

Daughter of the Empire

Book 3

by Fiona Messer

Chapter One

Parting Ways With The Dead

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I was born on Tatooine, a fairly unremarkable planet that orbits a binary star system. It is known for two things, it's unforgiving heat and Luke Skywalker. It lies in the Arkanis Sector of the Outer Rim territories and at one time was mistakenly thought to be a third star because the reflection of Tatoo I and Tatoo II's light from the planet's surface was so bright. On the whole there was not a lot about Tatooine to recommend it as a home world to anyone. During the Old Republic it was left alone, forgotten and seen as unimportant by the Senate. The Hutts ruled along with the spice smugglers and many other underworld organizations. Its lack of law made it a prime place for 'undesirables' to hide out. It was a place most civilized peoples would not dream of setting foot on and whispers of slavery as well as other unsavoury occupations did nothing to improve my home world's reputation. It would also not have helped if more people knew that it was on Tatooine that Lord Vader, then Anakin Skywalker, grew up as a slave until he was freed and taken away to become a Jedi Knight at the age of ten by Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn which would alter his life and his destiny forever. Twenty two years later I was born on the same planet with my own strange story to tell. Raised in its blazing heat, until I got swept up into working for the Empire and sent to Coruscant, I had known no other way of life and was happy for it.

My time on Tatooine had made me hardy. I had learned at an early age to conserve all water and be wary of the twin suns that reigned in the sky. I never minded the heat which I had grown up with and I found my home planet to be beautiful in its starkness. As a child, I learned the whispering tell tale signs the wind gave when a sand storm was coming because the sky's face never changed. It never rained and water, plucked from the atmosphere by hardy moisture farmers too stubborn to give up and move someplace else, was more precious than all the spice and credits in the galaxy put together. I knew how long a person could survive in the desert without food or water. I knew what plants held precious juices and liquids which could save a thirsty man's life and where to find them. I knew the correct way to greet the Sand People should one ever have the misfortune to meet them in the desert and I could ride a bantha with ease but none of these things prepared me for life in the Empire's service or living on Hjal amongst the Dantassi with Navaari.

Hjal was a small planet far out on the shoulder of the Tingel Arm, one of three planets orbiting a small yellow star and the one with the longest orbit. It was a glacial planet. Almost seventy percent of its mass was covered in some sort of snow or ice. For much of its year the seas and

lakes were fully frozen and even in the short summer the highest peaks of its sweeping mountains were covered in gleaming white snow. What Tatooine lacked in water, Hjal had in abundance, almost all of it frozen. Because of its strange elliptical orbit Hjal did have seasons, though none of them would be considered even remotely warm by my standards. The shorter end of Hjal's orbit around the small sun made up the two months of spring, two months of autumn and four months of summer. Spring and autumn brought violent storms which swept the planet for days on end with astonishing ferocity. The rest of the sixteen month year was the hell Navaari cheerfully called winter. The large enclave where Navaari lived was situated near the midline of the planet, where the weather was most temperate. It was a stunningly beautiful place despite its harshness and cold.

The Dantassi, short for Mathäd'antass'Iyantha which meant the Ghosts of Flesh and Bone, had colonized the planet hundreds of years before the Clone Wars after leaving their home-world of Csilla. They were descendants of the Chiss people, a section of the population that had lived before their home-world had been plunged into an ice age and driven the majority of its people under ground. The Dantassi had chosen not to seek warmth deep under the planet's crust but instead found ways to survive the bitter cold on the surface.

They had been, for the most part, a nomadic folk wandering with the seasons, such as they were, but at some point they had taken root and begun to build their own small civilizations deep in the caverns of the Csillian Mountains using both traditional and some very advanced technological means to survive the surface cold. Most people, including the Chiss, knew next to nothing about them. The Dantassi had thrived quietly, secretly. Their reputation as terrible and fierce warriors and hunters was well deserved but also highly exaggerated by rumours and whispers passed along by any and all who met them. The Dantassi encouraged these tall tales on the premise that the more outlandish the mystery surrounding them was the less likely it was that people would come looking for them. If this meant that the rest of the galaxy saw them as a vicious feral society to be feared and avoided then so much the better. I knew differently.

My life had changed irreversibly the day Lord Vader had died. In the time I had been lost to a coma the galaxy had moved on, the rebels advanced towards Coruscant and Ysanne Isard was doing all she could to tighten her grip on the power she had inherited with the Emperor's death. It would have made sense to me that Thrawn be recalled to the Core to take

charge of the military but instead he remained stationed on the base on Nirauan, carving out the Empire's niche in an area of space never before explored by Imperials. What he felt about this I didn't know, before we could speak of it and the other issues that lay between us he had unceremoniously shipped me off to Hjal with Navaari under the guise of keeping me safe. In spite of the fact that I was furious with him for this, it was probably, given the circumstances, the very best thing he could have done but this did not mean I forgave him for it, far from it.

The journey to Hjal had been a quiet one. I had withdrawn and Navaari let me be. We arrived on the planet in the middle of winter and it was every bit as cold and as strange as I recalled it to be. Bundled up in the furs Navaari had brought with him, I did not feel the cold as we made the sled trip from the docking bay to the enclave, I just felt numb. The small apartment I had stayed in before was just as I remembered it. I chose the same bedroom I had slept in the last time, not wishing to stir up memories of happier moments.

My return to the enclave was a quiet uneventful thing, the few people I saw kept themselves to themselves. When I asked why they turned their faces away from me Navaari's explanation surprised me a little.

"You are in mourning, they are respecting this." He had said.

And so I was. It was the Dantassi believed in many things and deaths were treated with the utmost of respect. It was said that the souls of the dead remained with the living until the living let them go, usually this period lasted for a year but in my case, Navaari had said that it would be longer.

"You were walking with the dead." He had said, as if that statement explained everything. I had just given him a look of confusion. "You were not letting go and saying farewell, you were following their path."

So I was officially said to be in what the Dantassi called sju'ru'arwy'kha, a period of mourning and meditation. The members of the enclave treated me with kindness but kept their distance. Firm in the belief that during this time the dead walked with the living and it was best to allow the person or people left behind to make their peace and move on. At first I had been furious about this, left feeling even more alone and shunned than ever before but over time I realised it made sense. So with a small solemn ceremony I was declared sju'ru-kha and treated accordingly. I found this idea of an official period of mourning to be silly at first, after all Lord Vader

had been killed well over a year past but as Navaari had pointed out, I had not been awake for this time so for me it was a fresh wound which, in his words, was shattering my soul in many pieces. There were many such wounds in my soul, I had told him angrily. *All the more reason for you to part ways with your ghosts then*, had been his reply. I never could argue with Navaari.

Sju'ru'arwy'kha was observed in many ways, the person in mourning was given lots of space to 'find their way back'. They were left in peace to contemplate, to experience all the emotions one goes through with loss and above all to forgive. There was a sacred space, a room set aside for remembrance and contemplation. It was a beautiful space and much to my surprise, once I got used to the idea I used it often. Unlike my previous experiences with someone close to me dying, this time I could not escape thinking about it all. Time to contemplate was all I had and there was no place to run to, no place to find loud distractions so for the first time in my life I faced the death of the people I had cared about. It was the most terrifying journey I had ever had to make in my life and I felt as though I were facing it completely alone. Of course, this was not the case at all.

The enclave's healer and shaman were responsible for the well being of the sju'ru-kha and it was to the shaman, an elderly woman named Ma'kehla, I found myself drawn to when I needed to speak with someone about what it was I had gone through, was going through. She did not have to know Lord Vader to understand that in my case the mourning was complicated and compounded by a terrible, crushing guilt. We would sit in the sacred space for hours, sometimes saying nothing, sometimes I spoke until my voice was raw and sometimes all I could do was weep uncontrollably. I knew that I was not simply crying for him but for everyone and everything I had ever lost. It was a terrible yet at the same a cleansing experience. The rituals she performed were secret and sacred; never to be spoken of and indeed even if I had wanted to share them there were no words to describe this journey.

For the first three months of my time on Hjal I did next to nothing. When I was not wandering around like a ghost or speaking with Ma'kehla, I slept. It seemed surprising to me to sleep so much after nearly a year in a coma but this was not the same thing and for the first time in a very long time it was sleep without the terror of nightmares or pain. My ghosts, it seemed were giving me space and there were no unwelcome visits from long dead Jedi. When I did dream it was of day to day things and slowly I began to heal.

Six months after landing on the planet I woke up one day to realise that the great weight I felt I had been carrying upon my shoulders was gone. I had dreamed of Lord Vader for the first time in ages, seeing him standing on the bridge of a star destroyer, his hands clasped behind his back staring out into the stars. He did not turn to look at me but instead merely said 'You may go now.'

When I told Ma'kehla this she simply smiled and told me that I was done. My ghosts had released me and I could now return to my life, such as it was. I suppose she passed the word along because within two days of me talking to her about this the enclave elder called a gathering and I was welcomed back from my period of sju'ru'arwy'kha. Suddenly it was as if someone had flooded the world with colour again and when Navaari pulled me into one of his huge bear hugs it was not tears of sorrow that leaked from my eyes but tears of joy.

Once I was considered to be whole and healed, no longer dragging around a bunch of disgruntled ghosts, my life became suddenly very busy. The enclave had need of a teacher, someone who could unravel the secrets of learning basic to those who wished to learn it. I found myself with five willing and eager students to teach which was a completely new experience for me. It was one thing to learn a foreign language but it was quite another to try and teach one's mother tongue to another. When I was not teaching I was learning. At the hands of Navaari and his own students I began to learn the ways of the Jhal'kai, the art of tracking. Boba Fett would have been envious at what I learned and Navaari was an excellent teacher. While hours and hours of traipsing through the frozen tundra was not my most favourite thing to do it kept me in very good shape as well as on my toes. I was officially a part of Navaari's family but he by no means went easy on me, if anything he rode me harder than he perhaps might have had I not been who I was. There were days when I could have cheerfully murdered him.

During my time on Hjal, Thrawn wrote letters. They arrived as a packet once every five or six weeks, usually with messages from my family and friends on Tatooine and Coruscant included. My family understood the seclusion and wrote of cheerful day to day things, making them seem less far away, less remote. Shiv's letters spoke of much change on Coruscant and not for the better. Under Isard and Pestage's rule the Empire was suffering. If people had thought the Emperor cruel they now had reason to doubt this way of thinking. She was every bit as ruthless as she was rumoured to be and I felt guilty at my last words to Thrawn every time I

read about Isard's exploits. Perhaps he did not know how to cope with strong emotions but in the end, in sending me to Hjal, he was only trying to protect me.

Navaari had tried many times to get me to open up with him on the subject of Thrawn but that was a place I would not go. Thrawn was a topic that was off limits. My guilt and my anger mingled in an unhappy cocktail leaving me to wonder if what ever it was that had been between he and I was now irreversibly shattered. I had told him I hated him, and in that tiny moment of time those words had been true but now, now I regretted them but I could no more go back in time and undo them than I could make Hjal a warm and sunny place. My regret and guilt made replying to Thrawn's letters impossible. I had no idea what to say to him, how to describe my experiences on Hjal and so his correspondence went unanswered. Still, he wrote. His letters were every bit as elegant and wonderful as I remembered. His way with language never ceased to astonish me but often the subjects of his letters were less than encouraging.

The Empire was crumbling. The Alliance sniped away at small yet vital targets with everything they had. Thrawn wrote with some admiration of a group of elite pilots collectively known as Rogue Squadron and talked about the small battles lost and won. He also spoke of Isard and Pestage. He knew she was lying to him, keeping him at arm's length because she feared what he might do if given the opportunity to take over. He was frustrated by this because it was, as he had often told me, never his wish or goal to take over as leader of the Galactic Empire, he felt that his role was that of steward, keeping the law in order to maintain peace and cohesion. As he often had before, he hinted that there were worse things in the galaxy than the Emperor to worry about but he could see the slow decay and felt powerless to stop it. So he continued his original mission, to expand the Empire into the Unknown Regions. He populated the base at Nirauan with both humans and Chiss but in reading in between the lines I could tell that things were also not going according to plan, he simply did not have the man power he needed to continue the level of expansion he had been achieving before the decline of the Empire really began.

