought against the drowsiness and the desire to just slip away again, to find my birth mother, the dreaming and the quiet place I had been before. No matter how many times I had tried to go back to that place it remained closed and elusive.

Doctor Thracer gave me a little smile and another little lump of ice.

“Thank you.” I managed to croak out. “So thirsty.”

He nodded. “To be expected. Can you follow the light with your eyes?” He asked shining a little torch in my face. I did as he asked. There were a few more questions, some feet and finger wiggling and a general check up. He didn’t say much but he seemed satisfied. He had the bed raised and helped me sip a very small amount of water. “Slowly, we’ve had

you on fluids for ... well, you’ve been on IV fluids for a while, drink too much too soon and you get sick.”

I nodded, glancing at the IV line in my hand. I hadn’t noticed it until he had mentioned it. I sipped the water gratefully, relishing each molecule. When he took the cup away I made a face but didn’t complain because my stomach was making unhappy gurglings.

“Doctor?” I heard another familiar voice ask. Thrawn’s voice. My heart quickened at the sound.

Doctor Thracer patted my shoulder and turned away from me, blocking my view. “She’s conscious and aware but don’t expect too much.” He said quietly, “She’s still very groggy and very weak. And before you ask, it’s too soon to tell about any permanent damage but so far she is responsive and coherent, which is a good sign. I will give you five minutes.” and with that he left the small alcove where my bed was.

Thrawn simply looked at me, his expression unreadable and distant as though he was seeing me in a different light and wasn’t certain he liked what he saw. “Why is it, Miss Gabriel, I seem to spend so much time watching you recover in a med lab?” He asked quietly.

“Bad timing?” I whispered. It was an old joke but it didn’t make him smile.

He was silent as he pulled the chair as close to the bed as it would go. I struggled to move, I wanted to sit up a little more. His hands were warm as he helped me, slipping an extra pillow behind my head. I shut my eyes for a moment and a barrage of images flashed through my mind.

“Endor...” I began.

He placed a finger tip on my lips, always his way of keeping me from speaking. “We know all about Endor.” He said. “It is no longer your concern.”

I glanced around me. This med lab was not one I was familiar with. “Where am I?”

“Nirauan.” He answered there was something in his voice that made me look at him.

I asked. “You did not take me back to Coruscant?”

“Your condition was too grave. Doctor Thracer did not want to risk moving you until you were more stable, then it was a question of waiting to see how well you responded to the treatments, mostly it has been about waiting for your body to heal itself.” He was not telling me everything and the lie behind his words was so strong I could taste it but it was too much effort to call him on it.

I glanced at the IV line in my hand. There was no bruising. “How long have I been here?” I asked.

A look of sadness and something else I had no idea how to decipher flashed momentarily in his eyes. He stroked a finger across my forehead, brushing away a strand of hair but he didn’t answer my question

“How long?” I pressed, catching his hand in mine.

When he hesitated I got agitated. It wasn’t like Thrawn to be evasive or lie but I sensed both in what he wasn’t saying. I asked the question a third time and he sighed.

“You’ve been here for seven months and five weeks.” He finally replied. “But it’s only been in the last few weeks that you have... come back to us.”

My heart seemed to stop. That was just sixteen weeks shy of a year. I had lost almost a year. It didn’t seem possible. I looked away from him feeling the prickle of tears in my dry eyes.

“How? What... how?” There were so many questions and I could not articulate any of them. My words tangled on my tongue. Images of Endor flooded back to me, the exquisite pain of Lord Vader’s death sliced into my belly and now Thrawn was telling me all this had happened nearly a year ago. What had happened to me? The world swam around me and little black spots of light pricked at the edges of my vision, I felt my heart pound in my ears and I couldn’t seem to catch my breath.

“Doctor?” Thrawn’s voice held a touch of concern in it.

Doctor Thracer was at my side. “Too much too soon!” he growled at Thrawn, lowering the bed again. “Merlyn, listen to me. Just breathe slowly. Don’t you dare pass out on me now!”

I did as he asked and the dizziness passed. I guess some colour returned to my face because both men suddenly looked relieved.

“She needs to rest, no more agitation.” The doctor’s words were directed at Thrawn and they were sharp. I reached over and grasped Thrawn’s arm.

“No,” I whispered. “Tell me. I need to hear it.” I didn’t want to fall backwards into that terrible abyss that had swallowed so much time and I was afraid if I let go of him I would. He didn’t pull away. I watched the silent communication between the Doctor and Thrawn as they looked at each other for a moment, then when the doctor nodded slightly Thrawn turned his attention back to me.

“The *Grey Wolf* picked up your signal almost immediately; luckily we were fairly close to your co ordinates at the time. When we reached

you, your ship was badly damaged and drifting.” He paused. I watched as the muscles in his jaw clenched. This was not easy for him to speak of. I could feel emotion rolling off him in waves, sorrow, frustration and above all anger.

The doctor broke in, continuing the explanation. “You were found in the cockpit, wrapped in blankets; there was blood on your skull, matted in your hair. You had a severe concussion and a very nasty skull fracture. Your ship’s life support had failed and your battery power had run out. The atmosphere in the ship was ...unhealthy but no one was certain for how long the atmo was at toxic levels. At first we thought you were dead but the instruments in the med lab showed that you had slipped into some sort of extraordinarily deep coma.”

I looked from one man to the other. “How...?”

Thrawn pulled his arm out of my grasp and pinched the bridge of his nose. “The doctor thinks it was the cold which saved your life.” He said quietly.

Doctor Thracer nodded. “The cold dropped your metabolic rate right down, all of your body functions had been slowed to nearly nothing. You were in a death like state. To be honest, it isn’t something I have seen in my life time although I have heard tell of Jedi Knights being able to do such things at will in times of physical danger. We had no way of knowing how to pull you back out of it so we treated the physical wounds and let you heal, hoping that you would eventually waken on your own... which you did.”

Thrawn drew a deep breath. “I suppose that some of the training you underwent under Vader and Taisto Kjestyll helped out. In the end it was probably what saved you but for the life of me I cannot figure out what you were doing out there.” He looked away from me then back again when our eyes met I knew he was holding himself in check. His expression had gone from relieved to hard. “I cannot believe you would be so stupid.... ” He began, his voice laced with fury. The concern he had shown just a few minutes earlier was so swiftly replaced by anger that I didn’t have time to think, or to defend my reasons for flying hell bent to find him, luckily I didn’t have to.

“Now is not the time, Admiral.” Doctor Thracer interjected placing a hand on the Admiral’s shoulder. I understood then that something had happened between these two men to create some sort of a bond. They had become more than just Grand Admiral and Doctor, they had become comrades and perhaps even friends. Whatever it was, Thrawn

heeded the Doctor's words and shoved his anger with me back into the place he kept all his emotions in check. He glanced up at Doctor Thracer's face and nodded. The doctor was right, no matter how angry Thrawn felt I was not ready to be on the receiving end of it. His shoulders heaved as he sighed; sitting back in the chair he pulled away from me from me, folding his arms across his chest.

