

# Daughter of the Empire

## Book 3

by Fiona Messer

### Chapter Ten

## In the Darkness of Dreams

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I woke up covered in sweat gripping my belly protectively screaming at something to stay away from my baby. When the last vestiges of the nightmare slipped away and I realised where I was, I burst into tears. Never in my life had I missed Thrawn more and never in my life had I felt so scared. Once the crying jag passed I just rested my head upon my knees, hugging them close to my chest trying to remember how to breathe.

The nightmares were almost always the same, ending with me waking while trying to protect my unborn child from some terrible danger I could never recall once I was awake no matter how hard I tried. When I had talked about this with Doctor Thracer he theorised that it was my subconscious fear of not carrying to term but I wasn't so sure. I had always had bad dreams, some worse than others but these ones were indefinable and insidious. As if some terrible enemy was out there waiting, lurking to create havoc on my life, my world and everything I knew.

Knowing that I was not going to get back to sleep I heaved myself out of the bed, got dressed and made my way down to the small cantina. The night cook on duty, Toryyn Tuary glanced at me knowingly. This was not the first time he had seen me after a bad nightmare and I was sure it wouldn't be the last.

"Same as usual?"

I nodded and watched as he made me a large cup of something he called a'shai which was warm, creamy, somehow very comforting and didn't make me sick. I loved the blend of spices he used to make the drink whose recipe had been his mother's. She had made this drink for him and his brother when they were children to help them sleep.

"How's the family doing Toryyn?"

"Good, I got word that my sister's having another baby. I am going to be an uncle again."

I grinned. "Wow congratulations. How many does this one make?"

"This will be her fourth child." He smiled and then asked hesitantly, "How are you doing?"

"You mean aside from the terrible sleeping habits? I'm good." I answered with a smile.

"Glad to hear it." He said handing me a large mug.

"So what is the latest scuttlebutt?" I asked taking a welcome sip from my a'shai. Toryyn was the best source of base gossip around.

"Marika and Joshi are a couple."

I smiled. "That's not news, anyone with half a clue could see that was going to happen."

"True." Toryyn nodded, "But now it's official."

I laughed. It was not unexpected that after a certain amount of time couples would start to happen on the base and while there was no outright directive against it, Thrawn was smarter than that, most people didn't go out of their way to announce it either. "Sometimes living here is like being in the middle of a bad holo-drama."

He gave me a look which said 'and you would know all about that wouldn't you'. "I did hear a whisper that The Admiral was in the Kessel Sector, near Honoghr but that was a while back, I also heard something went on at Endor."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow. "Wonder what he was doing all the way out there."

He shook his head. "No idea, they don't give us cooks any real information but the Virulent is orbit maybe there lays your answer."

"The Virulent?" I asked, "When did they arrive?"

"A couple of hours ago, I had a few of the crew come through here." He said, "They like my nala pudding it seems."

I glanced up at the chrono on the wall. "You're about to get busier, the watch just changed."

"The hungry hoards wanting breakfast before they go to bed, go figure. I love this time of the morning." He gave me his sweet one sided grin and nodded at the first group to come through the door. "Show time."

"Talk to you later, I'm headed to the back lounge to read." I gave him a little wave and then left before the full watch change crowd came in and things got loud.

I liked the smaller lounge because it was usually quiet and not well used so I could sit in my favourite chair near the window and read without anyone bothering me. Tonight I was all on my own which was nice.

I was currently half way through a book, a set of biographies of renowned Chiss personalities that had been given to me by one of my language students. It was fun to read and I had been pleasantly surprised to find that Thrawn had been considered a "personality" although there wasn't much written that I didn't already know. It was fun to read but it also made me miss him more.

I marked my place in the book with my finger and stared mindlessly out of the window wondering what the hell Thrawn was doing

in the Kessel Sector. The last I had heard he had returned to Myrkr to destroy what was left of the smuggler base he had found there. Honoghr was Rukh's home world but I could not come up with any good reason why Thrawn would want to go there.

Rukh had told me once in a rare talk that his home world had been all but destroyed by the Rebellion and that Darth Vader had promised to help rebuild it but I didn't know more than that. There wasn't much written about Honoghr in the planetary database and even less about the beings that inhabited it. I guess that neither the Emperor nor Lord Vader had wanted anything public about one of the most ruthless assassins in the galaxy. When Lord Vader had rewarded Thrawn by giving him the Noghri Thrawn had been pretty tight lipped about it. When I had first met Rukh it was not the very best of circumstances but since then we had become friends of a sort, as much as friends was possible with a deadly Noghri assassin. He trained with me occasionally because Thrawn had asked him to but personally I think he enjoyed putting me on my ass. Most of the time I enjoyed the workouts, the Noghri fighting style was singular and beautiful and I had learned a lot. I was so deep in thought that I didn't hear the door open nor did I notice the person walking up to where I was sitting until he spoke half scaring me out of my seat.

"I was told I could find you in here." The voice was warm and familiar.

I looked up and smiled. "Ged!"

"Well that's a smile worth travelling light years for." He said leaning down to kiss my cheek. I didn't pull away from him and smiled at his familiarity. It was a good job the room was empty; the gossip mill would run rampant. He pulled up a seat next to mine and sat back in it with a sigh.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, "I wasn't expecting the *Virulent* back for weeks."

"New intel and supplies, it's a short turn around." He said evasively with a slight shrug. "So how have you been?"

"Doing okay. Had a bout of the Corellian flu but I'm getting better. I hope that you've been vaccinated against it, it's on the base."

He grinned, "Already taken care of. You're up late or should I say early."

"Bad dreams."

Ged knew all about my nightmares. "Well that explains the shadows under your eyes but not the fact that you are glowing, you look radiant. I guess living here must agree with you."

It was my turn to shrug. "No one is shooting at me, I don't get woken up every few hours with surprise drills and the food here is better so I guess that helps."

He laughed. "I will be sure to tell Remy you said that about his food."

"Don't you dare! He was already insulted enough as it was when I wouldn't touch his version of Corellian Spice cake."

Ged smiled at the memory. "And then he was about as apologetic as it gets once he found out the reason."

"Now you know why I call that cake Zaarin's surprise."

"You do seem to attract the scyks, especially the older, more influential ones."

"Was that a dig Admiral Larsen?" I asked with a smile.

"Maybe a small one." He conceded.

I shrugged. "I cannot help it if older men found me interesting but you know the same could be said for almost all the palace girls. I think older men just love young women."

"I wouldn't know." Ged replied. "I stayed away from that kind of trouble."

"Until I came along it seems."

He gave me a sideways look. "Oh Merly you are whole new level of pain in the rear. Palpatine warned me about you."

"He did?"

Ged nodded. "Mmm, but that's a story for another time though. I am not here long enough to tell it."

I just smiled at the familiar bantering. "So how are things going on the campaign front?"

"It's like an elegant dance." Ged said with a graceful gesture of his hand. "And you know better than anyone else just how clever Thrawn is at complicated dance moves but the rebs are smart. They seem to manage to get past some of his plans and that crazy old Jedi master Thrawn has working for him is a real piece of work."

"Have you met him?"

"No, Thrawn keeps our fleets quite separate. He doesn't want to tip his hand to the rebels that we even exist." Ged said brushing away a piece of non existent lint from his trousers.

I smiled. "He always keeps his cards close to his chest. It gets annoying after a while" I said. "I don't doubt that Thrawn can keep his dark-side pet under control though. That's what his furry little friends from Myrkr are for."

"Yes and their effects are most unpleasant."

I nodded knowingly. "Well don't go down to the sublevels then, the place is full of them."

"Is that so?"

I shook my head. "You'll have to ask Thrawn about it all. I am sworn to secrecy."

"More cloak and saber stuff." Ged retorted dismissively.

"Thrawn's whole campaign is full of it." He shook his head, "Well, C'boath is on Jomark for the time being."

"So what was Thrawn doing at Endor?"

"You heard about that? Aside from dealing with rebels there, he met an old friend, I believe."

"Oh?"

"Ever hear of a smuggler named Kaarde?" Ged asked.

I nodded. "Talon Kaarde, yeah I've heard of him. Information is his game, likes to play all sides of the fence depending on who pays best, usually smart enough not to get killed while doing it but he's not any friend of mine, old or otherwise."

"Thrawn had him taken prisoner."

"What? How'd he manage that? Kaarde is about as wily as it gets in the smuggler not wanting to be taken alive category."

"It's true. Apparently Kaarde's new girlfriend gave him up."

"Kaarde has a girl? That's news to me, all the gossip usually says is that he was just too busy being the underworld's new man to have time for a girl, not that many didn't try."

"Actually, you know her." Ged said smugly, "Speaking of palace girls."

"Now I am intrigued."

"You remember the Emperor's favourite courtesan?"

"Oh you're kidding me." I said. "Mara Jade is slumming with Talon Kaarde? I thought she was dead. She just vanished after escaping from Ysard's clutches."

"Apparently not." Ged made a face. "She went to Thrawn. Wanted to rejoin the Imperial forces but really was there to bargain."

"Bargain?"

"Kaarde's life for the Katana Fleet."

"Oh this just gets better and better." I said, "The Katana Fleet? Give me a break. That's a fairy tale pilots talk about when they've had one too many."

"Well according to Jade it's very real and she bargained Kaarde's life for it."

I raised both eyebrows. "Wow." This was an unexpected twist.

Ged's laughter filled the room. "You said it."

His laugh was infectious and I giggled until it hurt wincing at the sudden sharp pain in my belly.

"Everything under control?" Ged asked catching my expression.

I took a deep breath, "Yeah just not used to laughing like that."

"You're with the wrong guy then." He said with a smirk.

"Keep trying Admiral." I grinned at him once the pain had subsided. There was a moment's silence and then I asked. "So what did you really want to see me about Ged?" and suddenly the atmosphere in the room wasn't quite so warm any more.

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Ged's manner shifted from easy going to serious. "I would have waited until morning but I heard you were up." He said as he shifted in his seat, crossing his leg up on his knee. "I was wondering when you would be returning to the *Virulent* to resume your duties there."

I sighed and looked out of the window. Dawn was still a few hours off. "I'm not." I said after a few seconds. I turned back to look at Ged only to find him staring at me intently.

"May I ask why?"

"I'm happy here." I said, wincing as another strange twinge of pain lanced my belly.