The two year anniversary of the battle of Endor came and went. I marked its passing quietly with Ma'kehla, half expecting it to be a difficult day, but the pain of loss had dulled considerably. I no longer felt that terribly gaping sorrow at Lord Vader's death instead more often than not, when I felt that pang of emptiness it came because I had thought of

Thrawn. I missed him terribly but I could not bring myself to say it. To admit this would be to admit I had been wrong and that meant saying I was sorry which no matter how often I tried to write those words I simply could not seem to do. I ached for his presence, the touch of his hands the sound of his voice. With each and every letter he sent this pain was renewed because every time I touched the latest letter to come to me I was instantly given a myriad of images and sensations, thanks to my wretched gift of being able to read the memories from objects. He too felt regret, while he never spoke of it I sensed it, lingering under his words and, just like me, he did not know how to bridge that particular gap so he skirted around it filling his letters with news from the outside worlds, stories from his day to day life and updates of what was going on as far as the Empire was concerned. I read his letters so many times over I could probably have recited them word for word but not once did I ever answer them. If this hurt or worried Thrawn he never spoke of it. I suspected that Navaari kept him well informed on my life on Hjal, though he never said a word of that to me, nor did I ask although it had occurred to me to do so from time to time.

My days on Hjal were full and busy, time passed far swifter than I could ever have thought, Before I had realised it I had spent over a year and a half on the planet. I had grown and changed in ways I could not have ever imagined. If Navaari had felt I was ignorant to the ways of the Dantassi before, he could no longer make this claim. While I did not look like them, I felt as though I was welcome among them, even one of them sometimes. I had learned their language and customs though some had taken a lot longer to get used to than others. I had made friends and learned new skills I had not dreamed possible and even come to occasionally enjoy the austere cold the planet had to offer. In short I began to feel comfortable and at home. This should have served as a warning of sorts because usually when things in my life settled down to some sort of normalcy was exactly when things tended to change. This was no exception.

I struggled in the soft powdery snow, tripping over the snow shoes strapped to my boots and falling, for the billionth time, flat on my face. Trying not to laugh, Navaari backtracked and hauled me to my feet by the scruff of my neck. One would think that years of walking in the sand would

have prepared me for this but that was not the case. I still sometimes struggled with the snow shoes despite the hours and hours of practice, tripping over the extra size they added to my feet. I used to think I was graceful but not now, wearing the large flat additions to my boots just made me awkward and clumsy.

Navaari sighed and shook his head. “You look like a jax trying to swim.” He said, his breath lacing the air with white puffs.

“I feel like it as well. How in the name of the almighty Sarlacc can anyone walk in these things?”

“Practice.” He replied.

I glared at him. “I’ve been practicing this for ages now!”

He laughed. “Yes and your skills at falling flat on your face are improving with each try.”

I grinned as I flung a handful of snow at him and sat down. “Ha very ha!”

He squatted down at my side and looked at me for a moment. “You are giving up?”

I nodded. “We’ve been at this for hours, we haven’t found anything worth tracking and the weather is going to turn.” I said.

He looked at the sky which had gone from a clear deep blue to a strange flat silver colour.

“Yes, there is a big blow coming in from the North East. It will be bad, I am thinking, three maybe four days.”

I nodded. I knew the signs for storms.

Navaari gave me a smile, “Maybe you are not so good at walking with the snow shoes but you surpass my skill in sensing the weather. Come, time we head back.”

We were close enough to home that we would probably get there before the storm really hit and I was glad for it. There had been a few times when we were not close enough and had to find shelter and camp out. I had learned a great deal about cold weather survival but that didn't mean I liked it any more than I had when I first stepped foot on Hjal. It was one thing to watch the wildness of a blizzard from the comfort of the enclave but quite another to be out in the middle of it, and I should know, I had done that on my own once. The enclave still talked about it, using my idiocy as an example to small children who thought playing in the wild wind and snow was a pretty good idea. If Navaari had not placed a tiny tracer chip in the bone mask he had made for me I would have died, curled up in a little ball in thinking I was warm when, really, I was freezing to death. It was not often that Navaari lost his temper but he had then, and rightly so. It had been a stupid thing to do and he never let me forget it.

By the time we made our way back to where the sled and hounds sat the first lazy flakes of snow had begun to fall. There was no wind yet but it would come. I could sense it the way I could sense lies. Navaari was right it was almost as if I had a gift to feel changes in the weather and I had never been wrong about it yet. I glanced up at the eerie sky and just knew this storm would be bad, Nagh'anni's brush, as the Dantassi called the storms that came during this time of year, were the worst. Violent and unpredictable they swept the planet for days on end with winds reaching past two hundred kilometres per hour and falling and blowing snow making the world impossibly white and visibility null. Better to be indoors safe and warm than out in it, that was for sure. During such weather the enclave battened everything down and concentrated on activities which could be done indoors. The spring and Autumn storms were often the times when the council sat in long sessions or weddings and other rites of passage were performed, because these storms pretty much guaranteed that most everyone from the enclave who was on planet would be present and would not be going anywhere for a while.

It was the first time in my life that I had ever really experienced any sort of community on such a large yet intimate scale. It was strange and wonderful thing. People lived together and got along together, for the most part. Disputes were settled either in house or when they got out of hand, by the council and the Elder. Almost everyone in this particular enclave knew each other and even though there were well over several hundred people living in the enclave at any one time it never felt crowded.

There five enclaves living on Hjal, widely spread apart across the planet. I had not known that when I had first arrived, the Dantassi kept their numbers a secret. No one really knew how many there were or exactly where they were all situated. Navaari told me it was to keep the *come from always* from learning too much. Once a year, all five enclaves came together for a week long gathering at a neutral place. It was a spectacular thing to experience but I had found it overwhelming to see so many Dantassi in one place, especially as I was the only human among them. The gathering site was huge, built into one of the mountains that ringed the very southern edge of the central tundra. It was a place of power Navaari had told me, the first settlers had found the caverns not dug them and to this day it was only ever used for the gathering.

It was at this huge meeting that the five councils got together, discussed politics and policy, caught up on the news of the outside worlds brought in by the hunters who had traversed the galaxy and returned. It was also a great social gathering time, the intermingling of clans and families. The mixing of blood between enclaves was encouraged so there were always a few binding ceremonies at this time and it was the one time of the year when the rule about being masked before anyone but your own enclave and family was relaxed. Mostly, I had thought at the time, it was an excuse to party like crazy for a week. It was exhausting and I had been grateful when it was all over but also a little sad.

The Dantassi were a very close knit people and even when there were conflicts, the ties that bound them together were stronger. They looked out for one another, worked as a group for the better good and it was a far cry from the back stabbing, bitchy politics I had experienced while working at the Imperial palace. Here, there was no Emperor's favour to curry, no vying for positions of power. Power came from contribution the more you contributed the higher in esteem you were held, but in the end it was simply about respect, there were no awards for hunting the most or doing the most. You were expected to pull your weight and do your part and in difference to humans, the Dantassi accepted this with grace. It was their way of life and their survival depended on it.

I came to understand why Thrawn admired them so much. While it was not the perfectly harmonious society that philosophers had dreamed about, it was organised and healthy. Once I had been able to see past my own grief, I came to realise just how lucky I was to be given the chance to experience this, to live with them and be considered one of them. Thrawn had not done me a disservice by sending me here to get better, he had done

me a huge favour. It was my own stupidity and stubbornness that kept me from telling him this.

I trudged back to the sled. The air had taken on that strange buzz that always came before a violent storm, as if the oncoming weather caused a certain vibration which only animals and beings far more advanced than me could actually hear. It set my teeth on edge though. I looked up at the sky as I stowed the hunting gear in the sled-box. This storm would be bad, the air pushed at me like a giant hand and what had started out as a few fat lazy snow flakes would become mean and vicious. I breathed the scent of the on coming weather in deeply. The air had a damp smell to it, peppery and biting. It smelled of snow, lots and lots of snow. Navaari clapped a large hand on my back, reminding me that we had to get moving and there was not time for day-dreaming. We had at least a hundred kilometres to travel and we needed to do it as quickly as possible or we would have to make camp. I tied off the sled-box and then straddled it for the ride back. Navaari usually ran the sled hounds on the way home, he was still far more experienced with the hounds than I ever would be, but he had been insistent that I learn how to handle them and learn to drive a snow sled. Unlike walking with snow shoes I was actually pretty good at it but it helped that I had always been good with animals, something to do with my force gifts I suspected.

By the time we arrived back at the enclave, shortly before dark, the weather had turned fully. The wind had picked up from a gentle breeze which had played tag with the lazy snowflakes to a whining howl which sent snakes of powdery fine snow writhing across the ground. It was well on its way to being a violent beast which blew snow in all directions and the snowfall had gone from vertical to horizontal. The flakes of snow that had been fat and lazy were now mean and small, stinging as they smashed against us. I was grateful for all the protection my clothes and mask offered. The storm had not even begun to show her full fury and already the gusts shoved the sled from side to side as though our very presence was an affront to the weather gods. I had learned how to shift my weight to compensate for the gusting winds, keeping the sled from toppling. This was the reason for sitting on the box, not just to get driven home but to be a counter balance. It was achingly hard work which, because of the subtleness of the job, one did not notice at first, however the aching muscles a day later sure let one know that the ride was not just a pleasure trip. This storm had come down faster than even I had suspected it would and I was glad when we made the outer ring of the enclave, lights telling us

we had come home, before things got really interesting. In spite of the fact that I loved the sheer ferociousness of this kind of weather it was exhausting to be out in and the lure of warmth and a hot meal was far more enticing.

Unpacking the sled and dealing with the sled-hounds was my job. While I took care of the animals, Navaari went inside to make supper. He had long since discovered that while I was pretty good at many things, cooking was definitely not one of them. It had only taken one of my very bad attempts at preparing a meal for him to make me swear I wouldn't do that again. That was a promise which was easy to keep; I hated cooking anything more than tea and toast. It became my job to deal with the sled and the dogs after a trip, and that was just fine with me. I liked the time I got to spend with the animals, they were simple and easy to be with. They made no demands on me; they yipped and yowled, tails wagging, tongues, hanging out as they bounced about me when I readied their food. I loved their furry warmth, their trust which they did not give easily to many. Once they were fed and settled, I sat on the sled box and oiled the leather sled lines before stowing the gear away. It was a peaceful chore and it always relaxed me after a long trip.

The sled wolves were housed in a large kennel, each had its own place to sleep and its own food, while the hounds ran as a team and pulled the sled as one unit when left alone the pack instincts came out and if they were left in one area all together they started fighting with each other. I took my time with the animals because I liked being with them. It was uncomplicated, something I had come to appreciate living here. I loved the peace and quiet. It was something I had known on Tatooine as well but until I had gone to Coruscant and started to work for Lord Vader had never really treasured before. This time I savoured every moment of it. As I hung up the harnesses it occurred to me that I was truly happy here, which surprised me. When I had first arrived I was sullen and angry, hating everything, now I wondered why.

When my chores were done I closed the kennel up and made my way through the underground passages to where Navaari and I lived. As I walked through the door to the cosy apartment, shrugging off the heavy warm clothes I noticed the lack of cooking smells in the air.

"Hey!" I yelled as I kicked off my boots and hung up the coat, "Are we eating out tonight?" I grinned at that thought; eating out meant that we had probably been invited to eat at An'jast'a's place which was just wonderful, she was an amazing cook. She had been showing a great deal of

interest in Navaari as of late and he was not averse to accepting her frequent invitations for dinner. I got to eat with them but it was expected that I would suddenly become quite tired and leave shortly after the meal. It was fun to watch the two of them court each other even if it did make me a little sad concerning the status of my own peculiar relationship.

I made my way to the living room, still grinning, still holding my running commentary. "Oh, I bumped into Kai' on the way and I cancelled the lesson with him because he asked if I cou..." I froze dead in my tracks and so, it felt, did my heart.