"I was attacked." I said defensively. I remembered bits and pieces of it. I remembered being flung against the bulkhead and winced involuntarily at the memory of it.

"Yes. I read the ship's logs. Your shields were down." Thrawn said coolly. "We also found debris floating in the same area. One of the local pirate ships we believe."

I just nodded and sighed. "Endor...?" I asked again.

His reply was firm. "We can discuss Endor when you are better. You have a long recovery ahead of you. It is pointless to waste your energy worrying about things that no longer matter, about things you can do nothing about."

"But what happened?" I pressed, "Coruscant? The fleet? Who is in charge now?" I did not need to have the Emperor's death confirmed; I had felt it as surely as I had felt Lord Vader's. Thrawn looked up at the Doctor again, who shook his head.

"When you are well enough, we'll talk." Thrawn repeated. "You'll learn everything you need and want to know but right now all you have to worry about is regaining your strength."

"Lord Vader...." I started to say but the words choked in my throat. It hurt to say his name.

Thrawn sighed and his expression softened. "I am sorry, tekari." He said and he meant it.

I just looked up into his face. I didn't know what to think. For me, what had happened at Endor was crystal clear and far too raw. He must have seen that on my expression. He reached over and caressed my face gently, the anger in his eyes receding.

"What about papa, does he know?" I asked.

Thrawn nodded. "Yes, we have been keeping your family apprised of your condition." He curled his fingers about my hand. It was a small gesture but it spoke volumes. I could feel tears start to prickle in my eyes.

"Has it really been that long?" I asked Thrawn in a whisper. It just didn't seem possible. I felt waves of weariness wash over me.

Pain flicked across his features and he opened his mouth to say something but Doctor Thracer spoke first. "She needs to rest."

Thrawn nodded and went to stand up but I wouldn't let go of his hand. "Don't go..." I sounded like a lost little girl, but then again this was exactly how I felt.

He leaned down and brushed his lips against my forehead. "The doctor will take good care of you." He whispered in my ear as he eased his fingers out of my grasp. "Now please, just get well."

"You'll be here when I wake up?"

His fingers caressed my face. "Sleep, A'myshk'a." was all he said.

He had not answered my question but my brief time awake had worn me out and I was too weary to argue with him. I was grateful to drift back into whatever dimness I had surfaced from, away from the biting sense of loss. The next time I woke up the doctor had the job of telling me that Thrawn had returned to duty on the *Grey Wolf* shortly after speaking with me and it was not known when he would return. I was not surprised by this news but it hurt all the same. When I didn't press him for details, Doctor Thracer seemed relieved and began to explain what exactly had happened to me and how he planned to help me recover. It would not be easy but concentrating on the work ahead of me helped me avoid thinking about everything else. The memories of what had happened at Endor left me hollow and empty and not for the first time would I wish that I had just stayed put in the deep oblivion I had come from.

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As I recovered and began the tedious business of getting back my life I discovered that the base on Nirauan was not a particularly friendly place. The mix of Chiss and humans made for a tense work atmosphere, added to this tension was the language barrier which almost everyone seemed to find difficult to overcome. There were a couple of Chiss who were fairly fluent in basic and perhaps a few of the Imperials who knew enough Cheunh to get by but on the whole communications were limited. The Chiss kept to themselves shunning the humans and the humans did the same, it was very odd.

I kept quiet about my ability to speak Cheunh; it was a skill I didn't feel the need to reveal because I suspected I would have ended up as a glorified translator and I didn't have the energy to do that, so I kept myself to myself which wasn't hard. It didn't take long for it to become clear that I was like a ghost on the base. If people knew who I was they

didn't say and I wondered if they had been given orders to, at best leave me alone and at worst, utterly ignore me. In the end it was just as well. The process of getting well was hard work, much harder than anything else I had ever done and much of the time, when I wasn't involved some gruelling sort of physical therapy I was asleep or at least, trying to rest. Although the medical droids had made sure that my muscles had not atrophied while I had been in my coma, my body still required a lot of work to get back to its former shape. Time in the bacta tank had repaired the damage to my skull but no medical wonder could heal the pain of loss.

My grief for Lord Vader's death was a lonely thing. It was hard to justify in many ways. How could one mourn for a monster? How could a person even begin to love or admire such a man? I spent many hours thinking on all he had done while I had known him, his swift anger and sudden brutality. He had not suffered fools lightly and they had always paid the ultimate price. To the outside galaxy he had been, quite simply, evil but I knew that had not always been the case. I would never have called him truly evil but he had been twisted and angry. He had been a child torn away from the only person who had really loved him into the arms of a group of people who had, for the most part, viewed him with mistrust and fear. He had been named the Chosen One, lauded as the One who would bring Balance to the Force but he had been treated as though he were a deadly time bomb waiting to go off. I knew, I had seen just how the leaders of the Jedi Council had acted towards him, particularly the one called Mace Windu. Not for the first time did I wonder if this treatment was borne out of jealousy rather than fear. After all Anakin's power was the stuff of legends, as was his courage and brilliance in battle and with all things mechanical. The Jedi Order had made him what he was, not the other way around. In treating him the way they had they had fostered the very nature they all feared. Palpatine had seen this and had used it to his own advantage. It had been Palpatine who was truly evil.

Palpatine, who had manipulated everyone and everything around him, amassed his dark side power as though he was hoarding sand in his arms, but sand, like power, is slippery and elusive. Hold on to it tightly enough and it slips away, grain by grain. I did not mourn the Emperor's passing at all. I was greatly relieved that the evil old bastard was dead but this was something I told no one because in contrast to Lord Vader, a great many members of the Empire did mourn for Palpatine and to speak against him was considered at best an offence at worst heresy.

Lord Vader's death had left a gaping void in my life which was as devastating to me as it was bewildering. There was no one I could speak to about it because there was no one who would ever understand it. *Bound*, Navaari's word for what lay between Thrawn and I would come back to haunt me again and again, had I not also been bound to Lord Vader? When he had severed the tie between us he had severed something inside of me so deeply, so utterly I thought I would never know what it was like to be whole again. I wondered how it was possible to bear such grief and still breathe in and out every single day, still get up out of bed and move on, move forward. It was as if I had become a droid, mechanically moving through time and space while my soul watched from some other place.

It was made all the more difficult by the growing whispers amongst the men that it was rumoured it had been Lord Vader himself who had killed the Emperor and not Luke Skywalker. Many in the Empire now viewed Lord Vader as a traitor not a hero but they were few. For the most parts, especially amongst the grunts and the pilots, there were many who genuinely mourned his death. He had been one of the few Imperial military leaders the majority of the ground troops and pilots had truly respected and he had been one of the few who got into the fight right alongside his men. It had been the officers who had despised his leadership skills or lack of them. I often wanted to point out when I heard these debates that it was stupidity and greed Lord Vader could not stand and his loyalty to his men was something well established long before he was forced to wear the mask, but I wisely kept my mouth shut. There was no point in arguing since in the end, no one really knew for certain the real truth of what had taken place that fateful day, not even I knew what had actually happened and it ate at me from the inside out, yet as sad as I was I found I could not cry.