Ged cocked his head to one side and regarded me carefully.

"Really." It wasn't a question and his sarcasm annoyed me.

"Yes, really."

"I would never have pinned you for the stay at home type of girl Merly."

"Then you don't know me as well as you think, Ged Larsen." I said more sharply than I meant to.

He sat back and sighed. "You mean to tell me that you are staying here to wait for Thrawn to come back, playing the part of the devoted mate and you're content with that?"

"You're angry." I said with some surprise not bothering to answer his original question.

It was his turn to draw a steadying breath. "I don't often hear the word no." He said being evasive.

"Ged, I'm happy here can't we just leave it at that?" I did not want to argue with him. I did not want to have to tell him the real reason, I too could be evasive. Thrawn should be the first one to know about this child not Ged.

"Well, maybe this will change your mind. I need you."

I grinned. I couldn't help it. "You practice that line in front of the mirror?"

"No, and I don't mean like that, you made that abundantly clear and I do know when to back off."

"Thrawn spoke with you." I said flatly reading between the lines.

"Let's just say your place in the Grand Admiral's life has been well clarified for me." Ged said dryly. "You should have said something to me right from the start."

I made a face. "Not this again." I got up out of the chair and rubbed my belly absently. "I told you why I didn't say anything and for the record when you actually asked about it I did tell you we were a couple, it was you who pushed the point."

"But I was right wasn't I?"

I scowled. "About what?"

"About the fact that a small part of you does like me." His smile disarmed my annoyance.

"Well you were partly right, yes." I conceded.

"Partly?"

I walked around a little, "You were right when you said I do seem to attract the scyks."

"And the lady wins the round." He nodded. "Come sit back down and stop pacing about you're making this scyk nervous."

"What do you really want Ged?" I asked ignoring his suggestion to sit.

"We, I need someone to do a pickup."

I raised my eyebrows.

"We need a civilian and a civilian ship. We have an agent missing and we can't get to them."

"You don't need me for that; you need a tac-team." I sighed.

"Who is the agent anyway?"

Ged shook his head. "I can't tell you that until you come onboard, the information is highly classified."

"Well it doesn't matter, find someone else. I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"I told you, it's personal."

Ged stood up and rounded on me. "What the hell is going on with you? You're one of the best agents we have no matter what you tell yourself. You speak multiple languages, you fly like a maniac and you are a force user. No one on the Rebel side even knows you exists, you're a ghost in the machine. You can come and go as you please and no one would ever suspect you. You are the best person for this job and if you don't do it chances are our agent will die, do you want that on your shoulders?"

I looked him in the eyes. "You have no idea what's on my shoulders so back off." I said very quietly.

He took a step back from me. "Merlyn...."

"Don't." I said holding up my hand. "You have a boat load of people perfectly capable to do an extraction. Why me?"

"I already told you why. Are you fishing for compliments now?"

"No." I said icily. "I want a reasonable explanation for why you want me to do a job you have better trained people for and the 'you're the best agent we have crap' doesn't cut it. Tell me the truth or get out of my face."

"I told you the truth. You have a civilian ship and you're not on any of the New Republic's lists as a known Imperial so you can slip in behind enemy lines."

"What the hell are you talking about? Enemy lines... you sound like a bad spy from one of Jeb Holloway's books."

"I can't say any more than that, not unless you tell me you'll do this."

"Well I can't so stop asking me."

Ged's jaw tightened. "Merlyn, it's your job!"

"My job!" I raised my voice, starting to get angry. "My job? I don't work for you, I don't work for the Empire any more at all to be honest and I sure as sarlacc don't have any specific job! I am not one of your agents, or one of the Emperor's Hands or any other fancy title you can come up with no matter what you think. I was Lord Vader's office girl and that was hard enough. I have done my time, Ged and I am not doing this sort of work for you or anyone else. I am not an agent."

“I beg to differ. Thrawn has used you on several occasions as just such creature. You are an Imperial agent whether or not you believe it and I am damned sure Thrawn would tell you to do as you are told in this case.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that and my answer is still no. Find someone else.”

“Why?” He asked sounding almost hurt.

“I told you it’s personal!”

“That is not an answer.”

“It’s the only answer you are going to....” Suddenly pain ripped through my abdomen and I doubled over, knees buckling to the floor, yelping in agony.

“Merly?”

I gasped as I curled over my belly protectively, my forehead touching the floor as I fought against the pain.

“What is it, are you okay?” he asked kneeling at my side.

I gripped his arm, “Get the doctor now.” I gasped as a second, sharper pain tore through me. The air danced and I could feel myself getting light headed. “Doc... now... please.”

He picked me up and almost ran out of the lounge. “Where’s the med center?” He barked at someone in the corridor. I never heard the answer because I screamed as a third even sharper pain sliced up into me. By the time he had reached the medlab Doctor Thracer was already there and waiting, someone must have alerted him we were coming.

“We’ll take it from here Admiral Larsen.” I heard the doctor say as I was laid on a gurney.

“Is she okay?”

“I have no idea but as soon as I do I’ll let you know now if you don’t mind...” Doctor Thracer said gesturing for Ged to leave as the med droid moved me into the next diagnostic room.

Once the door was closed I reached out to the doctor and caught his arm. “Is it the baby?”

“I don’t know yet. What happened?”

“Arguing.” I breathed. “One minute we’re arguing then all of a sudden it felt as though I was being impaled on a knife.”

“And now?”

“Still hurts.” I said through gritted teeth.

“Okay you need to calm down and breathe slow deep breaths for me, can you do that?” He said.

I nodded and concentrated on doing what he had told me as the diagnostic scanner in his hand hummed quietly. When it was done the room seemed unusually silent.

“My baby?”

“The baby is fine.” He said as calmly as he could but there was worry underneath his words. “I’m giving you something for the pain.”

“What is wrong?” I asked wincing at the sting of the hypospray.

“There is a small tear in the placenta.” He said.

“Is it bad? Can you fix it?”

“It could be very serious but this tear is very small and luckily the bleeding is minimal.”

“Bleeding? I’m bleeding?”

“Yes, but it’s very minor and we’re going to deal with that now. You’re okay, do you understand. Bacta will help repair it however this means from now on in you rest and by rest I mean no stress, no exercise, no running around, no flying, no travelling, no heavy lifting or sneaking down to work in the pit, no anything and absolutely no arguing with admirals, any admirals. I should be confining you to a bed here but I know that won’t happen, so will you promise me to rest?”

“Bacta, you’re not going to put me in the tank!” I struggled to sit up but he wouldn’t let me.

“No, it can be done locally and the med droid will take care of you once I get you sedated.”

“Ged, does he know? He can’t know, not before Thrawn... he...must ... not...know.” I could feel myself get ramped up again but Doctor Thracer placed a hand on my shoulder.

“You know what I said about no stress well that starts right now. I will tell Admiral Larsen you are fine, that it’s nothing to worry about. I will also tell Admiral Larsen that I want to keep you here for observation and that you need to rest which you do and the mild sedative I am giving you will make you sleep so even if he wanted to ask you questions he won’t get any answers. The *Virulent* is scheduled to depart once the supply loading has been done so he will be out of your hair soon enough but I have to tell you, my dear, you had better talk to Thrawn about your condition sooner rather than later. You won’t be able to keep this a secret for too much longer.”

“Why not?”

He smiled, “Because you’re starting to show.” said and before I could argue I felt the push and sting of the hypospray. The drug worked

quickly and I slid into a dreamless sleep letting the medical droid do its work.

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I woke up groggy and disoriented to find Ged sitting by the bed. It was surreal in more ways than I could say. For a moment I wondered if there was not some great cosmic joke being played at my expense when it came to the men in my life but then decided I was too tired to really care. If Ged wanted to sit and make sure I was still alive then who was I to argue but I hoped that the base scuttlebutt didn't find out about this or else Thrawn would have a field day and I sure as hell didn't want to deal with that right now either.

"Welcome back to the land of the living."

I looked at Ged and smiled. "I thought you would have gone by now."

He shrugged slightly, "We were scheduled to depart an hour ago but there was an issue with one of the supply runs."

"So you decided to hide out here?"

"I would have been here earlier but your doctor is quite protective of you, you know." He said with that charming smile of his. "He wouldn't let me see you until now and only because I pulled rank. He was quite insistent I don't do anything to, how did he put it, agitate you."

"He's known me for ages, saved my life a few times. He's family." I replied. "That whole spiced cake incident? Well if it hadn't been for Doctor Thracer I would not be here today."

"I can see why Thrawn keeps him on staff then. How are you feeling?" he asked, his concern was genuine.

"Better. Thank you." I said sitting up a little.

He nodded. "You gave me a hell of a scare."

"Sorry." I just smiled faintly. He wasn't the only one who had been scared. I sensed he wanted to ask more but he didn't and I was grateful. I didn't want to have to lie to him, I wasn't sure he would believe any lie I told anyway.

"Look, I don't want to get you all riled up again because I think your doctor will send Rukh after me but I could use you on the *Virulent*. So when you get better think about it, will you?"

I nodded. "I appreciate that but..."

Ged held up his hand. "No buts, you have a place with me and my ship. You're a talented young woman and, my personal feelings aside, I could use your abilities. So if you change your mind..."

"Thanks." I said, "That's good to know. I appreciate it." And oddly enough that was the truth. It was somehow comforting although I could never have said why I felt that way.

He looked as though he was about to say more but Doctor Thracer came in. "Miss Gabriel needs to rest." He said in a way that brooked no argument.

"Very well." Ged said as he leaned down to give me a light kiss on the cheek. I didn't miss Doctor Thracer's look of disapproval. "Next time no theatrics just chit chat and a drink, okay?"

"Aye, aye admiral." I replied and lay back, closed my eyes and let sleep claim me again.

It was early when I woke up to see the doctor standing by me and the sound of the hand scanner humming quietly.

"Good morning." Doctor Thracer smiled. "How are you feeling now?"

"Sleepy." I said, "Waking up, need to use the fresher and want to clean my teeth. Has Ged gone?"

"I guess you are feeling better." He nodded finishing up the scan. "The *Virulent* left orbit hours ago and Admiral Larsen along with it."

"Don't be too hard on him, he's not as bad as everyone thinks." I said with a smile.

The only answer I got to that was a disdainful look.