Navaari looked at me but said nothing then he looked at the man seated across from him. Their conversation had stopped cold the second I had walked into the room. For a moment there was absolute and awful silence, only the faint sounds of the howling gale from outside could be heard. I didn't know what to do or say and like a terrified durni caught in the headlight of a speeder I stood stock still hoping the ground would swallow me whole. I wondering for a moment if the person in front of me was real or not, but when he spoke I knew it wasn't a dream it was all very real.

"Hullo A'myshk'a." Said Thrawn getting up from the couch he had been sitting on. "It is good to see you."

Time stopped for a moment and everything, everyone seemed to hold their breath. It had been a long time since I had seen Thrawn and I didn't quite know how to react. I opened my mouth then closed it again as words fled from my brain. I stared at him and then looked at Navaari and then back to Thrawn. It felt as if the world had stopped moving. He was the very last person I expected to see here and now and if he had hoped to surprise me it had worked. My heart thumped painfully in my chest but I had learned to hide that, learned to push that sensation away. Silence made the room seem small and oppressive.

What was there to say that had not already been said before? My final words to Thrawn before I had been shipped off to Hjal still rang in my head, stirring up both guilt and anger, but mostly guilt. With another angry glance at Navaari, I ignored Thrawn and continued to my room to change out of my travelling clothes which were too warm for indoors. The storm that had begun on the way home was now in full fury so what ever it was Thrawn had come here to say to me could wait, he was not going anywhere for at least three or four days.

I wasn't surprised when Navaari followed me into my bedroom. The set of his mouth and the hardness in his eyes had not escaped my

notice. I waited till he had closed the door before opening my mouth to speak but he beat me to the punch. He tolerated many things from me but where Thrawn was concerned that tolerance waned a lot.

"Your rudeness is not becoming of you, A'myshk'a." he chided.

"Did you know he was coming? Did you know he would be here?" I asked ignoring his statement completely.

He stared at me for a moment then said. "No. I would have spoken of it. I do not think it is wise to surprise you in this manner; it makes you difficult to deal with. He arrived early this morning and the first I knew of it was when I walked in an hour ago." He gave me a calculating look. "But it is not unexpected; you knew he would eventually come to see you."

I shook my head angrily as I stripped off my heavy clothes down to the warm under garments that were always worn when travelling. "Well, you can tell him to go back to his base. I don't want to see him or speak to him." I grabbed my robe and wrapped it around me angrily.

Navaari frowned. "Perhaps you can be telling him that yourself, he has come to be and speak with you, not me. You are the one who has shunned him by not answering his letters, not communicating with him. You have made this face to face meeting harder than it needed to be. I cannot help you here. It is you two who need to fix what is broken, not I."

"He was the one who broke it in the first place by shipping me off!" I hissed, trying to keep my voice down.

Navaari just raised his eyebrows at me. "It was the right thing to do and you know this, you are just angry because that is easier than to be admitting the truth. You hide from your feelings, which serves no purpose at all. I will not play mediator for this, you must sort through your mess on your own. So, enough of this stubbornness! Go and get cleaned up. Your Ta'kasta'cariad has come a long way to speak to you, you will honour him with the respect the he has earned." There was no mistaking the reproach in Navaari's words and I had learned enough about the Dantassi ways, enough about Navaari to know I would never win this argument no matter how hard I tried.

"Fine!" I stamped my foot, feeling every bit as immature as I sounded.

"Do not cross me on this! You live in my house, you will abide by the rules." He admonished.

I just sighed, giving in. I wondered, as I headed to the 'fresher to shower, if parents ever stopped being parents. While I was no blood child of Navaari's, he had taken me into his family, treated me as though I were

his flesh and blood daughter. And because I probably deserved it, sometimes he treated me as though I were still a small kid as well. It was a real pain in the neck.

I took my time in the 'fresher. If I was going to face Thrawn I would at least do it smelling more like a girl and less like a bantha but I wasn't about to hurry. When I could no longer avoid it and had dragged my heels long enough, wrapped in my favourite robe I went back into the living room. The conversation stopped instantly so I knew they had been talking about me.

Navaari stood up. "Well, I shall be leaving you two alone. Try to sort yourselves out without bloodshed if you please." He said coolly, "If you are needing me I will be visiting with An'jast'a." his last words were directed at me but the tone of his voice said there would be hell to pay if I bothered him, and rightly so. I just gave him a little nod and watched as he left the apartment. The silence that remained after he left was heavy and unbearable but I couldn't break it, I didn't know how.

Thrawn poured two glasses of what looked a lot like Corellian Brandy and gestured for me to sit down across from him. I took the offered glass and sipped from it slowly. I hadn't tasted Corellian brandy in a long time and just the scent of it brought many memories flooding back, most of them good and all of them had to do with Thrawn. The liquor's fire burned all the way to my stomach, thawing me out from this inside. I felt the heat spread through to my toes and finger tips. I savoured the first sip then promptly drained the glass. When I held it out he wordlessly poured me a refill. This time I just contemplated the contents, swirling the brandy around in the glass as though watching the amber liquid whirl around in circles would help me find the words, any words to say to the man sitting across from me. For a moment he watched me then he sat lazily back in the couch and sipped his own drink. He was very good at waiting me out; he had had many years of practice.

"Why are you here?" I finally asked when I could stand the silence no longer.

"To see you." He replied. He tilted his head to one side, as though it would help him to understand me if he viewed me from a slightly different angle.

"Well, you see me." I answered promptly. I wondered briefly why I was being so defensive and so cold. Then I understood it was because I was afraid. If he was here to tell me that what ever had lain between us was over I wanted to be able to give the appearance of not caring. I didn't want

to be the first one to break down and I didn't want to give the impression I felt I had anything to apologise for even though I knew I did.

"Yes," he answered after a moment, "I do." He pondered his own drink for a moment then turned his gaze back to me. When our eyes met I felt as though my world had tilted sideways. For a second it astonished me that with a single look he could still make my knees weak. "You look well." He said finally.

I could only nod.

"I see that life on Hjal agrees with you."

"I am guessing Navaari kept you informed about me." I said, ignoring his compliment.

He shifted to lean forward, elbows resting on his knees. "He let me know how you were doing in broad terms, A'myshk'a, but if there are secrets between you two, rest assured he did not give them away. He simply felt it was his duty to let me know you were healing. It was a difficult road for you. I understand that."

"Do you?" I shot back without thinking.

"Believe it or not, yes, I do." He sighed. "Do you think that I needed you to come here simply to get rid of you? Nirauan was not the right place for you to be. I believed that Hjal was and I think I was right. I understand that you are angry but if I had to make the same decision all over again, I would."

I digested his words but they didn't make me feel any less cross. "Okay. Well you've seen me. I am happy here, it's peaceful. No one tries to kill me, or hunt me or anything else along those lines. I have a place here and it has become a home. You are not here just to see if I am okay so why don't you cut the crap and tell me why you really came."

He nodded, the gentle expression on his face hardening again. I had done that with my harsh words and cold shoulder but it didn't give me any satisfaction. "I'm here because I require your help." He said. There was truth in his words but it wasn't the whole truth.

"My help? You require my help? Let me guess, yet another mysterious planet you need to drag a force sensitive off to so you can discover another potential weapon? As I recall the last time you needed my help I almost got killed in the process but since you seem to take issue with me ending up in a med lab you'll have to forgive me when I question your motives."

He looked away from me and I watched the muscles on his jaw tighten as he bit back his own feelings. I threw Myrkr at him because I knew he felt a certain amount of guilt about it but it was always a low blow. When our eyes met again there was a coldness in his I didn't like at all but I was the one pushing him away, I was the one on the defensive. I didn't want to hear what was coming next because in the back of my mind I knew he was going to ask me to leave Hjal and I wasn't sure I wanted to go. For the first time in a very long time, I felt safe and at home and I was loath to let that go.

He took a deep breath. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii has been keeping me informed about your progress here in teaching basic. He says that you not only have a talent for learning languages but that you seem to be extraordinarily good at teaching them to others. I have need of your skills in this area. As you know I have been populating the base at Nirauan with Chiss loyal to me and willing to serve under the Empire but the issue with the language difficulties has become somewhat of a divisive problem and I need to rectify that. I was hoping that you would be willing to return with me and teach Basic to my people and Cheunh to the Imperials. I need to have the lines of communication between the people under my command open up more, while there are a couple who can and do serve as translators this is a waste of time and man power. I need the majority to be bilingual. I need your help to achieve this. The Empire needs your help." He spoke plainly and honestly.

I could not think of a job I wanted less. He had been right when he had said Nirauan was not a good place for me to be. My memories of it were unpleasant at best. I didn't have to think about my answer. "No." I said getting up. "I am happy here. The Empire made its point when Isard had a bounty put on my head, set a warrant for my arrest and threatened my family with execution if they were to help me at all. I worked hard for Lord Vader, I was as loyal as a person could be and this was how I was rewarded. My contract with the Empire ended the moment Lord Vader died. He released me from his service so I owe the Empire nothing."

He nodded. "I understand how you would feel that way, but it is not Isard asking for your help, it is me. The bounty and the arrest warrant have been rescinded."

"Oh really, well isn't that nice. At least now I can finally go home and see my family without worrying about being hunted down like an animal or getting my family shot." I replied. "The answer is still no." I went to leave the living room, anywhere to get away but he wasn't going to give

up that easily. He had come a very long way just to talk to me and he wasn't about to let me get away with my usual nonsense. Before I could make my escape he had gotten to his feet and grasped me by the arm, spinning me around to face him. He reached out and touched my face, as though he needed confirmation that I was real and not a ghost. The touch of his hand on my skin was electric and I gasped at the sensation of it. He pulled me close to his body, his eyes never leaving mine. I had forgotten how strong and how persuasive he could be when he really wanted to.

"Sarcasm does not become you, A'myshk'a." he said very softly.

"Let go." I growled trying to pull out of his grasp.

He did not let go because he wanted me to listen to what he had to say. "I understand you are furious with me. You and I have the remarkable ability to stay angry at each other for a very long time. You stir me up like one of these spring blizzards and I do not know how to contend with it. Under normal circumstances I would not ask you to leave because I know you are happy here but I need your help. You have the opportunity to be a part of something very big, to make a difference and believe me, if there were any other way I would not be here asking you now." I tasted lies beneath the words but I didn't understand what the lies were because mixed in with it all was the truth as well.

"So you didn't come here because you missed me? Because you want me to come back?" I asked, not having to pretend to be hurt.

"For goodness sake Merlyn, what do you want to hear?" The anger between us sparked, the physical closeness between us made that spark a flame. Of all the things I had truly missed since coming to Hjal it had been this passion, Thrawn's passion, our passion. Now it engulfed me and I felt as though I were drowning in it. I tried to throw up some mental defenses against it but it was too late for that so I wrenched out of his grasp and took a large step back.

"You sent me away because you said that having me near you was distracting! I am not a toy you can shove in a box every time you are unhappy with how it works!" I was shouting at him now. "What happens if I come back with you and you are not happy with the job I do? Do I get sent to Kessel?" I shook my head. "You disappeared when I needed you the most and then you shipped me as far away as you possibly could because you could not deal with how you felt. You never asked me how I felt, you never once asked. So no! I will not be placed in that position again."

Those words hit home and he looked away, turning his back to me to draw a deep breath. In that moment I knew I loved him more than I had

ever loved anyone in my life but I also resented him just as much and I didn't know how to put those two things together. I stood still waiting to see what would happen next.

"You are right." He said finally, turning back to look at me, making sure I knew he meant every thing he was about to say. "And I have had a lot of time to think about everything that has happened. I regret how I dealt with the situation, I regret how things ended up between us but as I said before, if I had to do it all over again I would." He paused for a moment then said, "Shall I ask that you release me from your life? Is there another man in your heart now? Is that why you are so distant and cold?"