I was thankful that the doctor had taken on the majority of the work as physiotherapist. I suspected this was in part because his job at the base was a fairly quiet one but also because he felt in some way responsible for me especially in the wake of Thrawn's absence. In contrast to the medical droids he was someone I could speak with while I worked to regain my form. He was a constant in my life when Thrawn was not. The doctor, trying I suppose to explain Thrawn's noticeable absence, had told me he thought it was difficult for Thrawn to watch me struggle to recover but that was not really the entire truth. Thrawn was angry with me, angry that I had come looking for him and placed myself in danger, angry for

many reasons not all of which were clear to me. I knew this and part of me even understood it but because I could not speak of it, the issue stayed unresolved and my own resentment and anger at him festered.

The weeks came and went. The pain and struggle of the physical rehabilitation eased as I got stronger and I was happy when I could finally resume the Bunduki style training and find some sort of peace through the movements and meditations I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. I missed my Bunduki teacher greatly and longed for his gentle guidance. I had tried to find out news of what had happened to my friends on Coruscant but here on the base I had no rights, no clearance and no friends to pester. Despite asking repeatedly if I could contact my home or even leave I was adamantly refused permission to do either but when I pressed for reasons no one could give me any.

“The Grand Admiral’s orders Miss.” Was the only answer I was given when I asked why.

Even Doctor Thracer could not explain to me the reasons for the security and my resentment at Thrawn grew. Slowly it dawned on me that I was more a captive here than a guest. I had no idea what to think about it and the one person who could do something about my status or explain to me why I was cut off from the outside was not around to ask or change the standing orders. Perhaps I should have pressed further or found a way to bypass the excellent security but Thrawn was angry enough with me I didn’t want to give him more fuel for that particular fire event though it fanned my own at him. If I was denied access to the rest of the galaxy then I supposed he had a good reason for this but this didn’t make it easier to accept. It was the first time in my life that felt truly alone.

In-between my physio sessions, once I was well enough, I spent a great deal of time on my own wandering around the huge facility. No one seemed to notice or care where I went. At times it felt as though I was truly invisible but I began to look at this as an advantage rather than a slight. It allowed me to learn the lay of the base, discover the secrets and find all manner of hiding places, finding the quiet spaces to work out, meditate or just read. I knew all the ways in and out and some of the hidden passages as well, but by far my favourite was a small room that had an even smaller balcony attached to it, a look out of sorts I guessed. It was there I would go with a book in hand, taken from the library I had been given access to, to hide away from everything else. Eventually one day, after I had been gone too long and missed an appointment, Doctor Thracer had become worried. I wasn’t sure how had actually found me but I suspected the security

monitors in the base were far better hidden than I had originally thought. He had found me sitting huddled against the balustrade reading a book, it was cold and windy but I needed to be outside, to see the sky. He had watched me for a few moments and then quietly retreated leaving me alone. I had discovered he was a man who understood silence and the need for it.

It was the doctor who eventually became my source of information. I suppose he took pity on me or perhaps I finally wore him down with my questions. Whatever the reason he was the one who told me about the fallout after the second battle station had blown up taking Lord Vader and the Emperor with it. Telling me how the remainder of the Imperials had retreated. The death of the Emperor had shattered the cohesion which had held the fleet together. It was his rare and powerful force gift which had allowed the Emperor to control the massive fleet and with its sudden disappearance the fleet spiralled into a sort of chaos which the Rebels took full advantage of.

Coruscant as well as many other planets had gone mad at the news of the Emperor’s death. There had been mass celebrations in the streets, Statues of the Emperor and Lord Vader had been pulled to the ground and fireworks had lit up the sky. The news of the Emperor’s demise seemed to be license to riot and let loose the pent up anger and frustrating of nearly thirty years of Imperial rule. It had taken twenty four hours for martial law to be declared and a total military clamp down on Coruscant to stop the massive celebrations. The people believed responsible for starting the whole mass party and fireworks were executed. Resentment festered and grew. There was no longer a beloved Emperor in place but an underling for which the majority of the Galaxy’s denizens had no respect. Underground movements to aid the Rebellion and its fledgling government were growing.

As the Emperor’s chosen, Sate Pestage had taken control of the Empire with Ysanne Isard officially as his second in command although I suspected it was actually she who was really running the show. She had not been nicknamed ‘Ice heart’ for nothing and under her thumb people knew a terror which had only been guessed at before. Still, life on the core worlds returned to some semblance or normalcy but nothing was really normal, the once vast and mighty empire was slowly but surely beginning to slip from Pestage’s fingers. Without the Emperor’s mighty will and dark side powers there was no one who could maintain the tight control which

he had held over everything and bit by bit the rebels were nibbling away at strategic points and heading towards Coruscant.

I overheard rumours from the men working on the base about the prowess of the rebel fleet, the daring of its pilots and above all the courage and audacity of one man, Luke Skywalker, whose name was whispered in the same manner people whispered about ghosts and demons. I suppose to people who had never seen or known a force user he was something mighty, someone with super natural powers but I knew better. He was the son of the man I had worked for. He was a Jedi's son with Jedi powers. That he was capable of amazing things was to be expected.

I wondered sometimes what I would ever say to him if we were to meet. I also wondered how he felt about his father, knowing all the terrible things that Anakin Skywalker had done. I often lay awake at night imagining what might have happened that last meeting between the two in the Emperor's throne room on board the Death Star but I was fairly certain that whatever my mind could create, it was nothing compared to the reality of it all and I found it odd that despite the terrible grief I felt I could not hate Luke Skywalker for what had happened. He had chosen a side and done what he thought was best. He and his friends had won the biggest victory they could have ever hoped to get. He was directly responsible for Lord Vader's and the Emperor's death but instead of hating him I only felt a vague sort of pity.

The anniversary of the Battle of Endor came and went. There was a small memorial service held on the base and everyone wore black armbands for the day except me. I didn't want to sit through the hour long ceremony knowing what I knew and I did not mourn for Palpatine so I hid, spending the day tucked up in the small private library Thrawn had permitted me access to and tried desperately not to think about what had happened ten months prior. For the entire Galaxy it had been a year but for me it was still less than two months fresh in my mind. That wound was still too raw and attending a memorial would have been like rubbing salt and sand into it.

Four months after leaving the base, the *Grey Wolf* returned to orbit. I knew this news even before the doctor because I had overheard the comm officer talking about it in the mess. I must admit my stomach dropped at the mention of Thrawn's return. I had neither seen nor heard from him since his brief spell at my bedside so I had no idea what to think, no idea how he felt about me any more and for all his murmured words of being bound to me by Dantassi law his more recent actions said something

else. I had never thought of myself as insecure but I worried now about my place in his life.