"So what's the verdict?" I sighed gesturing to the scanner in the doctor's hand.

"The scans show the baby is okay now but was in some distress earlier." He said.

Even hearing that word was unsettling. "Distress?"

"Everything is okay for now though but you must rest until that tear is fully healed." He waggled his finger at me. "So you are stuck in here with me for the next two days. The bacta should take care of it."

I did not complain about that because if the truth were to be told I was grateful to have the excuse not to do anything or go anywhere but after two days I began to get restless. I wasn't a good candidate for enforced bed rest. I never realised how much I moved during the day until I wasn't allowed to do so and I was certain I had driven the doctor nuts.

There was a palpable air of relief when he grudgingly released me from my stay in the medlab.

“I know telling you to spend most of your time lying down is like telling a rebel to sign up for the Imperial academy but I cannot stress this enough, you must take it easy especially for the next five days. I do not want to scare you, no wait I do want to scare you. So go to your quarters and lie down, or sit down in your bed and read, sleep, or watch those bad Holloway holo-dramas you like so much. You must not exert yourself. No heavy lifting, no stressful movements and no more arguments with anyone, it gets your blood pressure up and I am concerned about that as well.”

I nodded unhappily. “Yes doctor.”

“Oh and you need this.” He said handing me a slender bracelet. “It will monitor you and if there are any more emergencies that require you being carried to the infirmary in true Holloway dramatic fashion all you need to do is activate it and I will get an alert.” He showed me how to use it and then he watched as I had slipped it on my wrist.

“Ged did that whole manly rescue thing without my permission.” I replied feeling my face flush.

“Dramatic or not, he saved a lot of time by his actions and he saved you a world of pain. It could have been a lot worse if he had waited for the medical team to come to you. You owe him a thank you at some point.” He chided. “Now you may return to your quarters. Promise me you will rest and follow my orders.”

I sighed, just what I needed to owe Ged a big favour, then I nodded and let the doctor help me into a hover chair which he guided out to where the med droid was waiting.

“If have any problems you comm. me right away.” Doctor Thracer said. “I will be there as soon as possible.”

“Roger.” I said and then returned to my quarters hoping no one saw me and asked too many questions. My secret was getting harder and harder to keep. I wished Thrawn would come back soon. Some great deity must have been listening because eight days later I got my wish.

I was asleep when he arrived back on the base. It was only when he slipped quietly into the bed did I wake up enough to acknowledge his presence.

“Well this is a first.” He said softly as I snuggled into his warmth. “Usually I haven’t even stepped off the shuttle and you are wide awake, waiting for me up on the gantry. I wondered where you were.”

“It’s cold up there this time of night.” I replied, still half asleep, “Maybe you should plan for arriving during the day instead of all odd hours in the early morning. I’m tired.”

His hand caressed my face. “I’ve been replaced by a warm bed.” He smiled as he kissed the side of my neck. “But perhaps this will change your mind.” His hand wandered up under my night shirt.

The thrill of his touch made me ache and I gasped. I had almost forgotten what this felt like, it had been so long. He ran the flat of his hand over my belly, stroking over the small roundness gently and I smiled at the shivers of desire that leapt up through me but then Doctor Thracer’s words about rest sprung unwanted in my head. I caught Thrawn’s hand in mine and pulled his arm so that instead of caressing me it was wrapped around me and still.

“You must really be tired.” He said settling in to spoon around me.

“You have no idea.” I mumbled.

“Then we will have to catch up in the morning.” He murmured in my ear, his breath warm on my skin.

I just nodded, yawned and drifted back to sleep safe in his arms. When I woke up next it was morning, sunlight danced through the window and the scent of fresh stim’caf permeated the air. Thrawn smiled as he put the cup on the bedside table but unfortunately it had the opposite effect to that which he had hoped. I had no time to apologise or explain as I flew out of bed, hand clapped over my mouth, racing to the fresher just in time to throw up.

“Are you alright?” Thrawn asked through the door.

I was too busy throwing up to answer him so he knocked on the door. “Amyska?”

“Just give me a moment.” I managed to say before heaving again.

“Should I call the doctor?”

“No!” The last thing I wanted was for Doctor Thracer to come charging in with a med team thinking my morning sickness was some huge emergency.

“Merlyn?” Thrawn knocked again this time starting to sound annoyed as well as concerned.

“I’m fine.” I yelled at him when I was certain this round of vomiting had passed. By the time I came out of the fresher Thrawn was sitting in one of the reading chairs near the bed, had finished his caf and

was looking at me with one of those unreadable expressions I had come to loath.

“Your definition of fine is interesting.” He remarked coolly.

“Sorry about that.” I said as I slipped carefully back into bed.

“Can you take that away?” I asked waving at the offending stim’caf by the bed. “Please?”

He obliged, sitting back in the chair, cupping his hands around the mug as though to warm them. “Are you ill?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“Then what was that all about?”

“It’s nothing to worry about, really.”

“Nothing to worry about? You just spent ten minutes throwing up, it doesn’t sound like nothing to worry about.”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly then drank from the stim’caf which had been meant for me. “I see.” which was Thrawn speak for *I know you’re not telling me something and I don’t like it all that much.*

“No, I don’t think you do see.” I said wearily.

“Well, my dear, you are not exactly being forthcoming with information. I would dearly like to know the truth because the base is buzzing with rumours about you.”

“Oh?” I folded my arms across my chest.

“Well, for a start I am curious as to why I am hearing about you throwing up all the time, so much so that several people have asked me if you are seriously ill, why you stopped all your work in the pit, the deck officer is quite concerned? That people think you are dying from some terrible illness because you spend more time with the doctor than you do with anyone else and why ten days ago Ged Larsen carried you to the infirmary while you screamed in pain. And now I bring you stim’caf and it sends you running to the fresher to vomit.”

“Wow, news travels fast.” I said tartly.

He tilted his head to the side. “And answers, do they also travel fast.”

I heaved myself out of bed slowly and made my way over to the kettle to make myself a cup of Syal’s magic tea to settle my stomach. Thrawn remained silent, watching me while I potted around. When I was done I sat back on the bed and faced him warming my hands around

the cup. “May I ask you a question before we start the whole Merly-interrogation thing?”

“Of course.” He said with a slight amused twitch of his lips.

“Why did you not tell me you stopped taking Evexelhan?”

A frown crossed his face. “I did tell you.” It wasn’t a lie and he was surprised by my question.

“No, I would have remembered that conversation.” I countered.

“I sent you a letter to tell you because we were out of communications range. I assigned Jarack Behl to work with Larsen, who had requested a spec-ops operative, so he was the courier.”

“A letter?” I asked sipping my tea.

“Yes. I wrote as soon as I stopped taking the drug so that you could see the *Virulent’s* medical officer to discuss birth control.” He said and then added more vaguely, “The evexelhan was causing some ... problems.”

“There were no letters from you about that while I was on Ged’s ship.” I said with a scowl.

“Jarack might have missed you when you left to go to Hjal. You did leave the ship in rather a hurry and you didn’t tell anyone where you were headed right away either.”

I ignored the underlying reprimand. “I never got the message at all.” I was surprisingly angry all of a sudden. “Not on the *Virulent*, not while I was on Hjal and not after I came back here. What ever you sent, I never got it.”

He frowned some more, paused slightly then took a different tack, “What does this have to do with you being ill?”

“I’m not ill.” I said quietly, “And it has everything to do with everything.”

His eyebrow arched and he gave me that *Okay I’m waiting* face. “So if you are not ill, my dear, then what is wrong with you?”

“Nothing is wrong with me.” I said with a sigh.

“Merlyn....” He was losing his patience.

“I’m not sick.” I said softly, pausing while trying to find the right words. I looked at him knowing that once I told him the whole world would change, everything would change and it scared me half to death.

The expression on Thrawn’s face went from annoyed to concerned. “What is it?” He asked quietly. “Is it so terrible you cannot tell me?”

I shook my head. "It's not terrible, I'm not ill." I bit my lip suddenly terrified.

"Then what is it that has you acting like the world is going to end?"

I opened and closed my mouth twice while he waited and then because I couldn't find any easy way to tell him I just said it.

"I'm not ill." I said quietly, "I'm pregnant."

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The air in the room went very still. The moment I had both longed for and dreaded came and went in an instant. There could be no going back now and I felt as though the world had stopped. For a very long moment Thrawn just stared at me and said nothing, his expression completely unreadable. He steepled his fingers over his lips drew a deep breath and then he broke the silence.

"Pregnant?" He said very quietly.

"Yes." I answered all the while never taking my eyes from his face.

"So you're not ill then?" His eyebrows raised up a notch.

"No."

"Pregnant." This time it was more of a whisper to himself than to me and this time it wasn't a question.

I kept quiet because now I didn't have any more words and I still couldn't read his expression. He sat perfectly still for another few seconds and then he stood up to pace about.

"We are going to have a child?" He asked carefully looking at me over his shoulder.

"Hopefully, if everything goes well." I replied. He stopped pacing about and stood stock still for what seemed far too long. I wondered if the sound of my beating heart could be heard all over the base. I was suddenly very anxious.

"Say something." I whispered finally. "Please?"

"I do not know what to say. This was...." He searched for the right word so I helped him.

"Unexpected? Unwanted? Bad timing? Unwelcome?" My own words sounded angry and I could feel myself start to shake. Tears welled in my eyes.

He looked at me and then said carefully. "Unexpected yes, but not unwanted, bad timing... perhaps but not at all unwelcome."

I looked up into his face and blinked the tears out of my eyes.

His eyes tracked to my hands and he frowned, "You're trembling, are you alright?"

I just stared at him, "Are you?"

He looked at me as though he were seeing me for the very first time. His eyes studied my demeanour, my expression and everything else. I sat very still and waited because there was nothing else I could do. I was terrified and it showed. The moment hung in the air and then his whole body language relaxed as sudden understanding flooded his features. "I am so blind." He said more to himself than me as he sat down by my side.

My eyebrows bunched together in puzzlement.

"You were worried about how I would feel." He asked with incredulity, "You thought I would be unhappy about this news? Is this why you tried to keep it a secret?"

I swallowed. "It's awfully big news." I whispered.