That last question took me utterly by surprise. During my time on Hjal there had been some interest shown from a couple of men. To say I wasn't flattered would have been a lie but when things began to get even a little interesting the only person really on my mind was Thrawn. All the encounters with brief flirtations and possible what ifs did was make me miss and yearn for him more. It seemed that I could not live with him and I could not live without him and he had utterly spoiled me for anyone else. Or maybe it was just there was only meant to be one man in my life and unfortunately for me he was it. It had never occurred to me that he would worry about such things as well.

"No." I said softly. "Do you want to be released from me?" I asked holding my breath as he took his time to answer.

He gave me a tight smile then shook his head. "No. I did not enter into this relationship with you so lightly that I would walk away like this."

"So it is just pride that makes you stay with me?"

"Damn it! Must you twist everything around?" He snapped. Letting a little of his well controlled temper loose.

"Then stop talking to me as though I were one of your men! I'm not! I shared your bed, in theory also your heart! You are the one who chased and seduced me. You are the one who used Dantassi ritual to bind yourself to me without my knowledge I might add, so now you deal with it! Stop running away, stop pushing me away! If you spent even a little amount of time thinking about our relationship as you do your war games you'd be better far better prepared to deal with me. "

His lips twitched in a slight smile. "Nothing in my life has even remotely prepared me for you." He said quietly.

I just raised an eyebrow at him but he didn't say anything more and once again we just stood staring at one another while silence lay between us. Suddenly I was exhausted. The trek with Navaari had been a

long and arduous one. I had come home hoping to eat and then sleep, not to spend time arguing with Thrawn. The brandy had gone straight to my head and now all I wanted to do was crawl into bed and stay there. In the few seconds of time that had passed between us he had read this. He knew me too well. The situation had escalated out of hand which wasn't what he had wanted at all and now he tried to diffuse it.

"I didn't come here to fight with you. It was the last thing I wanted although, admittedly, it was not unexpected. Up until now I have been unable to get away or else I would have been here months ago. I should have come anyway but you were right when you said I hide behind duty. I do. I am sorry for that. I had no idea how to help you, no idea how to even talk to you. I was so angry that I had almost lost you that I was blinded by it." He said plainly. "Your grief was an overwhelming flood of emotion to me and I am unused to coping with such intensity. I felt you would be far better off here with someone who could help you through it, someone better equipped than I. It was only when you never replied to my letters did I begin to see how much damage I had done. Even though I still believe it was the right thing, the best thing to do for you I was surprised that it hurt you so much." He stopped for a second and watched my face when I didn't say or do anything he continued.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii kept me informed about your well being but it is not his way, not the Dantassi way to interfere in the personal issues between couples, it never has been and I would not expect it of him. When he let me know that you had made it through your period of sju'ru'arwy'kha, and that he saw the life-fire in your eyes come back, I knew that I had made the right choice in sending you with him even though it hurt you. Nirauan was not the place for you to be. You could never have healed there, in fact I am certain that staying there with me would have destroyed your soul altogether. I would rather lose you than see your beautiful spirit crushed by the weight of all the guilt and the sorrow you were carrying." He paused but gestured to let me know he wasn't finished. "It was only after you were gone, only after I had time to see past both your and my grief that I came to understand how much I also need you." He took another deep breath and let it out slowly. "The truth of the matter is that I miss you." It had cost him to say that, he was not a man to speak of his feelings with ease.

I stared at him not believing what I had just heard despite the fact that it was the truth, plain and simple.

The expression on his face softened. "I do not lie about the reason for wanting you to return with me, while I am perfectly capable of getting the task of language training accomplished; I have neither the time nor the inclination. As language instructor you would have an important role to play on the base, never minding the rest of your somewhat unique talents which I am certain will be more than useful. This would be a way for us to be closer and I would have a valid reason for having you there aside from simply being my bond-mate." He said. "Ultimately, the choice is yours but you should know that if you do decide to come back with me it will be difficult at first. There would have to be certain restrictions set in place on how you and I conduct our private relationship but I promise I would try to make it as easy for you as I could. However, if you really want to remain here I will not ask again."

I nodded slowly letting his words sink in. The air had that heavy feel to it as he waited for me to reply. It had been one of the longest speeches I had ever heard him make and somewhere in there he had apologised but I was too weary to sort through it all. "I can't decide this now," I said, "I'm exhausted. I will give you my answer in the morning."

"Of course." He replied coolly. He knew when to back off and give me space but I felt a ripple of uncertainty from him.

"You have a place to sleep?" I asked.

"Yes." He gestured to the room which was directly next to mine.

I nodded. I had not expected him to bed with me but part of me was a little disappointed he did not bring it up. I knew he was giving me the choice, giving me space but that didn't make me any less confused about how I felt about it all.

"Sleep well, A'myshk'a, we will speak more in the morning." he said quietly as I left. I just gave him little nod because I had no idea what else to say.

As I readied for bed I could hear Thrawn move about the apartment. It felt strange to know he was there, so close yet feel so unreachable. That had been my doing. He had come waving a peace flag, sort of, and I had all but torn it to shreds because I wanted to stay angry at him. Navaari had been right about that. It was easier than admitting how much I had missed him and how scared I was to lose him. I would have thought that such a long and difficult time apart from each other would have lessened our feelings for one another but it seemed that was not the case. If anything time and distance had strengthened them, sharpening the passion as well as everything else that went into making up our seriously

messed up relationship what it was. I was pretty certain that fate or destiny was laughing his or her ass off at us.

I lay in bed and essentially stared at the ceiling, despite being utterly overtired I could not fall asleep. I tossed and turned; going over in my mind everything that Thrawn had said to me and, worse, everything that I had said to him. It wasn't the words that knotted in my stomach though; it was how much I ached for him physically. This, above all else, made me furious at myself. I had not wanted to feel this way, I had wanted to stay angry at him but anger is hard to maintain after many, many months and mostly I had just missed him. Why I couldn't just tell him this and be done with it though was another mystery all together. These were my last thoughts as eventually drifted into and uneasy sleep and for the first time in months sleeping well was something I did not do, instead I was plunged headlong into one of the kinds of dreams I dreaded having. Ever since I had been released from the period of mourning these nightmares had all but vanished and I had hoped they would never return but I was wrong, as usual.

I knew it was a dream but still I could not move nor turn away as I watched from a dark shadowy corner while the Emperor taunted Luke Skywalker. We were on the second Battle Station, the Death Star II. I could see the fleet from the enormous view screen and the flashes of light as ships destroyed each other. I didn't understand how it was I could be here because I knew the battle station had been destroyed two years prior, I had watched it explode, but dreams had realities all of their own.

As the dream unfolded I watched as Lord Vader and Luke duelled with each other... They were so perfectly and evenly matched that it was as though I were watching mirror images fight. I thought for certain that Lord Vader would strike down his son but he pulled a blow at the last moment and it was Luke who slaughtered his father. I tried to scream from where I stood but someone standing behind me had clamped their hand across my mouth and whispered in my ear.

"Hush little one, it would not be wise to let him hear you."

I twisted my head to look up at the person who held me. Qui-Gon Jinn.

"Just watch." He said gently, removing his hand from my mouth.

Luke retrieved his father's lightsaber and turned to face the Emperor who was standing and applauding. "Well done my young apprentice." he said. "Now kneel before me and I shall accept your pledge of allegiance."

But Luke had other ideas and before the emperor could move he had ignited the lightsaber he had taken from Lord Vader and force flung it at the Emperor. The Emperor easily blocked it but he had not seen this was a move of deceit and while he was watching the first blade he did not see the second blade ignite and pierce through his body.

"I am Emperor now." Luke said as he stood over Palpatine watching him die.

I had not expected this turn of events but there was nothing I could do. Qui-Gon held on to me. And it was all I could do not to scream as Luke face distorted and changed. Screaming with a rage that seemed impossible, the man who had worn Luke Skywalker's face twisted and began to shrivel as though it were being pulled in and out of shape by forces I could not see.

I was horrified by what I was watching and Qui-Gon sighed. "Using the dark side of the force corrupts the body. Palpatine knew this and was prepared for it. He had clones of himself ready and waiting, but this is unexpected."

"Is this real?"

"Perhaps." He replied, "The future is a fluid thing, always in flux and never certain."

When the morphing had stopped I saw that the Emperor was a wholly different man. Reborn and new. What was worse was that somehow this new Emperor, young and powerful knew he was not alone in this dark room and turned to look at the spot where I stood with Qui-Gon.

"There will be no hiding from me, child." He said. "I have cheated death before I will do so again." He reached out his arm towards us but before I could scream in terror the scene shifted and I suddenly found myself on the command deck of a Star Destroyer and I was alone. It was very dark; the only light came from the few system lights that were still on so it took me a few moments to get my bearings. I glanced around afraid to move because I didn't want to fall into one of the crew pits. The main viewing windows up front were completely covered and the bridge was utterly empty, but I knew this was a super star destroyer. The ship looked to be devoid of any living creature but all around me I heard the screams and cries of what sounded like people being tortured. It was a sound I had heard once before and it was not a good sound.

"I see you have finally returned back to the fold." A soft female voice said behind me. The floor lights on the bridge-way suddenly blinked on, making the world seem far too bright.

My heart suddenly pounded in my chest, I knew this voice it belonged to Ysanne Isard and it terrified me but I drew a deep breath and hoped my own voice didn't shake too much. "Madam Director," I said, "I thought you would be on Coruscant."

Her smile was slow and nasty. "Who is to say I am not?" She replied. "So have you come to work for me now? I heard many good things about you from Darth Vader and even the Emperor spoke kindly about your talents."

"Work for you? I was simply Lord Vader's office girl. What use could I be to you?"

"I heard that you have certain talents for finding out the truth." She said. I stared at her eyes, one blue and one red. Both were cold and devoid of anything that resembled humanity. It surprised me that she kept her long hair down, not tied up as was regulation. I supposed that when one was the leader of the Empire one could do what ever one liked. She had beautiful hair, long and black with snow white streaks at each temple. It rippled like a curtain as she walked.

I made a face at her comment and she laughed.

"Come with me I wish to show you something." She said and she turned around abruptly so that I had no choice but to follow her, the two storm troopers that suddenly appeared behind me were added incentive. She walked abruptly, full of confidence and pride. She led me downwards through corridors and turbo lifts until we came to a small room with a window in the door. It did not escape my notice that the transparasteel was very thick.

"Please look inside and tell me what you think."

I did as she asked and was sorry I had. By the time I had finished throwing up it was only echoes of her laughter that remained. In the room were four aliens, I wasn't certain what species they had been, it was very hard to tell but I thought two of them were gamorreans, or at least what was left of them. The beings in the room were covered with open sores and pustules. The walls were covered in dark splatters I thought might be blood but I wasn't sure. The flesh seemed to have melted from their bodies but all of these things were not what had induced my sudden vomiting, it was the fact that they were still alive, flailing and screaming and writhing in pain.

“How do you like my method of finding out the truth?” Isard whispered in my ear.

I could only look at her in horror, wiping the remnants of vomit from my mouth with the back of my sleeve. “Truth?”

She smiled. “The rebellion will see they cannot win. This is my truth.” She said. “Perhaps you would like to converse with these aliens and find out how they feel about their rebellion now?”

shook my head and began to back up. “What is wrong with them?”

“They are dying.” She said with a slight shrug. “They will all die, every one of the aliens who clutter up this empire will be eradicated and the Empire will be cleansed.”

“Aliens do not clutter this empire.” I said without thinking.

“Ah yes, your lover.” She hissed between her teeth. “He will also be dealt with appropriately.” She smiled at me. “When the time is right.” She gestured to the door with the small window.

I didn’t want to know anymore and I backed up even more until I realised that suddenly we were back on the command deck but it was too late, I lost my footing and fell backwards into one of the crew pits. I yelped expecting to feel pain when I hit the bottom but instead my body twisted in a way that disoriented me, as though gravity also twisted and I found myself on another ship.