I listened covertly for news of his actual return to the base and was eventually rewarded for my patience. Thrawn's shuttle landed in the middle of the night. The ship's graceful wings folded up as she slipped into the landing bay, touching down gently, quietly. From my place high up on the upper gantry I watched, my heart racing and my palms sweating, as he along with several of his senior officers disembarked. As I laid eyes on him for the first time in months I ached with a sorrow I could not explain yet at the same time I was furious with him for leaving me alone in this dreadful place. Even from my high up vantage point I could see they all looked tired. They had been out in the Unknown Regions for longer than usual and rumours had whispered of difficult skirmishes with alien races and pirates unhappy with Imperial presence in the area.

I closed my eyes for a second, stretching out with the force to touch Thrawn's presence in it. I found him easily, such was the connection between us, but he sensed me too and looked up sharply to where I sat, half hidden in the darkness. I knew he could see me, he had extraordinarily good vision and for a split second our eyes met and then he turned away sharply to speak with the deck officer on duty. My heart pounded in my chest as I sat on the gantry way, my arms resting on the lower barrier rail, my chin resting on my arms and my legs dangling over the side. I did not move for a very long time afterwards until one of Thrawn's men finally found me.

"Miss Gabriel? The Grand Admiral sent me to fetch you. He wishes to speak with you." His voice was young. I looked up into dark brown eyes and an expression of nervous earnestness. Backwaters of Corellia, his accent told me, still new enough and young enough to smile and be polite. I just stared at him.

"Please miss, the Grand Admiral was most insistent that you come immediately.

I sighed as I got and wordlessly followed him to Thrawn's private office. The door opened and the young man gestured for me to enter. He did not follow me in and when the door closed behind me I felt the wuff of air it displaced on the back of my neck. I smiled a little as a second ripple of air caressed my cheek.

"Hullo Rukh." I said as I felt him stand slightly behind me.

"Lady Gabriel. It is good to see you well." The noghri mewled. I turned to look at him; at least someone was pleased to see me.

The office, situated high up in one of the towers of the base, was dimly lit. Thrawn had no real need of bright lights at night and neither did Rukh. The soft glow from the desk lamp was for my benefit. I had never been here before and looked around at the tasteful furnishings and the artworks displayed about the room and walls. Some of them I knew from his home on Coruscant others were new to me, a pleasant mix of holograms and real. I didn't need to ask to know that this room was his sanctuary. Not many people, I wagered, had actually ever been in here. It was not his work office but the place, much like the study in the flat on Coruscant, where he came to think, to meditate and maybe even to relax.

"Rukh, leave us." Thrawn commanded quietly, his back was to the door as he stood facing the window standing much the way Lord Vader used to. The sight of him and the memory his stance evoked made me ache with sorrow.

The noghri nodded once and then vanished as eerily as he had appeared. The silence that filled his wake was heavy and stifling. I could not break it and stayed rooted the spot waiting. An age seemed to pass until Thrawn broke the impasse, not moving as he spoke.

"Doctor Thracer tells me you have made a full recovery."

I waited because it was not a question I needed to answer and I didn't know what he wanted to hear from me. For another long moment there was silence in the room and then he turned around to look at me. The white Grand Admiral's uniform made him seem cold and austere. It contrasted vividly with the blue of his skin. I didn't need to touch it to know it would be stiff and unyielding. I wondered briefly if its wearer was now the same.

He looked me up and down and, for a moment, an expression I couldn't decipher flashed in his eyes then passed. Some of the stiffness seemed to edge its way out of his body and to my surprise he undid the buttons and shrugged the jacket off, as though he had read my thoughts about it. Suddenly he seemed weary. I glanced at the chrono on the wall; it was nearly two in the morning planetary standard time.

"You sent for me?" I asked not really knowing what else to say, not wanting to ask the single most important question which would surely lead to argument or discussion. I was in no mood and too tired for either.

He nodded as he placed the jacket over the back of the desk chair. "I saw you were still awake or else I would have waited until morning." He said. On the desk was a small box, he picked it up, considered it for a

moment then offered it to me. "I thought it best to keep it safe until you were well enough to wear it." He explained.

I came close enough to accept what he offered, taking the small plain box from his outstretched hand. A sudden rush of sorrow washed through me when I opened it and saw what it held. I blinked away the tears which had filled my eyes unwanted, unbidden. I looked at Thrawn but his face was unreadable.

"I thought I had lost it." I said. My voice sounded small to my ears. I stared at my necklace, the small round ma'arilite stone with the star of colour in it. My hand trembled as I took it from the box to let it dangle from my fingers. I had asked the Doctor about it when I had gathered enough of my wits to do so but his answer had been a shrug. He could not recall me wearing a necklace and could not say what had happened to it. I thought it was lost for good.

"I took it off you while they prepped you for the bacta tank." He said simply as he moved then, closing the space between us and took it from my hand. He gestured for me to turn around and without word I did as he bid, lifting my hair as his deft fingers fastened it around my neck and I felt as if something locked had broken loose inside of me. I bit back the sudden rush of emotion and my shoulders shook from the effort. This was the third time he had returned my necklace to me. I drew a deep breath and bit my sorrow back. I did not fight him as he pulled me around to face him. Two fingers tucked under my chin, raising my face upwards to look at him. There were a thousand things I wanted to ask but I could not find the words. I saw from his face that neither could he. I pulled away from him and he let me go.

"You are still far too thin and pale." He said quietly.

"The food here is awful and getting outside to enjoy the sun is insanely difficult." I replied with a shrug. "At least your security is good."

"Still you found a way to get by it."

I looked at him for an explanation.

"The doctor has kept me informed about your activities here while I have been gone. He mentioned you had found the North Tower sentry gate."

"What did you expect? That I would stay cooped up here like a caged rill?" I asked sharply. "Did you imagine I would enjoy imprisonment in this place?"

"No, but I imagine it is better than dying in space." He said more coldly than I think he had meant to.

I nodded, backing down. "Dying in space was not high on my list of things to do." I said. I did not want to go down this path now, I was exhausted and wrung out. I didn't have to dig too hard to know he was also tired and on edge but it was too late, that line had been stepped on. His manner changed and I felt his anger creep into his voice.

"Then why did you fly out into the worst possible part of space alone? What were you thinking?"

I sighed. For a split second the memory of what happened at Endor flashed through my mind. "I don't know." I answered. "I wasn't thinking." I added then I sat down on the couch covering my face with my hands. "The Emperor made me ... he betrayed Lord Vader, he wanted to use me ...he ... I was trying to warn Lord Vader when the Death Star blew up, Lord Vader ...." I could not put a single sentence together and the memory of Lord Vader's last words to me and his severing the bond between us was as sharp and as painful as the moment it had happened. I shook my head to wipe away those thoughts. "I don't know what I was thinking. I don't know that I was thinking anything." I said and that, at least, was the truth.