He shook his head and caressed my face gently, "I am just ..." He searched for the right word and this time I stayed quiet, "...surprised tekari. Very, very surprised. I thought you were going to tell me you were deathly ill; that something terrible was happening to you or that you had some how managed to contract some incurable deadly disease. I was prepared for bad news, not this." He drew a deep breath, "That you are pregnant was the last thing I ever imagined hearing, please forgive my reaction. As usual you surpass my ability to predict what you will do next." He brushed my cheeks with his thumbs, wiping away my tears.

I let out the breath I had been holding and collapsed against him. "So you are not angry?"

"Angry?" He asked in surprise. "You thought I was angry?" He kissed the top of my head. "After all this time you still cannot read everything on my face. This is good to know." He smiled. "No, I am not angry, far from it but being a father was not something I ever thought to plan for at this time of my life so I need a few moments to process this information." He smiled, "As you said, it's awfully big news."

"Well I didn't exactly plan for this either. I thought you were still taking the evexelhan plus I was told you and I would not be able to conceive."

He cupped my face between his palms. "This is nothing short of a wonder; you are nothing short of a miracle." He sighed, "I am unable to

express how I feel in the appropriate manner and I apologise for that but believe me when I say this is the most extraordinary thing I have ever been told in my entire life.”

And with those words the dam that I had been holding back from the moment I had first heard about being pregnant burst and I sobbed into his chest while he did the only thing I needed him to do, he held me. Once the crying jag was over he handed me a tissue and got up from the bed.

“How is your stomach?” he asked.

“Better. Syal’s zjenzär tea works wonders.”

“So Syal knows? Who else does?”

“Well Syal figured it out so maybe others did too but I didn’t tell anyone, so as far as I am aware only the doctor, Syal and you. Though, come to think of it she might have told Soontir. He is her husband after all.”

“You always were the keeper of secrets.” He said gently. “So I can order some breakfast? I think you and I have a lot to talk about and I don’t know about you but I’m famished.”

I smiled and nodded. “No stim’caf though, for some reason it makes me throw up instantly.”

“So I have noticed. Is there anything else I should know about before I order?”

“Nothing fried.” I offered. “Fresh fruit works well.”

“I’ll see what the cook on duty can do.” He smiled and before I could say anything else he left.

When he returned it was with a tray laden with food. It made me laugh. He set the tray on the bed, gesturing for me to get back under the covers and sat down beside me.

“I can’t eat all of this.”

“Some of it is for me.” He replied picking up a piece of sliced fruit. “But the a’shai is for you.” The kitchen staff seem to know more about what you love to eat than I do.”

“Well they feed me more than you do.” I told him munching on a piece of toast.

“I am happy to know I leave you in capable hands.” He replied. I glanced into his eyes and sighed. “I’m glad you’re back.”

He nodded and then he said, “So I believe you should start at the beginning and tell me everything.”

And that is what I did in between bites until both I and the food were done. He didn’t say anything. He just laid his hand upon my belly and I laid mine upon his. For a moment it was like being bathed in sunlight. I didn’t have to be a mind reader to know that in that moment the only emotion in the room was love, pure and simple.

“So for now everything is okay?” He asked once the moment had passed.

“So far so good but the doctor keeps telling me not to get too attached. His magic number is to get past two hundred days.” I didn’t mention the whole scary conversation about genetic defects and dna rejection.

“And where are you now?”

“A hundred and thirty-one.” I said quietly.

He nodded thoughtfully and then asked. “What about you, sj’iu tekari, are you okay with this?”

I drew a deep breath, “I’m scared to death. I’ve never been pregnant before, I never thought I would be a mother before and I have not exactly had a lot of experience with children or babies.”

“Having seen you with Syal and Tir’s boys I have no doubts about your abilities, you will be a great mother.” He replied meaning each and every word.

I lay back against the pillows. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry.” He said suddenly from out of the blue.

“For what?”

“The evexelhan, I should have double checked and made sure you got my message. It never occurred to me that you might not.”

“I understand and Jarack has always managed to get your letters to me no matter what.” I shook my head. “I didn’t even know you had assigned him to the *Virulent*. You’re not the only one good at keeping secrets, Ged is as well.”

“Speaking of, what exactly did Larsen want from you before you landed in his arms again?” he asked after he put the tray on the table then settled back beside me.

I made a face and ignored the dig. In spite of everything I liked Ged and I didn’t understand all the hostility towards him. I decided it must be a man thing and left it alone to answer the question. “He said he needed me to retrieve an agent from behind enemy lines, his words not mine.”

Thrawn frowned. “He has qualified people for that sort of work.”

I nodded, "That's what I told him but he was fairly insistent. It was almost as if it was something personal. One minute we're arguing about this and the next thing I know I am in the infirmary." I shrugged. I had told him about that. "Ged wouldn't tell me any more about the mission unless I agreed to do it which I couldn't but I also couldn't tell him why not. He thinks I've become some weakling, wailing girl who wastes all her time waiting for her mate to return home from the wars."

"That imagery is sweet but if that's what he thinks of you then he doesn't know you quite as well as he believes he does." Thrawn said with a smile.

I sighed. "He was surprised and hurt when I told him no. His reaction was unusual. He has people far better trained than me for stuff like that. He said it had to be a civilian with a civilian ship but apart from that he wasn't specific and I know he was holding stuff back. Do you know what he's talking about?"

"Not off the top of my head but we have not been in communication as of late." He said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I heard you were out in the Kessel Sector." Thrawn's eyebrow shot up but before he could say anything I said, "News travels fast on the base, you should know that."

"I had some business on Honoghr addressing the Noghri, a disciplinary matter, nothing to worry about my dear."

I frowned. "How does Rukh feel about that?"

"Rukh's feelings are none of my concern, he does his job and he does not question my actions." Thrawn replied coldly so that I knew there was something deeper going on but he would not talk about it and now was not the time or the place to dig.

"Okay, what about Karrde then and Mara jade?"

Thrawn made another tight lipped expression and shook his head. "This also base gossip?"

"No. Ged told me." I said tartly. "Don't make that cross face, I thought you were going to at least keep me in the loop. You don't and when I asked him what was going on with the campaign, that's what he told me."

He sighed. "Well base scuttlebutt and Admiral Larsen seem to be keeping you well informed. We can discuss that topic at a later time." He replied dryly and I knew this route of conversation was also a dead end for now so I switched back to talking about something a little safer.

"Why doesn't Ged ask Jarack to do the retrieval, I mean he's good at that sneaking around behind enemy lines stuff right?"

"Behl is already working for Larsen so probably he's on assignment already and out of contact."

"Ged never mentioned Jarack once."

"Undercover means undercover, tekari. It's doubtful that, unless you told him, Larsen even knows how close you and Jarack are."

"Yes but if Jarack had something for me then chances are if he couldn't deliver it he would have asked Ged to. While you and the rest of the galaxy may not like Ged very much he is an Imperial officer and an honourable one at that. Jarack would have given him your letter for me but I never got it and you know that Jarack would go through hell to deliver your correspondence to ...." Suddenly I felt as though my heart had stopped.

"You just went as white as a snow field, what is it?"

"You don't think it's Jarack that's missing do you?" I whispered.

"That I never got your letter because Jarack never made it to the *Virulent*." I shook my head, "Why didn't Ged tell you? Jarack is your friend. If he is missing you should know this, you should...."

"Hush." He spoke calmly, "He has been working undercover, it has to do with finding a leak on board of the *Virulent*. It's entirely possible he didn't want you to know he was there. He probably waited for the appropriate moment to get to you and you left the ship before he could do so. And if he passed the letter along to someone else to deliver it's possible who ever it was forgot. Not everyone is as reliable as Behl."

"But what if...?"

Thrawn's fingers upon my lips silenced me. "Tekari, he's working deep under cover."

"You keep saying that! But what if it is him?" This time he let me finish the sentence. "If Jarack is missing...." I shook my head, "Ged should have told you!" I was starting stress myself out. "He should have said something sooner and not do all this silly cloak and saber stuff!"

"Tekari, calm yourself. Ged Larsen does not run to me every time he has problems, he is quite capable of dealing with missing agents himself."

"Well apparently not since he came to me for help!" I winced at the sliver of pain I felt and clasped my hands over my belly with a gasp.

"Merlyn take a deep breath and calm down. Jarack Behl is perfectly able to take care of himself and if Larsen came to you for help

then he already thinks he knows where the missing agent is. Stop jumping to conclusions based on a single missing letter. Now breathe.” Thrawn replied quietly as he placed the flat of his hand on my back and rubbed slowly so that my breathing tuned into the motion. Only when I was a lot calmer did he stop. “Better?”

I nodded, “Yes, so what now?”

“Well, if it is Behl who is missing then I need know about it. Aside from my personal correspondence to you, he was carrying exceedingly delicate information.” He said getting up off the bed. “I will try to contact the *Virulent* and see what Larsen has to say.”

I just looked up at him.

“What is it, tekari?”

“How long are you on base for?” I asked.

“It was only supposed to be for two days but that might change once I know more from Larsen.”

I nodded and made a face. “I hope it’s not Jarack.” I said quietly.

“Well even if that is the case, it is not your concern. Your only job is to look after our child. Do you understand?” He said leaning down to give me a kiss. “Our child.” He murmured in my ear.

I nodded. “I have a scan this morning if you want to be there to see.” I patted my belly to emphasize what I meant.

“Really? Comm. me and I will be there.” He said as he slipped on his uniform jacket. “In the mean time no stress, was that not what Thomas ordered?”

“Yes.” I nodded, surprised to hear the doctor’s first name.

“Then for once in your life follow orders please?” He smiled and only after I nodded did he leave.

I decided that in this instance being obedient seemed like a good idea and curled back up in bed until it was time to go and see the doc for the progress check. I could grill Thrawn about his campaign later.

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I suppose we must have looked like every other couple in the world as the doctor waved the scanner over my belly, watching the screen for the images it showed. Suspense and anticipation mingled with something I could not define. Thrawn’s hand tightened around mine as the images began to clear. I gasped. It was a three dimensional picture of

the baby I carried within me, perfect and more real than I could have possibly imaged.

“There’s the head.” Doctor Thracer said, then he chuckled. “He’s sucking his thumb.”

“He?” Thrawn asked.

I looked at the doctor and he nodded. “Yes Admiral, he. Miss Gabriel is carrying a boy which means you will have a son.”

Thrawn just shook his head and stroked my face with his free hand.