This was a ship I did not know. I didn’t recognize the style of the bridge, similar but not the same as the ISDs I was used to, I also did not recognize any of the crew at all but they were all staring at a single point when I followed their gaze I knew a terror worse than I had just a few moments before. There, right in front of me, was Thrawn slumped back in the command chair, dressed in his white uniform of Grand Admiral clutching his chest with his hands. The look on his face was one of utter surprise as blood pumped between his fingers and coursed down the front of the jacket. No one around him moved so without thinking I rushed forward to do something. I pressed my hands flat against his chest but the blood kept flowing freely. It ran between my fingers, over the backs of my hands making them warm and sticky. I looked up at Thrawn who looked back at me. I did not have to be a mind reader to see the hurt in his expression. I knew how betrayal felt and I knew the expression that came along with it.

“Why A’myshk’a?” Thrawn whispered.

I wanted to tell him I didn’t know but I couldn’t find the words. The flow of blood between my fingers slowed and the pallor of his skin told me he was dying. I yelled for someone to help me, to help him but no one moved. They all stood staring.

“Don’t you dare leave me! I can’t do this without you! I need you!” I cried, pressing at the wound in his chest even harder but I knew I was losing; I could feel his heartbeat slow and then stop. I began to shout at everyone around me but what came out of my mouth was incoherent then arms, powerful and unfriendly, pulled me away from Thrawn’s body which slumped forward with out my support.

I struggled to get free of who ever was holding me but it was impossible.

“Lady Merlyn, he is dead.” A familiar voice hissed in my ear. I twisted around to look into Rukh’s face.

“No!” I screamed. “No, let me go! You have to help him!”

“The betrayal is complete!” Rukh said twisting me around to look me in the eyes. His hands grasped my wrists and hauled my hands up to where I and everyone else could see them.

“His blood on your hands!” he said.

“The Admiral is dead!” Another voice chimed in, then another and another. Suddenly the mob of officers who had stood by and done nothing converged on me like a pack of scyks.

I began to struggle against Rukh, screaming that I was not the one who had killed the Admiral, not the one who had stabbed him, that I had tried to save him but no one listened to me instead the bridge crew which now surrounded me began morphing into more noghri. The words they spoke became babble and I could not get free from Rukh’s grasp. I saw that they were going to kill me for the murder of Thrawn. I looked from one face to the next and then back to my blood drenched hands. I turned to look back at Thrawn not believing he was dead only to see his body start to break down and rot the way I had seen the aliens dying in the room Isard had shown me. Pustules formed on his skin and began to ooze dark liquid that covered his white uniform, mixing with the blood from the wound on his chest. I began to scream then and I couldn’t stop.

“Wake up A’myshk’a, wake up, it is just a dream it isn’t real.” A voice kept saying to me over and over again.

Fingers bit into my flesh as Thrawn, seated on the edge of the bed gripping me by the shoulders, tried to wake me, tried to stop me screaming bringing me out of the nightmare and back into reality. Slowly his words

sank in and the grisly scene I had witness receded. When I finally came back to my senses and realised he wasn't dead and that my hands were not covered in his blood I threw my arms around him and held on to him so tightly it hurt.

I kept whispering "Not dead, you are not dead." over and over. He simply held me against his chest, rocking me back and forth, not saying a word until a light flooded in from outside the room and I heard Navaari's deep bass voice ask if everything was okay. I must have been making a hell of a racket to wake him. Navaari slept like the dead.

"There is brandy on the table in the sitting room. I think it might be appropriate." Thrawn said to him by way of answer. He pushed back from my grip and lifted my face up with a finger tucked under my chin. I was shaking. The images of the dream still merged with the reality and I could still smell the awful tang of fresh blood and rotting flesh in the air.

"Merlyn look at me, I am very much alive." He said as he brushed sweat soaked hair from my face. "You were having a terrible dream, that's all, just a dream."

"It was so real." I stared at my hands again to make certain there was no blood on them, turning them palm in then out over and over again. They still felt as though they were sticky and blood covered even though I saw only my skin, clean and pale and my fingers which were shaking. The lingering scent of blood made me nauseous. I placed the flat of my hand on Thrawn's chest just to feel his heart beat; just to be sure. I stared at the spot where I had seen blood, but here was no wound, just skin undamaged and warm. I heard Navaari come in and watched as Thrawn accepted the offered glass of brandy which he then gave to me. I took a grateful gulp. The fiery liquid burned enough that I knew I wasn't dreaming any more. How many times had we done this? I had lost count. But Thrawn's soothing presence after the grip of some terrible nightmare was something I knew, a pattern we had repeated often. He did not suffer from bad dreams but he understood how to react when I did.

"Better?" Thrawn asked, turning on the small bedside lamp.

I nodded clutching the glass with both hands because I was still shaking so much I was worried about spilling my drink.

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

I looked up at him framed in the doorway, back lit by the living room light and shook my head. I couldn't shut the images lingering from my dream out of my head but I didn't want to speak of them out loud to Navaari. I had not had such a terrifying nightmare in a very long time. I

had thought they were a thing of my past. Neither man spoke as I finished the brandy off in one gulp. The empty glass was removed from my trembling hand and placed on the night stand.

Navaari waited a few seconds then asked if there was anything else. I felt Thrawn shake his head but I didn't look up. I was afraid of my dream because my dreams had a nasty habit of turning into some sort of reality. In the time it had taken me to wake up and comprehend that it really had been nothing more than a terrible nightmare had also come the awful realization that I did not want to lose this man who sat next to me. That the frustration and anger we seemed to generate between us was a small price to pay for having him in my life, whole and alive.

"It was just a night terror, you are safe at home, little one." Navaari told me. "I am going back to bed, you know where everything is should you be needing it." His last statement was directed at Thrawn not me. I heard the door to my bedroom close but didn't look up.

I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them, making myself small. I rested my forehead on my knees and tried to remember to breathe, just breathe. I felt Thrawn's fingers run through my hair and the action brought tears to my eyes. How was it that things between us had gotten so out of hand. I could not remember any more why I had been so angry at him. Shame and sorrow engulfed me.

"What did you see?" Thrawn asked breaking the silence that settled in the room after Navaari had left. "Tell me."

I shook my head. I hadn't wanted to tell Navaari about my dream and I especially did not want to tell Thrawn that I had seen him die in such a horrible way.

"If I say please? You know, speaking about it will not make it real." He said gently.

I shook my head again.

Thrawn sighed and tucked two fingertips under my chin lifting my face up to meet his. "Merlyn," he said firmly, "No more secrets, no more shoving these fears, these feelings down as far as they can go into your soul. You are not helping anyone especially yourself. This reticence to tell me what troubles you is what has us in the situation we now find ourselves in." He chided. "So tell me what has you screaming as though you are being murdered in a most brutal manner and clinging to me as though I were...."

"I saw you die." I said flatly, interrupting him.

"It was a dream, tekari." He repeated. "Tell me exactly what you saw, no more hiding, out with it."

The words came tumbling out one after the other. He said nothing until I was done and the silence in the room afterwards was even more oppressive that I could have imagined. He reached over and caressed the side of my face, I trembled and blinked the sudden tears out of my eyes.

“It was awful.”

“Yes,” He said gently. “And probably my fault.”

“How do you figure that?” I asked with a frown.

“You saw no killer, you did not see yourself kill instead you tried to save me which was why you had blood on your hands. These things are just symbols your mind uses to sort out past events not portents of things yet to come. Kirja’navaar’inkjerii told me that you have been well these last few months, no nightmares to speak of so I can only assume that it was my coming which triggered this one.” He said. “You experienced a terrible, terrible trauma, everything you knew is gone, taken away from you in a brutal manner. That is not something that simply vanishes from one's memory no matter how hard you try to make it so. This dream was your subconscious trying to cope with the trauma you try to hide away. I know how difficult Vader’s death was for you...”

I put my fingers on his lips, interrupting him and looked at him so that he would get the full meaning of my next words. “Not as difficult as yours would be.”

His expression softened. “I am not going to die any time soon. It was just a dream and nothing more.” He spoke quietly and with absolute conviction. “You and I have many unresolved issues which we have still to deal with and your tendency to shove everything as deeply down inside of you as it will go only serves to make your nightmares more intense, more vivid, but I will be vigilant never the less. Besides, how could anyone get past Rukh?”

That made me smile a little. His noghri bodyguard was a force to be reckoned with even in my dreams. I scrubbed my face with my hands, weariness slowly creeping into my body.

“You should try to go back to sleep. We have a lot of things we need to discuss in the morning.” Thrawn started to get up but I grasped his hand making him raise an eyebrow at me in surprise.

I said. “Every time I close my eyes I see...”

“It was a dream.” He insisted, cutting me off, easing his hand from mine.

“It didn’t feel like just a dream, Za’ar, it felt like a vision of the future, it felt real.”

He sighed, getting up off the bed to pace the room. “You told me yourself once that it isn’t the dreams that matter, it is the interpretation.”

I nodded.

“Do you not think that this could be your mind’s way of forcing you to look at what you really fear?” He asked as he leaned against the door frame.

I got up out of the bed and went over to where he stood, to face him. “If that is the case, then what I really fear more than anything else is losing you.” I said plainly.

He reached out and caressed the side of my face. “And now do you understand?”

“Understand?”

“How I felt when I found you on your disabled shuttle.”

I swallowed and looked away from him, nodding. “Yes.” I said. “I am so sorry.” I understood that and now I also understood that the mess I had made of things was big. I wasn’t sure it could be fixed, I wasn’t sure I knew how to but Thrawn did. When he cupped my face with both hands I clasped his wrists and looked up at him. When our eyes met I felt as though the bottom had dropped out of my belly. After all this time, after everything that had happened he could still stir me up from the inside out with a single look.

“Being with you is like drowning in fire, being without you is like starving to death.” He said quietly. “And I cannot decide which is worse.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that either. Thankfully I didn’t have to. Before I could even say anything he pulled me forward and kissed me in a way that reminded me I was very, very much alive. His hands slid from my face to my shoulders, over my shoulders, down my back, around my ribs to rest at my hips. He was right it was like drowning in fire but I didn’t care. After what seemed both an eternity and a split second he pushed back from me.

“You’ve put on some weight since I last saw you.” He said after a moment.

“Are you saying I’m fat?” I asked automatically. Navaari often teased me about my appetite.

The right side of his lip twitched in a smile. “I did not say that, nor did I imply that.” He said. “But the last time I held you in my arms you were nothing but skin and bones. You looked like the walking dead. Now you feel more like a woman and less like a skeleton. You are soft and have curves where you ought to have curves, whereas before... you were boney

and stick like.” He ran his hands back up and down my body to confirm what he had just told me. “I don’t feel each and every one of your ribs poking out of you now.” His hands rested once again on the swell of my hips. Their warmth through the thin fabric of my nightshirt almost seemed to burn my skin. He tugged me closer to his body and suddenly my heart forgot how to work. I reached up and caressed his cheek, then I drew his face to meet mine and kissed him gently. When we separated again the look he gave me was unfathomable.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, uncertain.

“No, not any longer.” he replied but something in his expression made me look carefully at him. I could see he wanted to say more but didn’t know how to begin. His hesitation made him vulnerable which was new to me. Two years was a long time and so much had happened, so much had changed between us that suddenly it was clear to me, he had been worried about his place in my life. I had not known him to be so uncertain but I understood that where I was concerned it was probably a normal state of affairs. For too long things that should have been said were not, words were held back because of fear and stubbornness and it wasn't what we said to each other that hurt but rather what we didn't say. I stroked his face with the tips of my fingers, as if I could memorize the contours of it just by touch. He made my heart ache.

“I thought you were dead.” He said quietly after a long pause. “I did not know how to deal with that very well. I did not deal with any of what happened very well. You are not the only one who has apologies to make.”

“That sounds like you missed me a little?”

He gave me a look which sent a flash of heat that seared me from my gut to my groin. The twitch of his lips became a slow, hungry smile and suddenly my decent sized bedroom felt very small. “Perhaps, a little.” He said, one hand cupping my face his thumb caressing my cheek. The moment between us stretched and slowed down until he held my chin with his thumb and forefinger so that he could kiss me again. This time there was nothing gentle about his kiss. His lips and his tongue explored my mouth as though he were eating the rich sweet ice treat the Dantassi made from cream and sugar. I shivered violently.