Thrawn sighed. "What happened to you? What did he do to you to make you act in such a reckless manner?"

"I left a recording for you, I told you what happened." I said. I didn't want to live through it all over again. I had done my very best to shut it all out.

Thrawn gave me a filthy look. "Yes, I suppose you thought you did but the message that I received was garbled and nigh incomprehensible. You were delirious and incoherent. I had an idea of what had happened but trust me what I heard was most unhelpful as to unravelling the story that brought you out here. So you tell me now, what did he do that made you completely witless enough to fly out into a known hotspot without an escort?"

I knew who he meant and as much as I wanted to never think about what had occurred in the Emperor's throne room just before all nine Corellian hell's had broken loose I knew that Thrawn would not back off until I answered his question. So as best I could I told him what had happened, what the Emperor had done to me, what he had planned on doing to Lord Vader and everything that had occurred afterwards. He listened in silence, arms folded across his chest. I could sense his anger but I wasn't sure at whom it was directed. The silence that hung, once

again, between us was sickening but I held my tongue. I had told my story now he needed to deal with it.

He released the breath he had been holding very slowly. "I will never truly understand the Power that man had but I am grateful, for your sake, that he is gone. I have never known a person more skilled in the art of manipulation than Palpatine but your rashness and stupidity rival this every time."

"You're angry with me?" I looked at him.

"Of course I am." He replied with a frightening calm. "I found you cold and lifeless in the cockpit of a dead shuttle. You left goodbye messages for everyone which I had to listen to in order to figure out what the devil you were doing there in the first place. You took the most terrible of risks, nearly paid the ultimate price for no good reason at all. You never think! You just act. For as long as I have known you it has been this way. I had hoped that you would learn some measure of self control but your emotions best you every time. You are reckless." He waited a moment to let his words sink in then he continued. "It is simply sheer dumb luck that keeps you alive. I hope you thank whatever gods you usually pray to on your home world for their constant protection because I don't know how else you survive these ridiculous situations you manage to get yourself into."

I swallowed hard and gritted my teeth. His words rang true but they stung and made me angry. "I thought you needed to know what had happened. Of all the people I know you were the only one who could have done anything about it."

He regarded me for a moment. "Your faith in me is astonishing, my dear, but how could I have changed things? Palpatine and Vader were dead. I could not turn back time to undo these events."

I shook my head. "I told you. I don't know what I was thinking. It seemed logical at the time." It was a half truth but I didn't want to get further into my act of desperation.

An eyebrow arched at me. "And now?"

I looked up at him and shrugged helplessly. What was there to say except to apologise for my actions? I didn't want to but I understood that he needed to hear it. "It was rash and stupid and I'm sorry." And as I said it I realised just how sorry I was. I had lost nearly a year of my life for nothing. Acting on impulse had almost killed me and no good had come from it at all.

I wondered in that moment if he was right, if I would ever learn to think things through before I acted. I got up to leave. He was angry and I was at a loss for what to do or say next but before I could make it two steps he caught my arm and pulled me to him. His embrace was as fierce as it was unexpected and it broke my heart. I fought him a little, struggling to be free of his hold, afraid of his kindness, afraid it would undo me completely. He didn't speak nor did he let go, he pressed me to his body tightly until I stopped fighting him. With my head held against his chest I could hear his heart, its strong steady beat grounding me. He kissed the top of my head and loosened his hold on me.

"I'm sorry." I whispered again, this time without the defiance of before and had to swallow down the terrible anguish which threatened to rise up and shatter me completely.

"So am I." he replied in a voice that scared me.

When I looked up into his face I could not read his expression but in that moment I understood that while he had accepted my apology he had not forgiven me. I pushed away from him, turning to sit back down on the couch, clasping my hands together so that he would not see them tremble. For a second he regarded me with that cool calculating gaze I had come to understand was his way of not only analyzing situations but also hiding his emotions. I watched in silence as he went over to the other side of the room. He pulled out a glass from the small cabinet which he filled with something from a bottle I couldn't see.

"Crackerberry liqueur." He said handing it to me. I took the glass gratefully, noting that he did not join me. Here, I thought ruefully, he was always on duty. The drink was as heady as I remembered it to be, warmth tingled down in to my belly as I sipped it slowly.

Thrawn sat next to me, elbows resting on his knees. He rubbed his face with his hands. He, too, was exhausted. "Doctor Thracer tells me you have trouble sleeping."

I nodded. "I slept like the dead for a long time. Now it seems that I am afraid if I close my eyes I won't wake up again." There was truth in my words but what I did not tell him, though I suspect he knew, was that really I was terrified of my dreams. I had dreamed while I was in my coma but they were nothing in comparisons to the nightmares that haunted me now.

"This place is not good for you." He replied. "I'm sorry but there were precious few other options, especially given your condition when we found you."

Again I just nodded; a sudden drowsiness was making my eyelids heavy. I wondered for a moment if he had drugged the drink but knew better. Crackerberry liqueur always had this effect on me and he knew it. If we were going to argue over what had happened to me it would not be tonight. I finished the glass in one gulp and set it down on the table beside the couch, then tucked my feet up under me, jax like, and rested my head against his shoulder. "I want to go home." I told him.

I felt him nod. "I know you do." He said.

Something in his voice made me raise my head to look at his face but his expression was, as always, unreadable. I did not resist as he drew me to him, his fingers holding my chin. When he kissed me tenderly I thought then maybe everything would be alright between us again but he was exceptionally good at hiding his feelings. Not for the first time did it occur to me that he would make an excellent sabaac player. I curled into the warmth of his body, truly sleepy for the first time in a very long time. I knew a small amount of peace in his arms. If he felt the same I didn't know but I could no longer sense the brilliant fury I once had from him, if he was still angry he no longer showed it. Still, a sliver of doubt rippled through me making me glance up at him again, trying to read beyond the mask of calculating cool he always hid behind. There was something he was not telling me, something important he was holding back but I was too tired to dig for it. He regarded me thoughtfully for a moment then, pulled my head back to his shoulder.

"I am here." He said as if he could read my mind. "You will be safe, I have seen to it personally so go to sleep."

It didn't occur to me to ask what he meant, I just nodded and did as he had suggested.

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The sound of voices woke me. An argument low and fierce, whispered in a language that was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. I stirred slowly, finding my way out of the dreamless sleep the way a drunk finds his way home. Someone had put a cushion under my head and laid a blanket over me. I must have made a sound because who ever was speaking, broke mid sentence as the other hissed. "Quiet, you'll wake her."

"I'm already awake." I mumbled sitting up slowly. Still groggy, I rubbed my eyes and yawned then looked to who was speaking.

“Navaari?” I could not quiet believe it. Tall and fierce looking, he was an imposing figure but his smile was like sunshine and before I could move he strode across the room to hoist me up in a bone crushing hug.

“Tjällh!” He exclaimed half squashing the breath out of me. When he set me back down Thrawn, who was at his side, held a cup of fresh stim-caf out to me. I took it gratefully and sipped it, welcoming its bitter warmth.