“I told you it was a boy, doc. It’s always men making my life hell.” I grinned. “And the little alien I’m gestating is no exception to this rule.”

The doctor moved the scanner and more images and views showed up, each one more astonishing than the last. “Everything looks in order.”

“And the placental tear?” Thrawn asked before I could.

“As far as I, and this high tech amazing equipment, can tell there do not seem to be any more issues but my orders still remain, rest, rest followed by more rest. A placental abruption could be a whole other story. You got lucky last time, the tear was small and we caught it early. We don’t want there to be a next time. You are not out of the woods yet, and this is still a high risk pregnancy because we don’t know how the baby will continue to develop or if there will be further complications due to incompatibility issues. There are still a great many unknowns but so far so good.” Doctor Thracer said as he put the scanner down. “I am being optimistically cautious here, so I won’t order complete bed rest but I cannot stress this enough; you must not over do it.”

“Okay Doc, I read you loud and clear.”

Thrawn smiled and ran his fingers over the soft, small round shape of my belly. “Amazing.” He said softly.

I glanced at the Doctor. “If you tell anyone you saw him like this I will hurt you.”

Much to my surprise both men laughed.

“Beautiful and fierce.” Thrawn said.

The doctor made a face, “More like headstrong and annoyingly stubborn.”

Thrawn nodded in agreement. “That too.”

“So we are good to go?” I asked before any more descriptions of my character got bandied about.

“Yep, until your next check up.” The doctor said and motioned for me to get up and get dressed, “Which should be in five days unless something else happens. Do not take that bracelet off.”

I nodded then motioned for the doctor to come close so that I could whisper in his ear. When I was done asking my question he smiled. “To answer your question, yes you can although I’d advise a certain amount of restraint and caution you to stop if you feel any pain or have any spotting. But the scans show that everything is okay for the time being so there is no reason to forbid you from having sex.”

I blushed. “Thanks doc.”

Thrawn smirked so I poked him on the chest. “Just because I asked if we could doesn’t mean we will.”

Thrawn’s smirk broadened.

I poked him again. “You better have the next few hours free because you have a lot to talk to me about and I am not taking no for an answer.”

“I suspected that would be the case so I am all yours until fifteen hundred hours.” He replied offering me his hand to help me down from the exam bed.

“But first I want food.” I said.

“After that breakfast, how can you be hungry?”

“It’s lunch time!” I laughed. “And now I’m eating for two!” I said with a grin. “At least that is what the doc here tells me all the time. I asked Galli to make me veghash and Denezeelian fizz pudding.”

“Not together I hope.” Thrawn said sceptically.

“That was not my plan but now that you mention it....” I grinned.

“Pregnant women and their crazy cravings. Better get used to it Admiral.” Doctor Thracer said clapping Thrawn on his arm. “Oh and Admiral...,”

“Yes?”

“While it is still too soon for my taste for this, let me be the first to say congratulations.”

Thrawn inclined his head. “Thank you.”

“Wow,” I said quietly, the reality finally sinking in, “We’re going to have a baby.”

“If things continue the way they are, it looks that way but Merlyn I know I sound like the master of doom, however I cannot stress this enough, it’s still early and there are still so many things that can go wrong so ....” Doctor Thracer began.

I finished for him. “I know, try not to get too attached. We are not out of the woods yet, but every day makes it more real. I can’t help it, I’m already attached and now I am excited as well as scared.”

“As you should be, my dear.” Doctor Thracer smiled. “Now I believe you have a lunch date with the Admiral here and I have work to do so unless there are any problems I should know about then your next check up should be in a week.” And with that he ushered us both out of his medlab.

Thrawn stopped and looked at me, “I have arranged for lunch to be brought to my private dining area and after we’ve eaten you can grill me at your leisure but I don’t guarantee you answers for all of your questions.”

I stood up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Okay, let’s eat, my stomach is growling.” Food was starting to rule my life.

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Thrawn had extended his stay on the base due to work on his super secret project in the subbasement along with many other things he would not discuss with me. I didn’t try to press him. I had too much on my own mind to worry about his plans and machinations. We had spoken at length about how his campaign was going but mainly the discussion had centered on Mara Jade’s unexpected visit to the *Chimaera* and what had happened after that.

“She appears to be quite taken with Karrde.” Thrawn had remarked after he had finished telling me about how she and Luke Skywalker had managed to rescue Karrde from the *Chimaera*.

“I had heard that Talon Karrde was charismatic but I never met him. He was one of those smugglers who did not love the spot light and he deals more in information than in actual goods. He began as a small timer under a guy named Car’das.”

“Car’das?” Thrawn had interrupted. “Jorj Car’das?”

“You know of him?”

Thrawn’s smile had been enigmatic, “In a manner of speaking. I met him a very long time ago when I was still a young man. It was from him that I learned to speak basic fluently and indirectly he is responsible for the death of my brother. I lost touch of his whereabouts until I joined

the Empire and then of course it was easy to obtain some information about the man although after the battle of Yavin he vanished off the scanners. I did not manage to learn much about his organisation and certainly did not know that Karrde had been a part of it. Had that been the case I would have handled the situation with him far differently.” He had said thoughtfully. “I underestimated Jade’s desire to please her new employer.”

“I’m not surprised she didn’t really want to come back and work for you.” I had said softly.

Thrawn’s eyebrow had arched significantly. “Oh?”

“She probably felt incredibly lost after the Emperor’s death and then she found Karrde. I’m betting she imprinted on him somehow, sees him as some sort of father figure or protector though she’d never ever admit that. She probably went out of her way to please him without actually realising what she was doing. She needs a powerful authority figure in her life; it’s all she’s ever known, in fact you told me that years ago. You betrayed her so that makes you the enemy now.”

“She was not planning on being a loyal member of my team.”

Thrawn had replied coldly. “She was merely playing for time.”

“Whatever her reasons, you only made her hate you more. She already felt betrayed by Palpatine’s death and now you have only confirmed that feeling. She never liked you that much anyway and you gave her reason to despise you further by not honouring the bargain that was made.” I had told him. “She killed for Palpatine, she would have died for him too but he never asked her for that outright, she was valuable enough to him that he had not been ready to lose his investment.”

“I underestimated her determination.” He had said quietly. “I also did not calculate that she would go to Luke Skywalker for help or that they would manage to get to the Millennium Falcon which was in storage on the *Chimaera*. They killed good men to get off my ship.”

“You know, you can’t control everything or everyone. Nor can you see the future.”

He had looked at me with a smile. “I am aware of that my dear. You show me this error of my ways all the time.”

“So what was the problem with the Noghri?” I had asked.

“Some minor dissent and I had reason to believe that Leia Organa Solo was hiding on their world.”

“They gave her up?”

“No.” Thrawn had answered thoughtfully. “I believe they lied about it.”

“They Lied?”

He had nodded. “It would appear that their loyalties no longer lie solely with the Empire. I will have to monitor that situation more carefully.”

“Why didn’t you do anything about it while you were there?”

“I set some parameters in place but I have no absolute proof and the surest way to lose the respect of a people is to accuse them of a crime without proof even if they are guilty. All I have is some suspicious behaviour by a few Noghri and a feeling.” He replied, “However issues with the Noghri are the least of my concerns. I lost a ship during our last battle which means training an entire new crew from scratch.”

“I heard about the *Peremptory* and the *Katana*.”

Thrawn’s eyebrows had risen. “Really?”

“Base gossip.” I had said lightly. “There was some word about how the battle for the Katana fleet went but not a whole lot of details. We heard a ship had been lost and I pressed Voss for details. Don’t be angry with him I just needed to know it wasn’t you and now you know why.” I had taken his hand in mine and placed it on my belly.

Thrawn had just smiled. “Suffice to say my dear that I managed to achieve enough of my goal to make the next stage of my plan possible.”

I had nodded and then for no other reason than sheer meanness my stomach had rebelled and I had managed to make it to the fresher in time to vomit up lunch which had effectively ended our afternoon together.

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I woke up with a gasp, my fists clenching the bed clothes, sweat soaked and my heart pounding violently in my chest. It took a few moments for the last remnants of the nightmare to recede and when it did I realised I was in the bed alone. For a few seconds I knew a sliver of fear and then a small light from the other room switched on.

“Za’ar?”

“I’m here,” Thrawn’s voice said from the shadows.

I slid out of the bed and slipped on my favourite robe to join him in the sitting room.

“I did not wish to wake you.” He told me as he put down the data pad he was holding.

“You didn’t.” I said with a sigh, “It’s past three, what are you doing sitting in the dark?”

“I was thinking.” He said enigmatically and patted the space on the sofa next to him.

“Thinking about what? Plans for the future or baby names?”

He smiled. “Names? No that had not yet crossed my mind. The Chiss do not name their children until a week after they are born and planning the name is not an arduous process since our children’s names are mainly pre determined by our family name. Worrying about names is not something Chiss parents spend a lot of time concerning themselves about especially as sometimes the names will change depending on a chosen career. As for plans for the future, well they are always on my mind.”

“Then what has you sitting alone in the dark at this hour of the morning?”

He sighed. “I finally received word from Admiral Larsen.”

“Oh?”

“Well, it is classified information tekari.” He said evasively confirming my worst fears.

“It’s Jarack isn’t it?”

The muscle in his jaw clenched. I just stared at him until he drew another deep breath. He placed steepled fingers against his lips, regarded me with his glowing red eyes and then said. “Very well, as you know Jarack was on assignment to the *Virulent* to uncover a possible rebel informant onboard, the information he found there led him to an infiltration cell based on Coruscant and that’s where Larsen believes Behl is being held.”

“That’s it?”

“It was an undercover assignment even Larsen doesn’t know everything about it. Behl had specific times he was supposed to check in but he’s missed his last three. Larsen sent an agent who was already on the planet to investigate but there was no trace of Jarack to be found. There are unsubstantiated rumours about the capture of an important imperial but Larsen cannot confirm any of it.” He paused, drew a deep breath and then continued, “Larsen told me he wanted you because it would be easy for you to slip in and out of Coruscant, you have friends there, you know things that most people don’t about the palace and information should be a simple thing for you to obtain. He was right when he said you were the best possible person for this job because you are.”

“The best person for the job.” I repeated flatly.

Thrawn nodded. “Yes but....”