“Are you cold?” he asked with a slight smile.

I shook my head, rendered speechless. After all this time he could still do that to me.

“Perhaps I should go and let you get some sleep.” He murmured in my ear with a smile that reminded of me of how the sled hounds looked at me at meal time.

I shook my head. “No I don’t think I can sleep and if I can’t sleep neither can you.” I said and because he had begun to unbutton the night shirt I was wearing, I slipped my fingers under the waist band of the soft silk pants he had worn to bed and slipped them over his hips and buttocks so they fell to the ground. I grinned a little at his naked body, aroused and beautiful. He smiled as he slid the shirt off my shoulders. He smelled of sex, of need and want.

“Well then...” he said. His voice suddenly husky, his eyes had taken on that weird look of liquid fire. It had been a very, very long time since we had done this and the teasing had taken its toll. There was no more room for words or foreplay. He scooped me up in his arms and brought me to the bed. He put me down gently then lay over me, covering me. He didn’t waste time and his mouth crashed down on mine while his body melded to me, his skin hot on mine sending goose bumps rippling up and down my spine. His knee nudged my legs apart and I opened to him willingly. The sensation of him and every move he made was almost too much to bear so when our desire blossomed into insanity there wasn’t much to really think about. I wanted him every bit as much as he wanted me and I no longer cared about nightmares, being angry or anything else. I just needed him and I let him know it. Our dance climaxed in a crescendo I hoped would not bring Navaari running back to the bedroom thinking that both of us were being murdered. It was over too fast and I lay in Thrawn’s arms sweat soaked and breathless wondering how we could have forgotten how good it felt to be together this way and how awful it felt when we fought. He rolled over onto his back and pulled me to snuggle into his body.

“I think we just set a speed record...What was that anyway?” I asked when I caught my breath. My fingers traced up and down his chest then followed the line of dark hair that went from his navel to his groin.

“That was me marking my territory, and reclaiming that which is mine.” He said running his fingers through my hair. Every word he spoke was the absolute truth.

“Do you care to explain that?” I asked propping my head up on my elbow to look at him.

“Well, from what I have been told perhaps it is you who should explain it to me. I heard you are being courted.”

“Navaari told you about that?”

“He mentioned that you have been chased by several eligible young men since you were released from of sju’ru’arwy’kha.” There was a hint of something other than concern behind his words.

“Yes.” I said plainly. “And did he also tell you that I turned them down.”

That earned me another raised eyebrow and a smirk.

I sighed, “At first it was flattering. I mean I am not Chiss or Dantassi but a complete alien and yet there are men here who found me attractive. It was a bit of a shock but in some way it was good too. It made me realise I was still alive, really alive but it was confusing. I didn’t tell Navaari at first because I didn’t want him to be disappointed in me. He makes such a big deal out of you and I being together but finally I had to because one of the men in question was starting to pressure me for more than just conversation. At first it wasn’t serious but then it got that way. He found ways to be alone with me and he got too close physically. You know that my talents work both ways so you will understand when I tell you that while I did not initiate anything, I felt his need, his desire and... well... it was just hard to deal with.” I sighed at that memory. I had been astonished that while my heart said one thing my body had reacted in a completely other direction. That moment had shaken me but thankfully common sense prevailed.

Thrawn stroked my face possessively. “So what happened?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Well, the man in question had sort of backed me into a corner by point blank asking me to partner with him and was not all that impressed by my refusal. He said I was free to do as I wished. Free to be with whom ever I chose, that you ...well he was not complimentary towards you or what you had done to me. I told Navaari what had been happening. All of it. He said he wasn’t that surprised which I suppose surprised me. He asked me what I wanted because you had left me with the choice. While you had bound yourself to me for reasons I still don’t understand, the ceremony we had undergone was only binding one way. I was still free to choose my own mate should I wish to and you would have to live with that.” I drew a deep breath. “He said I needed to follow my heart. Do you know the first thing that popped into my head and out of my mouth?”

“No, but then again I never know what you are thinking, my dear.”

I made a face at his barb and continued, “I told him, ‘My heart is a billion light years away sulking. I don’t want some fresh faced boy as a substitute even if he can give me sand jiggers in my belly with a smile.’”

Thrawn raised both eyebrows. “Sulking? Is that what you thought I was doing?”

“Yes and you were, don’t change the subject.”

He smirked, “And this boy gave you sand jiggers in your belly with just a smile?”

That earned him one of my looks. “It had been a very long time since you and I...” I began but stopped as he brushed his fingertips suggestively across my lips and smiled as I swallowed. I knew he could see the effect he had on me.

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You are the most stubborn, wilful creature I have ever known. You are also the best, the most beautiful and the most surprising thing that has ever happened to me. When I heard that you were being courted I admit, I was worried especially since you did not answer any of my letters. I don’t enjoy the sensation of insecurity; it is not something I am used to at all. It was Kirja’navaar’inkjerii who told me that if I was concerned then I should return and stop, as he put it, all this ridiculous back and forth nonsense. He said, ‘She misses you and hides it well but she cries when she thinks no one will see or hear. You sent her here to heal but if you don’t come to her soon you will end up breaking the one part of her that hasn’t been truly broken yet’.”

“Navaari said that?” I asked.

Thrawn nodded. “Yes and he was right.” He shook his head as though even he could not quite believe it himself.

I didn’t know how to answer that. I had not thought Navaari had noticed the few times when I had curled up in a dark corner in my room, thinking the apartment was empty, and wept. He had left me alone and not interfered. These bouts of sorrow usually coincided with one of Thrawn’s letters. I suppose I was stupid for thinking Navaari would not notice. He was Jhal’kai, a master tracker. Nothing escaped his notice. No matter how much I had lied to myself about it, I had missed Thrawn more than I could say or bear. It made me melancholy just to think about and some of this must have shown on my face because Thrawn wrapped his arms around me and pulled me tightly to his body. We lay like that for what seemed a very long time and I relished the sensation of being held. His scent on my skin was a perfume I had missed. I sighed contentedly. The sex between us

had been sudden and explosive, at least two years worth of pent up passion pouring between us in what felt like mere seconds. Our coupling had been hurried, raw and needy but the aftermath was like being bathed in sunlight. I looked at him and smirked a little.

“What?” his eyebrow arched.

“Well, that was fun but it was also a little short and not up to your usual standards so do you think we could do it again?” I asked.

He let his fingers trace up and down the length of my body, from my shoulder to my hip. “I expect we shall be doing *that* again several times if I have my way.” He whispered in my ear, his warm breath making me shiver.

“Several times? I thought you were tired.”

“Oh tekari, how many times do I have to tell you, the Chiss have amazing stamina.”

“Does this mean you are not angry any more?” I asked.

He shook his head slightly, “Don’t get me wrong, you and I have much to talk about and we will talk but it occurred to me that the conversation we need to have will go a lot better if you are satisfied and relaxed, not on edge and strung out from bad dreams. Besides I need to prove to you that I am very much alive.”

I smiled as I caressed him and watched the results of my actions. Yes, we needed to talk, we had an awful lot of things we needed to talk about but tonight was about relearning who we were to each other not about opening up the box of hidden and forbidden secrets we both kept. “Well,” I said carefully, “You seem very alive to me right now.”

That remark earned me a kiss on the forehead but he didn’t say anything else. He just wrapped his arms around me and pulled me tightly to his body. This was home, no matter where I lived, what planet I was on, in his arms was truly home. It had just taken watching him die in a dreadful nightmare to make me understand this.

“Don’t ever send me away from you again.” I told him after what seemed an eternity.

“I won’t.” He replied.

“Promise.” I looked up into his eyes.

He drew a slow, deep breath. “I promise.”

It had cost him to say that because he was a man who kept his promises and he didn’t make them lightly. I nodded but said nothing else. I suspected that we would spend more than enough time talking tomorrow. As he had said, we had much to discuss not all of it pleasant but there were

some wounds that could only truly heal after they were dragged out into the light of day and had their filthy bandages ripped off them brutally. I was guessing that the time for hiding things from each other had come and gone. I understood now that I did not want to live without him; the big question was after everything that had happened, if circumstances allowed it, would we be able to actually live with each other again.

“Stop thinking so hard, you’ll break something.” He chided with a smile.

I just sighed and continued to stroke him concentrating on his fingers as they untangled the knots on my hair. He leaned over to kiss me on the forehead. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“For what?”

“For this...” he said and he began to reacquaint his lips with my body. He made me smile then he made me shiver and that was even better.

When I woke up the next morning Thrawn was still there beside me. He wasn’t sleeping instead he had his head propped up on his arm and was simply watching me. He smiled and brushed hair from my face looking more at ease, more relaxed than I could remember seeing him in a very long time. I guessed I was not the only one who benefited from being on Hjal.

“What?” I asked, stifling a yawn and stretching like a jax.

“I was just thinking about the very first time I ever saw you.” He said.

I looked at him with a smile. Memories of that first meeting flooded back to me. “I thought you were an arrogant pri...” He placed a finger on my lips to stop the rest of the words from escaping.

“I know exactly what you were thinking and you were probably right. My first impression was *what was Vader doing hiring this little girl from the back end of space?* But you surprised me with your pluck and your bluntness.” He said. “I found it impossible to believe that the red-headed bundle of spit and fury telling me she would kill me if I touched her again actually had Vader’s favour. You were the most intriguing person to step into my life in a very long time and I probably should have listened to the whispering voice in the back of my head that told me to stay away from you, that you would be nothing but trouble.”

I poked him in the chest and wondered if I should tell him that my little voice had said exactly the same thing about him only it wasn't whispering it was yelling, loudly.

"Can you deny I was right?" he asked arching his eyebrow at me, catching my hand in his so I wouldn't poke his chest again.

"You are not exactly the easiest man in the galaxy to be with either, you know." I replied tartly.

He smiled, "Which is a good thing, my dear, as you do not seem to enjoy the company of men who are easy to be with."

I wasn't certain how to take that so I just shook my head and got out of bed, slipped on my nightshirt and headed to the 'fresher before the conversation turned combative. By the time I returned Thrawn had poured two cups of stim-caf and was sitting up, leaning back against the headboard sipping his. Instead of crawling back under the covers beside him I sat facing him, accepting the cup he handed me happily.

I took one sip and knew that Navaari had made it. "Ugh, he always makes it far too strong."

"He said he thought you might need something strong to get started today. He won't be back until late, he has to attend a council meeting and they tend to last a while. I suspect he was just happy to see us both still alive and in one piece, he rather feared the worse."

I just nodded. It was not unusual for enclave meetings to be longer than usual when the weather was bad and I was also sure that Navaari welcomed the excuse to give Thrawn and me time alone together. If it hadn't been a meeting he would have found another reason to stay away for the day. For a long while neither of us said anything at all. I suspected that neither of us wanted to break the sweetness of the morning after.

"Another cup?" Thrawn asked after seeing me contemplate my empty one for a few moments.

I nodded and watched as he vanished for a moment and then returned, handing me my cup refilled. I sipped and made another face, the second cup was equally as strong as the first.

"Did you know that would happen between us last night? I mean was that your intent when you came here?" I asked a little shyly after a long moment of quiet.

Thrawn shook his head. "No, I came here with no intent," he sighed, "only hope."

"Hope?"

He nodded slightly. "Yes, hope that we could bypass our stubborn natures so that we could at least talk and perhaps resolve some of our issues."

That made me smile. "It didn't work." I said, which earned me *the* eyebrow. "Well, we didn't exactly talk." I clarified.

He reached over and touched my face. "No, that is true enough but we did resolve at least one issue and the communication was positive never the less, don't you think?"

I just bobbed my head in agreement and silence settled between us again. I sipped at my stim-caf not really knowing what else to say or where to even start. I found it strange that we could bridge the gap between us physically but the words needed to really fix the other damage that we had done failed. It made me a little sad.

He drew a deep breath and looked at me. "I put off coming here for too long. I should have come when I learned that you had passed through the period of mourning but I didn't. There was always a good reason for staying away, always work to be done. It was one crisis after another, so it was easy to put off the one thing I really needed to do, come and talk to you."