Thrawn said something to him quietly in Dantassi-Cheunh and Navaari smiled at me, but shot Thrawn a look. “Yes, I know.” He replied, “But she is still young, still rash and still doing incredibly foolish things, so to me she is still an’tjällh’ech.” The word meant beloved little child or simple fool depending on how it was used. I didn’t mind. I was so happy to see him that the slight insult that word offered washed over me like sand across the desert. He sat down beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder.

“You are well, yes? Recovered from your death sleep?” he asked.

I nodded mid sip, my eyes watching him and Thrawn from over the rim of my cup. The sleep induced fog in my brain receded and I began to sense a tension in the air between the two men. They had been arguing. It was what had woken me up. Terse words spoken in hushed tones. I finished my stim-caf and handed Thrawn the cup.

“Another?” he asked. I nodded and turned back to look at Navaari. He had not changed. Unmasked he was less intimidating but no less fierce. Red eyes stared into my own and waited for the question he knew I had to ask.

“Why are you here?”

I watched as he glanced at Thrawn. “You did not tell her did you.” It was not a question, he had known and it hadn't impressed him much.

Thrawn stopped mid pace, my empty cup still in his hands and sighed. The look he gave me was mingled with sadness and defiance. What ever was coming next he knew I would not be happy about it.

“No. I thought it best if she did not know until you were here.”

Navaari shook his head and pursed his lips, disagreeing with Thrawn’s logic.

“Know what?” I asked, loathing that he spoke about me as though I was not in the room at all.

Both men looked at each other, the hardness from the earlier argument that had woken me returned to fill the silence between them. I asked my question a second time.

“I am here to fetch you.” Navaari said eventually when Thrawn remained silent.

I looked from one to the other again. “Fetch me?” I asked raising my eyebrows.

He nodded.

“Fetch me where?”

“You are to come with me to Hjal.”

I stared at Thrawn as realisation dawned on me. “You’re sending me away?”

He gave me the barest of nods. “You cannot stay here. I thought it best if you were to go some place safe, be with someone who is far better at curbing your impulsive idiocy than I am.”

“Am I not in the safest place in the galaxy?” I asked ignoring the last bit.

“No.” He said quietly.

“If you cannot bear the sight of me then why not simply send me back to Coruscant?” My words were cruel and angry.

“Coruscant is also not safe.” He said plainly, ignoring my barb. Now the sadness in his voice was unmistakable.

“So your answer is to send me away to an ice planet on the edge of the galaxy with a chaperone?”

“It seems the best course of action given your propensity for running off blindly into the unknown. You would not have spent almost a year at death’s door and months afterwards trying to recover your strength if you had used some common sense.”

“And you’re letting him do this?” I turned to Navaari. If I had hoped for an ally to my own cause he was not it.

“It seemed to be the best way to be keeping you out of trouble, Tjällh.” He replied seriously.

I opened my mouth but had no idea what to say. “No!” I hissed angrily, standing up. “Absolutely not!”

My defiance threw a switch and Thrawn’s anger flew. “Seven and a half months, Merlyn!” He spat. His use of my birth name was his way of letting me know the extent of his anger. “For seven months and three weeks I watched and waited while you hovered in and out of death.” The bitterness, anger and pain in his voice sliced into my gut like a blunt knife. “You have no say in these matters any longer. You forfeited that right when you flew out of here alone, without an escort into certain danger on a whim or rash, instinctive impulse. You don’t think! You never think! So now I am removing your need to think and acting in accordance with Dantassi laws which bind me to you, which also, I might add bind you to me as you acquiesced.”

I stared at him in astonishment. I had suspected that at some point not knowing what I had agreed to during the unmasking ceremony would come back to bite me. I opened my mouth to protest but he held up his hand for my silence. The full extent of his anger, which he had held in check the night before, stunned me into submission.

He continued, his voice now ice cold and unforgiving. “You will go with Kirja’navaar’inkjerii and you will, for once in your life, do as you are told. No more headstrong disobedience. Do you understand?”

The air went still, the way it sometimes was before a terrible storm. I stared at Thrawn for a full minute in utter disbelief at what I had just heard and then not knowing what else to say or do I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room. I heard Thrawn move to follow me but out of the corner of my eye I saw Navaari stop him, a broad hand at Thrawn’s shoulder. “Let her go, kej’son, give her some space to digest the news that you....”

I did not hear the rest because the door shut and I was already running down the corridor to get away. There were a few places I knew where I could escape to, quiet, where no one went. One was the small room which had a doorway to a small outcropping that served as a sort of ledge or balcony. I often went to sit out on it and breathe the fresh air. It was one of the few places I felt free to sit and think. I stood leaning back against the wall of cold stone and tossed small pebbles over the side. I

gulped for air, feeling as though I couldn’t breathe. I was too angry to cry but the tears were not far away. All I could think were the things I had lost. It all seemed so terribly unfair and I ached with a deep sorrow that would not go away. It did not take Thrawn terribly long to find me. Doctor Thracar had filled him in on all the places I went to hide; there wasn’t much that escaped the doctor’s notice and I didn’t have that many hidey holes anyway.

I sensed him before I heard him so I didn’t turn around. “Go away.” I said.

“I shall do as you ask but only after you hear me out.” He replied coolly, the anger gone leaving only stillness in its wake.

“You have more to say?” I asked nastily turning around to look at him. “I thought you didn’t want to speak to me, that’s why you are sending me away isn’t it?”

“Stop being difficult and listen to what I have to say.” He said wearily.

In answer I folded my arms across my chest and glared at him defiantly. He took it for compliance and continued.

“I need you to leave because it isn’t safe for you here. It isn’t safe for you with me or anywhere within the Empire and it is especially unsafe for you to return to Coruscant or your home.”

I rolled my eyes. “And just why is that?”

“Because Ysanne Isard has put out a warrant for your arrest and there is a bounty on your head.” He said simply.

That was the very last thing I had been expecting. “What?”

He drew a deep breath. “She and Pestage wish to rid themselves of any they fear would oppose them. Isard had your young friend Mara Jade imprisoned. You know too much, you were too close to Vader and held the Emperor’s favour. She and Pestage are eliminating anyone from the Emperor’s coterie who might be trouble. You, as Lord Vader’s trusted personal assistant are considered trouble. I still do not know of all the details but I am working on this. Things between Isard and myself are strained.” He paused for a moment. “While I trust my men and the Chiss stationed here under my command, it would only take one careless whisper to put everything done here in jeopardy. It would only take one

person to report that you are here to create some serious problems for me. I have enough to deal with as it is.” He looked at me to make sure I was getting the message. “You are not safe here and I cannot protect you all the time. Your home on Tatooine is being watched as is your family so I cannot send you there either. I did not think that you would wish to spend the rest of your life in an Imperial jail, so I contacted Kirja’navaar’inkjerii and asked if he would be willing to take you out of harm’s way until I can clear up this current issue.”