I didn’t let him finish, “Best person for this job? May I remind you that I’m carrying your child? In case you hadn’t noticed, I throw up at the slightest provocation and I can’t just go running off to....”

Thrawn held up his hand, “Tekari, stop.” He commanded and I shut up. “I told him you were unavailable which produced the obvious and expected arguments however once I explained the reason he backed off.”

“What?” I was surprised. “You told Ged I was pregnant?”

“I did not see any reason to lie to him about it.” Thrawn said, “Now he understands the risks to you and he will not request it again. Did you not wish him to know? I thought that you and he were... friends?” He gestured vaguely.

“We are, at least I think so, but I just didn’t want anyone to know before you did. It just seems odd, that’s all, you telling him and it’s still too early to be telling people. You heard what Doctor Thracer said.”

“According to the doctor you are doing well in spite of all the odds against you.”

I shrugged. “It’s still early and I’d prefer the whole galaxy didn’t know.” I didn’t want to tempt fate.

He looked at me, “I wanted to be clear that you were off limits, I wanted to make sure he would not try to somehow coerce you into doing something you have no business doing right now. One of the things I admire about Admiral Larsen is his power of persuasion and I’ve seen him use it on you so I wanted there to be absolutely no misunderstandings between him and I.”

I shook my head in wonderment. “The two of you... it’s like watching two alpha male banthas fight for the rights to the herd sometimes.”

Thrawn’s eyebrow arched but he ignored the comment. “I am very surprised he was so secretive about who it was you were being asked to rescue. It would have been to his advantage to play on your attachment to Jarack. Now he is aware that the risk to your health and the health of our child outweighs his need for your skills.” He said with a thread of steel and ice running under his words. “So there will be no running off to Coruscant to launch a one woman rescue. I have arranged for people to go in and retrieve our man. It is not your worry, only the baby and your health are.”

I sat back against the couch with a sigh and pulled my robe closer around my shoulders.

“Go back to bed tekari, it’s late, you should be asleep.”

“I can’t get back to sleep after one of these dreams.” I explained.

“And I have the feeling you are preparing to leave soon.”

“I was supposed to head back yesterday but there are some things which need my attention.”

“Anything I can help with?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Does this have to do with your project in the subbasement?”

The moment of silence before he answered let me know I was right, “That project is strictly off limits.”

I made a face. “I know that and I don’t go down there ever because those furry little critters you have in the sub basements make me head blind and give me a headache but you did tell me about it so I have to assume that this part of why you come back to base and not just to see me.” I sighed.

His lips tightened slightly. “Yes, I needed to check on the progress of the prototypes but I told you when I showed you what was going on that I would not discuss it further or outside of that area and I meant what I said.”

“You complain about me having too many secrets but you’re so full of them it’s a wonder your brain doesn’t explode.”

He shrugged with one shoulder ever so slightly. “Secrets are part of the trade, my dear. You of all people should know this.”

I just gave him a look. “So when are you planning to depart?”

“If all goes well I will depart for the *Chimaera* at twenty hundred hours tonight. We will be headed to Wayland for a progress report and after that we will continue the campaign. The next step will be to procure shield generators and more equipment as well as take back more sectors. I hope to combine this with more training for our newest clones while manning the recent ship acquisitions, if all goes well.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

He smiled. “That is part of my job, my dear. If I do not have confidence in what I am planning how then shall the people who serve under me have confidence?”

“Will you let me know if you hear any more about Jarack?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

Thrawn looked at me and smiled. “I will do my very best to keep you informed, that much I can promise but no more.”

That was good enough for me. I sighed. “I know you don’t want to hear this so I will only say it once, I wish you didn’t have to go, I wish you could stay here.”

He placed the flat of his hand on my belly. “Given the current circumstances so do I but even for this miracle I cannot abandon all that we have worked so hard to achieve, not even to watch the development and birth of my son.”

I placed my hand over his. “This changes everything doesn’t it.”

His eyes glowed as he replied quietly. “In more ways than you could ever possibly imagine tekari.”

I looked into his face trying to read the underlying emotion I felt in his voice and sighed. “We don’t seem to have much luck with our timing do we?”

“Well I don’t know if I would agree with that,” He said, “but what I do know is that while the circumstances may not have been ideal the outcome was. Now we are expecting our first child and I could not be more in awe of you, of this,” He patted my belly gently, “this miracle growing within you. You will be an amazing mother and this is a complication I am happy to accommodate my life to. Once I secure the Empire’s place once more as leader in this galaxy then I am quite sure we will have more time for family matters.”

I rested my head against his shoulder. “In order to do that you have to be here because this child will need a father and I will need you, so please stay alive at all costs.”

“I will do my utmost to accommodate that request and have taken as many precautions as I can to ensure the safety of everyone under my command as well as my own.” He caressed my face, “But we are at war and not even I can control everything that happens.” He withdrew his hand from my belly.

I nodded. “I would suggest that maybe you could clone yourself,” I joked, “but I don’t quite know how to take just one of you, never mind two.”

His smile was slight as he returned his attention to the small data pad on the table. “A clone? Of me? Now there’s an idea.” He said absently, as though he were actually considering it.

“It would be a really bad idea. Knowing you, you’d probably fight with each other over me and no one would survive.”

His lip twitched in amusement.

“Don’t you dare even think about it!” I told him.

He turned to look at me, crooked his finger under my chin and raised my face so that he could kiss me gently. “As my lady wishes.” He murmured before keeping my mouth occupied and me unable to talk any more which was okay, I was done with words.

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Thrawn left the base quietly. We had never been fans of big, sentimental, messy goodbyes but this time it was hard not to feel that terrible pang of separation and the dreadful uncertainty which lay before us both. In the quiet of our quarters he kissed me passionately, whispering for me to be well, to keep the baby safe, telling me that he would be careful and that everything would be alright; all the lies couples told each other when they were parting into dangerous, uncertain times.

“I will try to keep you apprised of what is happening when I can but I cannot guarantee regular updates although I do expect them from you along with images of the scans of our child. If I cannot be there in person I wish to be there in spirit.” He said as he caressed my belly gently.

I nodded. “I will make sure you get them and I will tell our son about his father as often as I can.”

“If people see you talking to your abdomen without knowing you are with child you know what they will think.”

“They already think I am a bit weird so this will just add to the crazy Merly myth but I am sure that by the end of this week most of the base will have learned the truth, it’s hard to keep secrets here.” I answered.

“So I have noticed.” He replied with a wry smile.

Suddenly there were so many things I wanted to tell him but all the words stuck in my throat and all I could do was look into his eyes and hope that he understood until the silence became too much to bear.

“Be safe.” I whispered.

His hands were warm as he cupped my face and kissed me one last time before turning sharply on his heel leaving me alone in the sudden quiet which engulfed the room in his wake.

For a moment I just stood there holding his scent in memory, my hands wrapped over my belly quite of their own accord and for the first time I knew a fear for Thrawn that was new and entirely unwelcome.

“Okay kiddo,” I whispered to my unborn child, “It’s just you and me now.” And before I could wallow in the self pity that threatened to engulf me I turned my attention to the data pad Thrawn had conveniently left on the table for me. It held all the relevant information pertaining to Jarack Behl’s disappearance and possible capture. I had no intention of leaving the base to find Jarack but at least I could familiarize myself with the details.

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In the days that passed after Thrawn’s return to his ship life on the base felt quiet, almost still. It was as if the entire population were holding their breath, waiting for something to happen but nothing did.

I knew from Voss that Thrawn had gone to Wayland to retrieve equipment. That he was also planning war games as training with Ged’s fleet, getting ready for the next big push which was rumoured to be Coruscant. There was a terrible sense of urgency under the calm reports Voss gave me and I wondered what was really going on but left it alone. It would do me no good to dig at him about a topic I was certain Thrawn had forbidden him to talk about in any detail. I found it surreal to think of Coruscant once more becoming a battle ground. I had lived through such a thing once and was grateful I would not have to do so again.

Thrawn had not spoken to me about his plans in this particular matter and I had not asked because when the subject of Coruscant had been brought up he had become distant and brooding. He had spent many hours sequestered in his meditation room pondering strategies and tactics but I often had the sense that he was troubled by some of the outcomes he predicted.

“Nothing is ever set in stone, Tekari.” He had said once when I had brought the subject up one night as we lay in bed, restless and unable to sleep. “For every move I make there are hundreds of possible outcomes, not all of them in my favour. I must think carefully before I set any theory into motion.”

“It sounds like you are playing Dejarik.”

His eyebrow had arched. “Except that instead of game pieces being at risk, it’s millions of lives that hang in the balance including yours and mine. I must consider all possible permutations and consequences with infinite care which, for me, requires quiet time and thought.”

I had only nodded because there had been nothing more I could add and one of those lives hanging in the balance was growing within me. The galaxy suddenly seemed far more fragile than it had a few months prior to discovering that I was pregnant. As we had lain in bed talking there were a mass of unspoken questions boiling in my brain but I had long learned that no amount of pushing on my part would gain me the answers I wanted if Thrawn was unwilling to give them. Instead I had left him alone when he required it and given him what solace I could when he had asked. After his departure I tried to keep myself busy but it was difficult. I had never enjoyed waiting and now, confined to the base with no real purpose, it was harder than ever.

Every day brought with it new discoveries about the tiny life I was carrying. I could feel him move, I could sense his being within me and even though it was pure fantasy I believed he could sense me too. I had asked Syal about this one day, feeling foolish but she had just smiled, telling me this was perfectly normal.

“Of course he is aware of you, he is listening to your heartbeat isn’t he?” She had asked when I had spoken of it shyly.

I had smiled. “Were you this jittery with your first?” I had asked.

A sliver of sorrow had crossed her face for a second but it was gone before I could make sense of it, I wasn’t sure she even knew it had been there. Before I could ask what I had said to upset her, she had nodded and answered me. “Oh worse, I think.” She had said. “Davin was born small and too early. He was quiet in the womb, much like he is now, quiet and thoughtful. In fact he was so quiet sometimes I used to wonder if he was there at all. I ran to the medlab on many an occasion to see if everything was still alright. Chak on the other hand arrived late and through most of the pregnancy he was restless and kicked like a mura almost all the time.”

“How do you get past the uncertainty?”