"Navaari said it has been difficult for you, that things in the Empire are not going so well."

He nodded. "The Emperor's death left a gaping maw that no one has been able to fill. Isard tries but she is not Palpatine. She has neither his charisma nor his power of will and her cruelty only serves to strengthen the resolve of the Rebels."

"I thought that Pestage was the Imperial leader now."

Thrawn shook his head. "No. Sate Pestage is dead. Executed by Admiral Delak Krennel, if the report I received was to be believed."

"Dead?" I frowned. I had never liked Sate Pestage, the Emperor's long time advisor and friend but I could not imagine him being dead.

"If I understand the news I get correctly, Isard did not like it that Pestage planned to turn Coruscant over to the rebels in exchange for immunity. She arranged for his elimination."

"So if Pestage is dead then who....?"

"Ysanne Isard runs the Galactic Empire by herself now. Although she maintains she is merely its steward I have the feeling she enjoys the power too much to simply give it up when a better leader comes along."

"I'll say she wants power. That crazy bitch had her own father framed and executed so she could take his place as the Director of Imperial

Intelligence. She's insane. I hated it when she was at palace functions because she would always try to get me to talk about what it was I was really doing for Lord Vader, she seemed convinced I was some sort of super spy not an office girl and once she learned I was seeing you, well then she tried to get all the information she could out of me about the mysterious alien who had the Emperor's favour." I shivered as fragments of my dream resurfaced.

Thrawn nodded slowly as he let out a slow deep breath. "She has been lying to me but there is not much I can do about it at the moment, so I continue to build up the forces we have in the Unknown Regions and hope that she sees past her own nose sooner rather than later."

"Why don't you just take over?" I asked. "I mean you could, you have enough force and you have enough loyal men to back you up."

He ran his free hand through his hair. "And then what, tekari? Set myself up as the next Emperor or dictator and begin the whole cycle again? No, I have no interest in ruling the empire only seeing it return to a state of law and order, not this cluttered chaos we currently have. I dislike being lied to intently but she feels secure thinking that I know nothing about the truth at the moment and that allows me a certain amount of freedom. When the time is right I will make my move but the time is not right. There are too many power hungry factions out there vying for a piece of the Imperial pie, the Rebellion is just one of many. The only thing they have on their side is that they are seen as heroes and liberators but that will change when they realise just how hard it is to run a galaxy wide democracy. Democracy fails because power corrupts and no matter what people will tell you, greed will always win out in the end. Everyone has their price, tekari, especially politicians."

"Is Coruscant still under Imperial rule?"

"For the time being but it is the end goal of the rebellion because Coruscant is seen as the keystone to owning the galaxy. Obtain that governmental seat and you appear to have the power, eventually the other systems will fall in line with the ruling body from the core world. It is like ripples from a stone thrown in a pond. Most beings, no matter what the species are a lot like nerfs, they long for independence but they tend to follow the herd."

I frowned, "Why is that?"

"For the simplest reason of all my dear, survival. In the herd there is protection from predators, the best chance for food, and the greater

choice of mates. Being independent is a lot harder in reality than it is in theory."

"But creating and keeping a government up and running isn't easy either, I can't imagine why anyone would want to even try doing that."

"No and they will discover this soon enough. The balance between trying to please everyone and trying to maintain law and order is very, very fine. It does not take much to topple a fledgling government or a well established one for that matter. One only has to look at how well Palpatine arranged his rise to power to see that and he was a man of extraordinary strength of will and character. He was powerful with your mysterious force and, most surprisingly of all, he was fairly well liked by the majority of beings." Thrawn said. "Now, in retrospect, people understood that despite his somewhat strict and often eccentric ways, for the most part life under Imperial rule was not so bad. Ask a world whose trade and shipping lines have been interrupted, whose population is starving and whose infrastructure is failing due to the sniper style war going on how they feel about the Empire and they will paint a very rosy picture of how things used to be. It all comes down to a point of view and popular point of view will depend heavily on how well fed and comfortable people are."

"Was life under the Emperor really so bad?" I asked him after a moment's silence.

He gave a slight shrug with his left shoulder. "I guess you would have to ask someone who thought so."

I sighed and thought about the nightmare I had had. "What if what I saw in my dream was true?"

He frowned. "Which part are you referring to?"

"The first part, about the Emperor being reborn."

"Do you think this is a likely scenario?" He asked.

"Yes," I nodded. "But I can only think of one way. He clones himself, it's the only answer. The power he had and used took an awful toll on him physically. It was the reason he looked so old. I had heard rumours while I was still living on Coruscant that he had actually done this clone thing more than once but it seems so unreal and I just put them down as silly gossip. People had all sorts of weird speculative stories about the Emperor because no one really understood much about the force or its nature and the darker side of it." I said thoughtfully. "But what if it is real? What if he can somehow clone himself and transfer his consciousness, his memories? If he really can do this why didn't he come back sooner? Surely he must know what chaos the Empire is in now?"

Thrawn just shook his head. "I can't give you an answer for that. Perhaps there are problems with the cloning procedure. It used to be the best cloners in the galaxy were on Kamino but that facility and the knowledge base are rumoured to have been destroyed. The Empire developed its own method of cloning and due to issues with the Kaminoans stopped all production with them on that planet. Most of the Stormtroopers in the last decade have been conscripts and not clones. There were too many issues with cloning sickness among other difficulties, at least from what I know."

"Cloning sickness?"

"It is a form of madness, from what I have read. It happens if the cloning process is too fast. I believe the fastest that a clone can be grown is a year, anything faster than that and what is produced is rubbish."

"Rubbish..." I repeated softly. "Clones, they are humans. They think, have feelings, know love and pain ... how can you say they are rubbish?"

"Cloned madness of mind and sickness of flesh is not a human being, tekari, it is a created mess manufactured by science and technology. There is no soul, no life force as you or I know it."

I looked at him for a moment. "The man who gave me life was a clone, Za'ar. Does this mean I have no soul?"

He sighed and chose his words very carefully. "The clones of the past, the ARC commandos were different, bred differently. They were granted independence and free will, which caused no end of headaches, in the hopes that they would make better soldiers, better leaders. I suppose they were human in every sense of the word, not born but grown but I argue against them having an actual soul. They were programmed by DNA. The execution of Order 66 showed that in the end they were more like droids than independent free born men. Clones from later generations, with production pushed up go mad. They are not human in the way you think of humans. They are created and designed from human DNA. They look human sound human and do all the things that human beings do except that they are manufactured and programmed to be obedient, to follow orders and above all to fight. Mad clones are rubbish in this context and that is what I mean." He gave me a look so that I had to nod that I understood where he was coming from even if I didn't agree with it, then he continued. "On the theoretical side of things, it is believed, at least in my culture, that there is one soul per being so if there are many clones of one individual how can there be multiple souls for his or her clones? It is a

difficult topic at best and one with no answers. But for your question, of course you have a soul, you are not a clone. You are unique in this galaxy, thank goodness because I don't know how to deal with just one of you."

I smiled at his small attempt at humour but I didn't like this line of thinking much and the morals of clones and cloning had often bothered me, especially since finding out that I was born of one. The truth was I didn't know what to think so I just nodded and let the matter go. We had enough issues of our own to deal with without me creating new ones.

"If the Emperor did have clones of himself made, they were not on Coruscant, or at least not in the Palace I am sure of that." I said after a while. "I am positive I would have felt it and I am certain that Lord Vader would have mentioned it at some point."

"You think Palpatine kept this a secret from his second in command?"

I shrugged. I didn't know. "I think it would have been seen by Lord Vader as a weakness and the Emperor knew how much Lord Vader hated him. Knowledge of the Emperor's need for clones would have given Lord Vader an opportunity to do what he always longed to do, which was destroy the Emperor and take over as ruler of the Empire."

Thrawn's chest heaved as he took a deep breath. "Well, in the over all scope of things I am grateful this never happened."

"Me too." I said quietly. "I don't think that Lord Vader would have been a good Emperor."

That earned me a questioning look but instead of commenting Thrawn merely nodded. We had long ago come to the conclusion that our respective feelings for my now dead boss were vastly different and that we would never see eye to eye about him.

"You know, I would be more concerned about the part of your dream with Isard in it if I were you." Thrawn said after a moment.

"What do you think it meant?" I asked.

He pursed his lips and shrugged. "I wish I knew. My communication with her is limited at best. She occasionally sends people to me, usually under the guise of me being able to use them but I think it is more a case of her weeding out the Imperials who disagree with her or that she feels could benefit from being made to work under an alien. Anyone being sent to me is seen as being punished. It would be amusing if it were not so time consuming and annoying. I get the impression that she is planning something and has been for some time now. She is aware that the rebellion is heading slowly but surely towards Coruscant and that she does

not have the man power to head off a direct, large scale strike, or an attack that would come from many fronts.”

I raised my eyebrows in question. It had been such a long time since I had had anything to do with the Empire or heard any real news from the outside world. I felt as though I were missing huge gaps of a very complicated story.

“When the Emperor died, his hold on the entire galaxy fractured. There are many factions now who would love to obtain a piece of the galaxy for their very own. In killing the one person who truly held it all together, the rebellion has opened this galaxy up to be picked apart by all the warring factions. There are many petty war lords now vying for power in the political and military arena. The rebels know this so their journey towards capturing Coruscant has been a slow and careful one helped by the fact they also lack the man power and the ships to launch a full on attack. I am quite certain that should they decide the time is right to take back the Imperial center it will be done in a covert operation and with as little bloodshed as possible. The rebellion does not wish to be seen as blood thirsty, they wish to be seen as the good side. It is hard to be the saviours of the galaxy if you slaughter innocents along the way.”

“In my dream Isard was eliminating all the aliens, but surely she would not allow that to happen? I mean everyone would hate her even more than they do now.”

“Well one might think so but Isard does not think the way most people in power do and she has a very cruel streak in her.”

“Do you think she would actually attack the alien population to get back at the rebellion? Surely that would just generate more sympathy for them and not her?”

“Perhaps.” He said vaguely. “I am not privy to her inner circle nor do I know her plans. I only know I do not trust her and that it would not be the first time she has done the unexpected to get what she desires.”

I sighed and cradled my now empty cup in my hands. I had nothing to add to what he had said and although there were a billion questions boiling in my head I didn't know where to begin asking them so silence settled between us once again. We were so good at avoiding the real issues at hand, so good at not talking about the things we really needed to talk to each other about. I wasn't the only one who felt the weight of these avoidances and I wasn't the only one who did not know how to bridge the gap.

“I hear you have become quite skilful in the art of Jhal'kai.”

Thrawn said eventually, making conversation.

“Navaari is kind.” I smiled slightly. “I still fall flat on my face while walking with snow shoes.”

“But you can track.” Thrawn said. “He tells me you have a talent for that.”

“I can track.” I agreed. It was true, while walking with snow shoes gave me some issues, I was good at following a trail. I could somehow find even the tiniest traces to go by. Navaari had been pretty amazed the first few times I had done this but I thought I owed it more to my force talents than anything else. It was as if I could hone in on what I was seeking and the signs of where whatever I was looking for had been just stood out for me. Thrawn nodded and again we lapsed back into silence until he took the lead and eventually broke the silence.

“If this storm hadn't closed us in I would have returned to the *Grey Wolf* which is orbit, but as it looks it could continue for another three or so days so you have some time to decide what you want to do, if you want to stay here or not.” There was concern in his voice and while he did his best to hide it I could read the touch of uncertainty in his expression. A lot rode on what ever I said next. It was a good job, I thought, it was not a difficult decision to make.

“I don't need more time.” I told him, glancing at his face over the rim of my cup. “I can't stay here forever and be happy. It just doesn't work that way. Part of me would always yearn to be with you and I think even Navaari would agree this would not be very healthy. If my nightmare was nothing more than a subconscious creation then it tells me I afraid to lose you. If it was some sort of vision of the future then maybe if I aware of it I can prevent it from happening at all. Either way I don't want to be without you in my life anymore.” I spoke plainly. “And you promised never to send me away, ever again.” I added, making sure that particular promise did not get forgotten.