I just stared at him not believing what I was hearing. What had happened to the Empire that I had worked for and believed in that its loyal citizens and workers were being condemned and hunted by its own leaders?

Thrawn continued. “Kirja’navaar’inkjerii has wanted to teach you the ways of the Dantassi ever since he learned that I have failed in this particular duty. I cannot do what I need to do here and worry about you at the same time. I have much work to do and you no longer need medical attention. It seemed a good way to accomplish two things at once.”

“So I am just in your way?”

He looked at me, annoyance flashed across his features. “Believe what you will but you cannot stay here and I mean to see that you are safe. I promised this much, so you will go.”

“Promised? Promised who?”

He took a deep breath to steady his slow blooming anger. I knew all the right buttons to push and I was pushing them now. “Your family, Kirja’navaar’inkjerii and all those who care for you. It is a promise I intend to keep, A’myshk’a, whether you like it or not.”

“And this suits your purpose just fine to get me out of the way?” I asked angrily. “You are just pissed off and annoyed with me and this is how you punish me for it!”

I watched as he clenched his jaw. I was winding him up but he was working hard to keep it in check. I wished he wouldn’t, this Chiss coolness was alarming to me. I wanted him to explode at me, rail and be furious so that whatever it was he was holding inside would be released and we could go back to what we had been before all nine Corellian hells had been let loose. “I am, as you say, pissed off and yes, I am, to put it mildly, annoyed with you. I have been for some time but my feelings

hardly enter into the picture do they? You go charging off where ever you will without considering the consequences to yourself or others.”

Now we were getting to the heart of it. “Why didn’t you talk to me about this last night, then?” I asked.

“Because, my dear, it is pointless to discuss your actions with you. You go flying off into the unknown without heed or care for the dangers and wind up nearly dying in the process. I am quite certain in your head you had a perfectly good explanation for doing what you did but I cannot for the life of me think of one.”

“I was trying to tell you what happened at Endor.”

“Risking your life to do so when I would have learned of it soon enough. You are not the only messenger in the galaxy and we are not so backwater as one might think. What did you imagine you could accomplish?”

I opened my mouth for a second and stared at him but I did not know how to respond to this. I thought, had hoped that he had forgiven me, last night it had seemed that way, now I understood it had been his way of saying goodbye and softening the blow. It been just under a year and a half since the battle of Endor but it seemed that there was little I could say to him that would ease this anger which had stayed strong and fresh in all this time.

“Have you no answer?” His eyebrow arched and for a single second I hated his arrogance.

“I told you last night, I don’t know.”

His voice turned icy. “Do not lie to me behind half truths.”

That was all it took and my anger came loose like a spitting jax. “I came to tell you so that you would know, so that you could salvage the fleet and do what you were supposed to do!” I stamped my foot.

“And what would that be, my dear?” He asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“To lead the Empire!”

He laughed then, it was the last thing I had expected him to do and it was a biting sound. “Sate Pestage and Ysanne Isard lead this empire now. I am in exile, or had you forgotten?”

“That was a ruse!”

“Yes, which only the Emperor, a few others who are now dead or here with me knew about. As far as the rest of the galaxy knows I am the alien in disgrace. It suits Isard’s purpose well to have it stay that way and I am in no mind to challenge her at this point.” The bitterness in his words as he spoke was palpable.

I just looked at him in total disbelief wondering if I even knew him any more. What had happened to him in the time I had been in the coma?

“You, my dear, almost lost your life for nothing and I had to stand by and watch.” The flash of cold fury in his voice made me take a step back from him. For the first time, for as long as I could remember, I could not meet his eyes. When I didn’t say anything he continued.

“Parck was beside himself with guilt, I spent hours trying to tell him that short of throwing you in the stockade there was nothing he could have done. He could not bear to be on base while you lay at death’s door so he is currently in some sort of ridiculous self imposed exile on one of my ISDs. He is one of my best men, one of my friends and he hates himself for what happened to you. So answer me honestly, did you use your mind tricks on him?” Thrawn asked barely bothering to keep the viciousness out of his words.

“No!” I shouted hotly and shook my head. “I did not, I just asked. I told him what had happened and he let me go, he didn’t disagree with my reasoning!” The truth was I couldn’t recall what had happened. I remembered only a terrible sense of urgency and panic but I was fairly certain I had not used my force powers to push Parck into any decision.

“Your reasoning....” He spat the words out shaking his head slowly and drew a deep breath. “Your reasoning almost got you killed. You don’t think! You don’t reason, you just act! Your carelessness and your passions will be your undoing, A’mysk’a.”

*And also yours*, I thought but wisely I held my tongue. There was a long deadly silence and he turned away from me. His voice when he finally spoke was full of pain.

“I mean to keep you safe. Do you know what finding you at death’s door was like? How many times do I have to watch as you walk the line between living and dying, how many? You are the worst distraction a

man in my line of work, in my position could ever have in his life! It seems I can not walk away from you nor can I have you here and I cannot do my job with you underfoot, constantly getting in harm’s way. You need to go with someone who can do a better job of keeping you out of trouble than I can.”

“Underfoot?” I asked turning on him, shaking my head in disbelief. “I interfere with your job? You will send me away because I am in your way or is it really because you are afraid?” my voice was barely a whisper because I could not fathom the truth of it all.

“I thought you were dead.” He said quietly. It cost him so much to utter these words, I saw the pain of it in his eyes but I ignored this and the anguish that flooded his voice. I was too riled up to care and lashed out accordingly.

“And that’s the real issue isn’t it, your fear.” I said coldly. “You hide from your emotions and your pain by ducking into duty. That’s what you did after your brother went missing and now you do it again with me only I am not dead!” my voice shook as my own fury gripped me. “No wonder your sister won’t speak to you. You’ll hide me away from the real world to save yourself from a broken heart and in the process you’ll break mine! You drive everyone who cares about you away because you are afraid of the pain relationships cause! You are such a coward!” I hissed the words at him and took a grim satisfaction from watching him flinch. I had hit home and it was a low blow. I should have stopped but I didn’t, I was too angry and beyond caring. “You are so full of pretty words and grand gestures but when it comes to what really matters you hide behind that uniform! The real truth of things is that you can’t deal with love or the pain of loss. You run away from emotions under the guise of work! So, go back to your duty then and see if I care!” I shouted, staring at him for a full second then uttered the words I would live to regret. “I hate you. You should have left me there to die we both would have been a lot better off.” Tears spilled down my face. I could not stop them. I went to shove past him and smacked his hand away savagely as he tried to catch my arm.

He whispered my name and for a split second our eyes met. My heart wrenched with what I saw in his expression but my own anger, grief and misplaced pride had a far stronger grip on me than sense, proving him right about everything he had just said. I turned away, leaving him standing there. Without another word I went to find Navaari, stopping

along the way to pick up my satchel which held the few belongings I had on the base and with some clothes. Navaari was waiting for me at the docking bay. He looked at my face and wisely kept quiet. I didn't say anything when I saw what ship he had come in, the *AhnkeliS'u'udelma*, but it was another addition to the fuel that fed my anger.