She had shrugged, “You don’t, not really. But with each pregnancy it gets easier because you learn what to expect, mostly. With Jagged I didn’t worry so much about the anomalies. He kicked, he moved, he punched with his fists and when he was born he came out backwards. It was as if he wanted to come into the world already standing on his own two feet and he’s been fiercely independent ever since.” She had smiled.

“Yeah, I noticed that. He’s pretty amazing. All of your boys are amazing and I love them dearly.”

“And they adore you right back.” She had replied, placing her hand over mine. “You’re going to be a wonderful mother so stop worrying so much.”

I had never been more grateful to have another woman to talk to than at that moment; she was a fountain of knowledge as well as a comfort to me in what was a very uncertain time. It was no wonder that she was the one to see when I was having a bad day and help me through it.

I had not been sleeping well and the nightmares which had been plaguing me had gotten worse leaving me with a feeling of dread I could not seem to shake. I would wake up shaking and in tears but without any real memory of what the dreams had been about which was unusual and disturbing. As the day wore on the sensation became more pressing until exasperated I ended up in the small cantina drinking something I had hoped would soothe me. Sometimes it was good just to be near other people even if they mostly ignored me. Not having anything specific to do was starting to drive me a little stir crazy, baby or not.

I was staring off into space while nursing an already cold cup of tea when Syal found me.

“Here you are.” She said sitting down across from me with a cup of tea in her hand. “You know for a small base you sure can be hard to find.”

I grinned. “It’s not that hard, just go to where there’s food.”

Syal laughed.

“Where are the boys?” I asked. “You usually don’t fly solo at this hour of the day.”

“Davin is with his tutor for another hour and Mar’sa is taking care of Chak and Jagged. I needed to get away. I don’t know what’s gotten into them today but it’s a mad house in our quarters. I swear there must be a full moon or three going on.”

I smiled but didn’t say anything.

“Is everything okay, you seem sort of distant?” She asked after a few moments.

I nodded. “Yes, I am just having one of those days, you know? I can’t settle. Everything hurts and every time I try to take a nap or go to sleep I have nightmares that make Kessel look like a holiday resort. It’s as if I took a restless pill or something, like I am expecting something bad to happen only there’s nothing going on. I think I am creating stress where there isn’t any because I am bored.”

She studied my face carefully. “Is the baby alright?”

“According to the doc two days ago everything was fine.” I nodded. “I have my next check-up in three days. Why?”

“That’s good to know.” She sat back against her chair, “You just look a bit pale is all.”

“That’s probably due to a great lack of sleep.” I sighed, hating how I sounded. My entire universe now revolved around the tiny alien life in my belly. “I’m not used to sharing my body is all. It’s as if he’s doing everything possible to make me uncomfortable today. My back is killing me.”

She looked at me thoughtfully and then asked, “Your back? You don’t have any cramps do you?”

I looked at her as though I were seeing her for the very first time. “No, nothing like that at all. It’s just an ache. I’m not used to so much lying around. I think my muscles are rebelling against the inactivity. Plus I never seem to sleep well when Thrawn is away.”

“You’d go see the doc if you thought something was up?”

“Yes, of course.” I nodded, “Do you think there’s something wrong, should I be worried about a back ache?”

In that moment I watched her face carefully, she had something on her mind but she made the decision not to tell me anything more. Instead she just shook her head, “No of course not though maybe you should requisition a new bed. You just look tired and I am being overly protective.” She answered. It was a lie but I was too tired to press her. “We are just looking out for you is all.” She added.

I smiled. “I know. It’s as if this baby belongs to the whole base.”

“Well in a way he does you know. I mean I thought Tir and I had the perfect fairy tale romance but it’s nothing compared to you and Thrawn. You’re the perfect couple and after everything you have been through you are still together, still in love and now you will have a baby. It’s perfect and let me tell you, as an actress I should know, that’s what people want, the happy ending to a story filled with all sorts of adventure and adversity. Your life would have made a really great holo-drama you know.”

“Perfect?” I asked softly, “You think we’re the perfect couple?”

“Well it looks that way on the outside.”

I sighed. “I think Thrawn would argue on that assessment because I am probably the least perfect person I know and I must admit in the perfect world my baby’s father would not be the warlord he is, challenging the current rulers in place to bring back Imperial might.”

“Well that may be so but isn’t it nice to know people think what you have is idyllic?”

I shook my head morosely, “No.” I replied honestly. “Things that are perfect in my life have a very bad habit of going belly up in a really big bad way.”

She cocked her head to one side, “You really are having an off day aren’t you.”

“Sorry, I woke up feeling all gloom and doom and it just hasn’t gone away.”

“You think something is happening with the campaign?” Syal asked. “Have you heard anything from Thrawn?”

“No, no news good or bad.” I shrugged. “Really, I think I am just going stir crazy being here is what.” I said trying to lighten the mood a little.

She laughed and suddenly the tension that had been building dissipated. “Well, that I can understand.”

“I never thought I would say this but I actually miss Coruscant. I think I would almost give anything to be able to head out to the coco district and do some shopping, something to distract me.” Suddenly I missed Shiv and Cati more than I could say.

“Yeah. I do miss that, being able to go out for ‘caf and cake, or to the theatre. I mean I don’t regret coming here with Tir but it is hard to be so isolated and hemmed in. It’s not even as if we can really go exploring outside the perimeter either for fear of being eaten by some unknown beast.”

“Or worse, some flesh eating worm bug thing.” I nodded. “My uncle once told me it was my heart ache to be with an Imperial Navy lifer, I never really understood what he meant until I was already in too deep and it was too late. I mean Thrawn has been at war for a long time and it never worried me the way it does now. I am so scared for him, for us and for the future. This baby isn’t even born yet and I am terrified of all the awful things that could happen. Nothing I have ever done in my life has prepared me for this, nothing and it’s kind of making me go a little crazy, you know?”

“First baby jitters.” Syal said gently. “It’s normal. You are bringing a new life into the world, you worry about everything. Trust me that doesn’t go away but you learn to get over some of the what-ifs.”

I sighed. “I don’t know I have so many of those ‘what ifs’ in my head right now I think my brain will explode.”

“I’d love to tell you that once this war is over things will get better, but I’ve been saying that for most of my married life now. That’s the trouble with soldiers, pilots and warriors, there is always more to fight about.” She nodded.

There was nothing else I could add to that statement, she was absolutely right. For as long as I had known Thrawn there had been some conflict going on somewhere that he had needed to deal with. He thrived on such adversity, I was sure of it. Military problems gave his brilliant mind something to do. I was quite sure he would go crazy if he were cut off from space and strategic planning and all things in between. I remembered what he had been like when we had lived together on Coruscant while he was at the court. It had been a relief when he had been able to return to space.

I spent the rest of the day in Syal’s company ending up back in her quarters so that she could relieve her babysitter. It was a pleasant enough distraction but I was grateful when I found myself back in my own quarters which were blissfully quiet by comparison. She had not been joking when she had said it was a mad house at her place. The boys ran us both ragged with their enthusiasm and rambunctiousness.

“I hope that you aren’t quite so wild, little man.” I whispered to my belly as I walked slowly back to my own quarters. If the boy I was carrying had any opinions on this matter he kept it to himself.

I ordered supper to eat in my quarters but once it arrived I found myself playing with the food rather than eating it. I was not hungry and the mild indigestion I had been battling on and off all day wasn’t really helping much either. After pushing the vegetables about for the umpteenth time I set the plate aside and tried to watch some holo-dramas but that also proved to be futile. I simply could not settle down and eventually decided to go for a walk, taking my unfinished dinner to the dirty dish drop off in the cantina along the way.

I ended up walking through the base to end up in the main hanger bay along the high gantry where I stood for a long time just watching everyone go about their routines. I missed space, if the truth were to be told, and had I not been with child I would have requested leave to go and take my ship for a joy ride. A subtle pressure deep in my abdomen made me place my hands over the small bulge that was getting harder to disguise.

“You be quiet.” I whispered to my son, “You’ll get your shot at space soon enough, I promise.” And as I spoke the words I realised I was excited at the prospect of teaching my child how to fly.

“You know they say that talking to yourself is the first sign of madness.”

I turned around and found myself looking at Voss who was grinning from ear to ear. “I was told you were up here by the deck officer.”

I looked over the railing and waved to the deck officer on watch, Martim VanKamt. He smiled and waved back. I liked Martim, he was an old hand at the business of dock operations and he knew me almost better than I knew myself. I enjoyed working with him and we had often swapped stories about our lives and adventures while I was tinkering with or repairing a ship.

“So what’s brought you all the way up here to find me?”

“Your comm. is off.” He replied as if that explained everything.

I made a noise of exasperation. “It’s not off; it’s sitting on the table by my bed. I keep forgetting it. Seriously, I’m on the base what the hell is going to happen to me that a dozen people at any given time won’t notice? There is no where safer except for maybe the *Chimaera*.”

Voss made a face. “You know better than that, if Thrawn finds out you wander about here with no comm-unit he’ll not be very happy.”

“Yeah well what the eye doesn’t see the heart doesn’t grieve. I won’t tell him if you don’t.”

“Roger that.”

“So what’s up?”

“I thought you might want to know, the *Chimaera* is due to return to base in the next two or three days.”

“Oh, why?” I asked, feeling my heart skip a beat out of fear, “Is everything alright? I expected them to be gone for longer than just three weeks. Has something happened?”

“Everything is fine, as far as I know.” He nodded, “The Admiral intimated that it has to do with some work on his cloning projects which can only be completed here, he’s bringing equipment from Wayland for installation.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Oh?”

Voss waved his hand in a *don’t ask me* manner. “I really am not privy to all his secrets but apparently time is of the essence.” He said, “Anyway I thought you would like to know, he’ll be here for about two days if the installation he wishes to do goes well, maybe longer if it doesn’t.”

I sighed with a relief that was almost overwhelming, "Thank you. That's the best news I have heard all day." I said.

"How are you feeling?"

"Honestly, I'm terribly bored." I said after a few seconds.

"Bored?" He was surprised. This was not the answer he had been expecting.

"Feeling a bit trapped you know." I explained, "I'm used to being able to come and go but with this pregnancy I need stay on base and because it's high risk I can't do anything that might be dangerous which includes ship repair or sports of any kind so yeah, I'm bored."