After what felt like forever he drew a slow deep breath and nodded slowly, more to himself than to me. I could not tell if he was pleased or displeased and I was a little afraid to ask if he had suddenly changed his mind. “It will not be easy, you know.” He said eventually.

“You told me that but really, nothing has been easy in my life so why should this be any different?”

His eyebrow hitched up a notch, “Why indeed.” He murmured.

The silence that crept back in between us was not uncomfortable but I felt the weight of the past sitting on my shoulders. I sighed which made him look at me in question. "I'm sorry." I said plainly.

"About?"

"For what I said to you on Nirauan." I answered. "I didn't really mean it. I don't hate you at all."

"Ah." He nodded. "Well, I know that."

"I was so angry and I wasn't thinking straight. I hated everything and everyone. I hated what you were doing to me, even though I knew you were right. Mostly I think I hated myself. I was so ashamed." I sighed, "I should never have said what I did and I'm sorry."

He reached over and caressed my face. "Is that why you never replied to my letters?"

I nodded staring in to the dregs on my stim-caf wondering if there was anything he did not seem to be able to unravel about me.

"Sometimes you are an utter mystery to me, do you know that?"

He sighed. "Not even Kirja'navaar'inkjerii could riddle that one out, although he speculated on it. He said you would never speak of what happened between us the day you left. He said you don't speak about that time much at all, at least not to him."

"What is there to say? I poured my heart out to Ma'kehla.

Surprisingly enough once I told her all these terrible things I didn't need to speak of them with anyone else." That was a half truth and we both knew it but Thrawn let it go.

"She has a power to heal that astonishes me to this day." He murmured to himself, making me wonder how he would know this and more importantly why.

I looked at him for a moment but when he said nothing more I continued, "And writing an apology just seemed so inadequate. I didn't know how to get past that and every time I tried to word a reply I ended up hating myself even more. It was easy to channel it into anger and be mad at you because you weren't there when I needed you on Nirauan and you weren't here either."

The sudden quiet that filled the space between us again made me nervous. I thought that I had angered him but when he finally spoke I understood he also felt ashamed of his own actions and just like me, he didn't know how to move past them.

"I am sorry for that, truly I am." He said. The power of truth behind his words made my stomach knot with sadness.

I studied his face for a moment then got up. "I know we have a lot more to discuss but I'm hungry and I want to have a bath so can this wait until afterwards?"

"Shall I make breakfast?"

"Might be better if you did, the last time I tried to cook something Navaari banned me from the kitchen."

"Oh?" His lips twitched in amusement.

"I nearly burnt it down." I said sheepishly. That had not been one of my more memorable moments.

He laughed then. "Very well, go bathe and I will make food and then we will talk. It would appear that I am not going anywhere for a few days so hopefully that will be enough time to pull out all your secrets." He teased.

I caught the glitter of mischief in his eyes but I swatted his thigh anyway. "I am not the only one who has lots of explaining to do, you know! You have at least twice as many deep dark secrets as I do! This is a two way conversation! Making it sound as though it is all my fault is a bad move on your part!" I said with my hands on my hips. "As I recall..."

He caught my arm pulling me to him so that I was unbalanced and fell back to sit on his lap with a squeak. I went to protest but he stopped any words from escaping by kissing me. By the time he was done I was too breathless to finish the tirade I had been about to start.

"As I recall," He said, "you were on your way to have a bath rather than lecture me on the art of conversation." His voice was more like a purr.

"I think it depends on the definition of conversation and of art." I replied tartly.

He caressed the back of my neck and then began to unbutton the nightshirt I had slipped back on earlier. "I believe that when it comes to art often the hands on approach is far more useful than wordy explanations. Allow me to demonstrate."

I shivered as he managed to slip the shirt off me without me actually noticing. It should not have surprised me though, there were parts of him that were becoming very distracting and my clothing or lack of it was the least of my concerns.

"This won't help towards you making me breakfast or our discussion." I swallowed and wondered if I was just confusing the sand jiggers in my belly for hunger and that really I wasn't hungry at all, at least not for food cooked in the kitchen.

His hand trailed down the front of my neck, traced the outline of my collar bone and then went on to explore another parts of my body which made me forget anything else I had planned to say. "I like this style of conversation." He said with a grin, "it allows me to get a word in edgewise." And to prove his point his fingertips danced over the sensitive skin of my breasts making me bite my lower lip to try and not make a sound. "That I can occasionally render you speechless is a very, very good thing." He added mischievously.

"Only because you use dirty tactics." I managed to say.

That made him smile. "It is your race who says that all is fair in love and in war. It seems to me that this relationship is a little of both."

I squirmed under his touch which was making me ache from the inside out. Then needing to find some equal footing I tugged off his pants. His smile broadened as he moved his hips to make this task easier for me. I blushed at his arousal. It still amazed me that I could do that to him. Of course I managed to regain some ground when I stroked him gently with the tips of my fingers then decided it was time to turn the tables completely. I smirked at the look of surprise which danced across his face when I began to execute some rather unorthodox manoeuvres of my own.

He arched an eyebrow. "Where did you learn to do *that*?" He breathed. "I don't recall ever teaching you ..."

I grinned as I placed the tips of my fingers on his lips. "That's because you didn't."

The expression on his face turned dark. "I thought you said you were never with another man in this way...?"

This time I clamped my whole hand over his mouth. "I wasn't, you are still the only man I have ever shared a bed with but I have girlfriends here and we share things, compare notes and talk about ... stuff." I said with a little nonchalant shrug.

This time both his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You *share* and *compare* things?" he asked sounding a little alarmed.

"That's the great things about having girl friends." I answered airily then before he could think to speak I just gave him a look and occupied his attention with another interesting trick, grinning broadly when I heard his own moan of pleasure.

My friends Tanika, Sh'jenni and I had spent many a lengthy discussion on relationships, men, sex and everything in between. Sh'jenni had a rather interesting holovid drama that her mate had smuggled on-planet for her... it was both explicit, amusing and remarkably educational

all at the same time. We had watched it together one evening when Navaari was away. We had all drunk a little too much ice-wine so we ended up laughing through most of it, finding the whole thing uproariously funny. Aside from the holovid, its how-to tips and our own discussion on the men we shared our beds with, what I remember most about that evening was giggling so hard it hurt and the sensation of warm friendship. I had discovered that it was good to have girlfriends and I would miss them sorely when I left Hjal.

"Just what *exactly* do you tell them?" He asked when he found his voice again.

I just gave him a wicked grin and said. "*Everything*." Which wasn't actually true but he didn't need to know that.

He opened his mouth to say something else then changed his mind. It was amusing to watch various emotions flicker across his face. After a second or two he simply shook his head and asked. "So what else did you pick up that I should know about, my dear? Now you have quite piqued my curiosity."

"You know what they say about that don't you!" I replied as I began to execute another of the more intriguing things I had learned from the silly holovid.

It was his turn to smile. "Ah yes, curiosity killed the jax, but as I recall you keep telling me satisfaction brought the unfortunate creature back to life and I have the distinct feeling you will satisfy me greatly."

I just shrugged but he was probably right and I set about seeing if that was actually the case. The look on his face told me there would be a rather hefty question and answer session after this was all over and I looked forward to his interrogation but right now I had rendered him mostly speechless which was good enough for me.

Need shot through us both, I felt it sharply and it sucked my breath away. Suddenly I wasn't in the least bit hungry for food any more and even though I knew he wasn't about to go to the kitchen anytime soon but that wasn't going to stop him from cooking up a storm. He had decided that both my having a bath and his making breakfast could wait. I wasn't about to complain about this diversionary tactic. There were all sorts of hungers in the galaxy but this was the only one I knew he alone could satiate; the only down side was that he would take his time and drive me crazy. However, I had long since learned that it was a game two could play. With a smile I shifted to straddle his lap, pushed him back so that I could

show him that he was not the only one capable of fulfilling these physical culinary delights.

Despite our rising need and aching passion, Thrawn took great pleasure in drawing out our love making with agonizing slowness. He let me play but never let me take it over the edge, always pulling us both back before it went too far and was all over. It was as though he wanted these moments between us to last forever and I didn't complain because there was such a sweetness in our coupling that I didn't want it to end either. It never ceased to astonish me how our two bodies could meld into one and that the power that we produced between us felt as though it could light up an entire city.

We moved together, rippling like falling water, his scent and mine mingled into a new perfume which only served to aroused us further. I breathed him in deeply, musk, spice and something unique only to him and I tasted the salt on his skin as my mouth explored his body. Making breakfast was taking on an entirely new meaning, yet there was something bitter-sweet about this. As though we were both trying to make up for something irretrievably lost. I felt the flicker of sorrow slip through him and pulled back from him to frown. When our eyes met, he shook his head in answer to the question I didn't voice but something in the way he looked at me told me that, no matter what, I had his heart. It was an overwhelming moment and tears sprang to my eyes. If last night had been about the physical reunion then this morning was more about reuniting our souls and it was an agonizingly slow and painfully honest affair.

"What is it?" I asked him as he brushed away the tears that escaped down my cheeks. His shifting emotions puzzled me. It was unusual and incredibly alarming.

"I truly, truly missed you, *sj'iu tekari*." He said gently. It was the truth and he had said it in such a way that I felt the rush of emotion which accompanied his words and understood that it was what had not actually been said that really mattered. It was like standing in front of a damn that had broken. All I could do was hold on to him with my arms and my legs, so tightly that I could feel his heart beat against mine. I dug my nails into the skin of his shoulders so hard that he hissed in pain.

If I could have captured this moment in time and held it forever I would have but time has rules and it moved forward in accordance with them. "*Peyla'mer a mal'yn*." I told him fiercely, nipping the delicate skin of his neck just under his ear with my teeth to make sure he got the point. *You belong to me.*

"Sad but true." He teased with a grin, pulling my hands off his shoulders, easing me back a little. "Though it would be less painful if I were to simply tattoo this on my flesh rather than have you try to mark me with your nails and teeth every time we do this."

"Pain is good for the soul." I said, checking the skin on his shoulders to make sure I hadn't actually drawn blood.

He only smiled in response and then, with his mouth and his hands, he shut me up.

He had been right, as usual, when he had once said that the Chiss had astonishing stamina but he had failed to mention anything about the voracious appetite they also appeared to possess. I was grateful for all the hard work that Navaari had put me through in the last year because it meant I was in good enough shape to keep up with him. Nothing, it seemed, not even falling empires, assassination attempts or near death experiences could keep us apart. I hoped, as we climaxed together, that we had finally learned our lessons. We were meant to be with one another and that was all there was to it. Why we both seemed to fight against this was beyond me.

Long after the waves of pleasure had rippled through us both, did he finally concede that he, too, was hungry and in desperate need of a shower and that it might be perhaps a good thing if we left the bed. I was in too languid a state to argue with him or point out that he had started this particular go-around so his hunger was entirely his fault and that, yes, he really did need a shower. After he had finished in the 'fresher, I ran a bath and luxuriated in the abundant geo thermally heated water until he came in to tell me that breakfast was almost ready. Dressed in clean clothes, I joined him at the kitchen table and for the first time since before the battle of Endor we shared a meal that was not fraught with tension or anger. He had not forgotten how to cook and I was grateful for his culinary talents both in the kitchen as well as out of it.

It was only after we had eaten and the dishes were cleared away did the tension begin to creep back into our world. He made a fresh pot of tea and then sat down across from me. I knew by the look in his face that now there would be no more distractions and when he began to talk, I listened just I knew when I spoke he would listen to me. I also knew that it would not be easy for either of us, despite the passion we stirred up between us, we had a lot of things we needed to sort out and if we didn't get a handle on the issues here and now then our lives as a couple with all the pressures that were to come with being together on Nirauan would

collide badly. If I had learned anything from my time on Hjal under Navaari's tutelage it was when to shut up and listen. Luckily for me Thrawn had learned the very same thing from the very same man.