"Let's go." I said as I marched past him up the ramp.

Wordlessly he followed me in.

"I assume you are the one who flew *my* ship here?"

He nodded.

"Fine, then she's yours." I told him and left to find refuge in one of the small cabins.

I felt the ship's thrusters engage and closed my eyes as she swung lazily out of the docking bay. I had not known Navaari could pilot but nothing about the Dantassi who had rescued me in the middle of a raging blizzard surprised me anymore. I lay on the bunk, too furious to cry. When the shuddering stopped I knew the ship had broken free from the planet's atmosphere. I counted the minutes until we left the planet's gravity well and waited with baited breath to hear the hyperdrive kick in; when it did I knew a small sense of relief. Sometime after that Navaari knocked on the cabin door and then, although I told him to go away, came in anyway, holding a cup of tea. I glanced at him then went back to staring at the ceiling. He set the cup down on the small table then sat on the edge of the bunk and looked at me.

"That did not go as well as he wished, did it?" He asked. When I said nothing he continued, "I told him you would not be listening. He does not understand how you can be so emotional about something which makes so much sense to him. He only wishes to keep you from more harm." He chuckled a little at the face I made. "You are far too hard on that man." He added.

"Perhaps, but he is also hard on me." I retorted. "And now he can do what he wishes, which is to forget about me and bury himself in his duty! It is what he's good at."

"Give him time, Tjällh, give him time." Navaari said softly, placing his large hand gently on my shoulder.

"Time?" I could not keep the anger out of my voice. "Time, he has had months and months to get over it. I don't understand him at all."

"Yes, many long months of watching you find your way back from your journey through the underworld. Do you think it was hard for you to be in that dark place all that time? Imagine what it was for him having to be the observer of this journey. He is a man of planning and of action, not a man to sit easily and wait." Navaari nodded. "You understand him better than you let on but you do not like the results of his choices and while he understands you as well, he loves you which blinds him. Pushing you away is the only way he knows how to deal with his own grief. He is not a stupid man. His crime is caring too much and that goes against all he has been taught. He does not mean to be cruel or cold. Allow him this time, this space, little one, he also needs to heal. Much has happened in these long months which he could not speak of; it has been difficult for him as well." His deep voice rumbled in his chest. His kindness was my undoing. I gulped down air trying to stop the damn within me from bursting. He stroked my hair watching me struggle to hold the well of sorrow and emotion back from exploding.

"Let go of your sadness, Tjällh, keeping it inside makes you do crazy things."

"Go away, Navaari."

"No. Not this time. You need to be listening to me now." He said. "You hurt through and through, you have lost loved ones and time, your life has changed forever if you do not allow this grief to pass through you, you will surely suffer for it, perhaps even die because of it, so let it go little one." He spoke with a firmness I knew meant he would not go away, nor would he let me slide into the greyness that threatened to swallow me whole. He caressed the side of my face and he waited.

The gentleness of his touch and the truth in his words were a trigger, permission to let go of everything I had been holding inside. I felt the damn burst and could no longer stop it, curling up into a small ball on my side and burying my face in my pillow, I wept bitterly without holding back for the first time since I had come back to the land of the living. Grief poured out of me like a river and I thought I would die from the pain of it. Navaari simply sat at my side, his large hand warm on my back as he rubbed it comfortingly. A father's gift this was, the ability to somehow ease away pain without saying a word. It made me ache for my own father and I

cried even harder. I thought it would never end but even the body has its limits and eventually there were no more tears to shed.

“I am thinking a rest on Hjal away from all this sorrow will be doing you some good.” He said. “You need a place to heal, you need time to mourn. Nikätza’arth’pavjäska was right this is a deep wound and it has had plenty of time to fester.”

I sniffled and turned around to look up at him. He read my disbelief in my eyes.

“He knows better than you think about such things, and he, too, carries much sorrow in his heart. Just because he is not showing it as you do does not mean it is not there.” When he handed me the cup of tea now no longer hot but still drinkable, I sat up, cross legged and took it gratefully. My throat ached from crying.

“This is my ship, you know.” I said for lack of anything else to say.

He smiled. “Yes, I know. I have taken great care of her. Your things are aboard and some of your clothes, your Ta’kasta’cariad thought you would be wanting them. He thought you would feel safe in her.”

“How long will I be staying on Hjal?”

Navaari shrugged slightly. “That is up to Nikätza’arth’pavjäska, it is he who must decide when it is safe for you to return.”

“So I am to be a prisoner then.”

“No, you could be leaving if you wished it but I would not be recommending doing such a thing. You will be safe with me, with the clan and if you are thinking to return to your family on Tatooine then I must ask would you wish to be putting them at risk as well? They are being watched, you cannot go home and where else would you be protected?” He paused to let the weight of his words sink in. “Would you rather be on the run? Always looking over your shoulder to see if you were in the sights of a bounty hunter? I do not think that imprisonment would sit well with you. Your family knows you are with someone safe, Nikätza’arth’pavjäska has kept them well informed. He simply did not give them details so that when they are questioned they do not need to tell lies.”

“If I went home I would put them all in danger.”

He nodded. “If I am understanding it correctly they could be executed for harbouring a known and wanted fugitive. Better that you

vanish for a while and let Nikätza’arth’pavjäska sort things out on his end. It is what he is good at.”

I could only nod. My last words to Thrawn echoed loudly in my head. My anger had receded leaving remorse in its wake.

“Time, you both need some time.” Navaari said gently, reading the expression on my face correctly.

But I shook my head. There are some wounds time never seemed to heal, was not Lord Vader proof of that? As if he could read my thoughts Navaari wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me to him tightly. I just closed my eyes, my head ached fiercely and I was suddenly tired beyond belief.

“So now you are in my hands, Tjällh. Let us see if I can not make of you Jhal’kai and teach you how to be Dantassi.” He smiled.

I returned his smile but I don’t think it reached my eyes and then rested my head on his shoulder. I could not argue against anything he had said and in the end, truth be told, I was a little relieved that the decision had been taken out of my hands. At least if something went wrong no one could say it was due to my rashness or stupidity.

“How long before we reach Hjal?” I asked.

“A few days by your reckoning.”

I nodded. “Is there more tea?”

Navaari smiled. “I can be making more tea if you wish and perhaps something to eat? You are too thin, the cold will gnaw at your bones.”

I didn’t answer as I got up to follow him out to the galley. My mother used to say that nothing cured all ills like a good cup of tea. Now was as good a time as any to put her theory to the test because there didn’t seem to be anything else I could do or say that would change the way things had turned out. What was done was done and there was no going back. The Empire that I had known and worked for was gone, what had taken its place was a stranger to me. Whatever my future held next was a mystery but at the very least I was alive to see it.