He smiled. "You know, I haven't said anything because you didn't seem to want to talk about it but on behalf of everyone here who's asked me, I want to say congratulations."

I looked at my belly. "Thank you."

"If you need anything, you know, you only have to ask." He said shyly as we walked down the stairs to the exit. "We are all very excited for you both."

I smiled, "You are?"

He chuckled, "Of course we are. Your baby gives everyone hope."

"Hope?" I swallowed down the retort that was on the tip of my tongue in favour of giving him a smile hoping he did not see beneath it to the fear and uncertainty I felt.

"Yes," He said without explaining it further. "If you don't mind me asking, have you picked out names yet?"

"No, not officially. According to Thrawn the Chiss don't do the naming thing until after the baby is born and I am just superstitious."

"Why?" Voss's ask puzzled. "Everything is fine isn't it?"

"Yes, everything is fine." I said.

"So you've thought about names then, haven't you?"

I grinned at his curiosity, "Yes. I have. I've thought about naming him after my father or maybe Thrawn's brother but really I don't know, I think it will have to wait until he's born. It's hard to name a little person I haven't met yet and names are important."

Voss nodded. "I can understand that. One of my cousins took nearly a week to name their first born. She also said it was a difficult matter."

"What name did they eventually decide on?"

He chuckled, "They named him Jarren, after my great, great grandfather." He answered.

"I suppose he will follow in your family's illustrious footsteps?"

"I believe he will if his desire for Imperial toys is anything to go by, though my cousin Yelena would argue against it."

"I am starting to understand why mothers do not want their sons to grow up to be soldiers." I replied wryly.

Voss smiled. "I cannot even imagine what mothers must endure. Boys are hell, you know, but think about it this way. You carry the heir to the empire in your womb. He'll have the whole base watching over him."

His words sent a terrible shiver of fear through me and I gasped at a sudden pain I suspected was a kick from my son reacting to the adrenaline surge.

"Are you alright? You've gone as white as a Hoth snow field."

I swallowed the fear down and nodded. "I'm fine but I should probably eat something and get some sleep."

"You had me worried for a second, come on I'll walk you to your quarters so you can get some rest. The Admiral would have my hide if I let anything happen to you."

I smiled and then out of pure whim I gave him a hug and kissed him on the cheek. "I hope Thrawn knows what an amazing man and even more amazing friend you really are."

"I'm sure he does." Voss said half embarrassed by my sudden display of affection. He untangled himself from me and continued to see me to my quarters.

Once I was alone I made myself a cup of tea down settled down to watch one of my Holloway holo-dramas feeling humbled by the kindness of everyone around me. I was only half aware of what was playing on the screen because my mind was racing with all manner of thoughts. It had been troubling to hear Voss refer to my unborn child as the heir to the Empire; I found the very idea unsettling. I rubbed my belly gently wondering how people could make such grand assumptions about a child that had not yet even been born.

"You have no idea little man. If you were smart you'd stay put where it's warm and safe." I murmured softly. I waited to see if he would kick me in response but he was quiet, as if he were agreeing with my advice. Suddenly I realised I was exhausted and decided to go to bed instead of dozing in the chair in front of the holonet screen.

It took me a long time to fall asleep. In spite of being tired I was restless and could not stop my brain from buzzing at a million parsecs a second. I was glad that Thrawn would be returning to the base in a few

days, his presence calmed me down. Being able to see and touch him made all the difference. He would tell me my fears were unfounded, his physical presence more soothing than any reassurances ever could be. I focused on these thoughts, trying to imagine that he was with me instead of light years away working out how best to bring the galaxy back under Imperial rule. Sleep, when it eventually came to me, did not bring any peace.

*I knew I was dreaming but I was powerless to stop it. The floor beneath my bare feet was cold, black stone and the room I was in was horribly familiar to me. I walked out of the darkened turbo lift into the Emperor's observation chamber.*

*"Welcome back young Merlyn." A soft voice whispered. "I have been waiting for you."*

*I shivered and wrapped my arms around my body. The long night dress was tight over my very swollen belly, the baby was due any day and I was feeling slow, heavy and swollen. "Why am I here?" I asked wearily.*

*"You bring me my new protégé." The shadowed figure sitting on the throne said smugly.*

*I shook my head. "No." I placed my hands protectively over my belly.*

*The figure moved so that the sliver of light from outside shone on his face and I gasped. It wasn't the emperor that I had known but someone much younger, much stronger and far more virile. This was no weak old man devastated by his constant use of dark side power this man was a predator in the prime of his life.*

*"You carry that child for me." He said arrogantly.*

*I shook my head but remained frozen to the spot I stood on. I could not move for fear. As if he sensed this, my baby kicked hard enough to hurt and I gasped at the pain of it. "No, this child is not yours, not now not ever."*

*The young version of the Emperor got up from his throne like a hunting tiger who just spotted the perfect prey. "I beg to differ, my dear. You, the daughter of a Kaffir jedi and a clone warrior, have powers unattainable by normal force users that are of great value. Now this child, a cross between your genetic code and one of the brightest minds in the galaxy, will be a force to be reckoned with. I will have him as my own apprentice and train him and he will rule this galaxy with me, and help accomplish what your alien lover's pathetic attempts cannot. Your child*

*will be the heir to this empire that I have so long searched for and as of yet not yet been able to attain."*

*"You know what Thrawn is trying to do, you know but you just sit here and watch?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "And now you want my baby to help you? You are a selfish, power hungry bastard and you always were. You should be working with Thrawn instead of sitting here planning these ridiculous schemes."*

*"He is a fool." The Emperor spat. "He cannot grasp what it takes to rule this galaxy, he cannot replace me."*

*I stepped back from the jealousy I heard in the man's voice. "Then why not help him?"*

*"I do not need his help." He spat, "I have all I need right here." He stepped off the podium and walked towards me.*

*I wanted to move but fear rooted me to the spot. He was taller than I ever remembered and his features would have been considered handsome had it not been for the cruelty etched on them. He walked around me as though I were a prized possession in one of his private art collections and then he placed a hand on my belly. I felt the child kick again and it hurt.*

*"Don't touch me." I pushed his hand away from me and mentally tried to calm the baby down.*

*He chuckled then grasped my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "You are so lovely." He said softly, "I always regretted that I did not make you one of my concubines instead of allowing you to tryst with that blue skinned alien who thought he was better than everyone around him. And," He added, "It was a great mistake to allow your talents go to waste under that half mechanical monster you seemed to adore for no good reason and now you are mine. That you kept your talents from me for as long you did was the only thing that saved you from being brought to me sooner." He smiled but it never made it to his eyes, "You should have been mine then and now you are."*

*"Yours?" I tried to move away from him but he held my arms tightly. "No, never. My heart does not belong to you and neither does my body or my baby."*

*"Your lover is dead, the galaxy is mine for the taking and you will stand by my side."*

*I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. "No, you're wrong! Thrawn lives and you are the one who is dead, this is not happening. This is not real!"*

*I wasn't expecting what came next. I wasn't expecting him to grab me or kiss me brutally. I wasn't expecting to feel the terrible power of the dark-side emotions which flowed over me like water threaten to drown me. I did not know how to handle the sudden rush of heat and lust that rolled over me in waves. I writhed to get out of his grasp.*

*"No!" I began to struggle and scream at the same time. I could feel the baby kicking violently and the pain it was causing was almost unbearable. "No, no, no, no!" I kept saying over and over.*

*The emperor pulled at me so that I faced him and gave me a terrible grin, "Very well if you will not comply then I will take the child and you will die leaving him without a mother."*

*I stopped struggling to stare at him in horror. "No! You can't do that!"*

*"You foolish little girl you have no idea of the power of the dark side!" He growled and with that he drew back his hand and before I could stop him he pushed me hard enough to make me lose my balance.*

*I screamed as I fell backwards to the ground trying to ward off the Emperor's attack. He knelt at my side, pinning me to the floor with one hand pressed on my shoulder. "It's a pity you were spoiled by Thrawn's touch and Vader's stupidity. You would have made the perfect mate to stand at my side." He said softly, caressing my face with tenderly, "But now your child alone will have to suffice." And with that he plunged his other hand deep into my belly and began to rip my baby out of my womb.*

I woke up screaming, clutching my belly in terror. For the first few moments I struggled to be free of the nightmare's grip, gasping for breath. The pain and the fear I had known were still too fresh for me to understand that I had not left it behind in the dream world. Slowly it dawned on me that the pain in my abdomen was real.

"No...." I whispered in disbelief as a new cramp shot through me, vice like and agonizing. It took my addled brain a few seconds more to realise that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

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I scrambled out of bed and immediately doubled over in agony because felt as though some giant hand had reached deep into my abdomen and was squeezing as hard as it could. I gasped, fighting down

the need to scream while trying not to panic. I had the presence of mind to grab my comm-link as I activated the med-alert bracelet the doctor had given me. By the time I made it to the fresher I was more scared than I could ever remember being.

I curled up in a ball on the floor protecting my baby or at least trying to. When my comm beeped I activated it, listening to the Doctor's voice. He seemed very far away. I had no idea what he was saying to me. In a voice that sounded ragged to my ears I told him to come quickly, that something was very wrong and that he had better hurry. Everything was a blur and when he and the med droid arrived. I was not sure what was real and what wasn't. I heard the door to our quarters open and I heard his voice call my name. It was the med-droid who found me first and alerted Doctor Thracer. He knelt on the floor beside me and did a cursory exam. He didn't say anything, he just gave orders to the med-droid hovering at his side quietly. The small scanner in his hand beeped and he read the information it gave him without comment or change in his expression.

"Okay Merly we're going to get you to the medlab." He said gently as he and the droid helped me up to the hover-chair he had with him.

"My baby...?"

"I want you to breathe slowly; can you do that for me?" He asked calmly without answering my question.

I nodded and tried to do as he asked but the pain kept getting in the way. "What's wrong? What's happening?"

He lied to me to try and keep me calm, "I can't say for certain until I get a more detailed scan, I need to get you to the med-lab now."

I was terrified and Doctor Thracer's avoidance of my questions was more frightening than anything else. By the time we reached the med lab I was in tears and irrational with fear. The transfer from the hover chair to the exam bed was awkward and when I realised then that there was blood on my dress any grip I had on my panic was lost.

"Merlyn, you need to breathe and I need you to calm down, I know you're scared and I know it's difficult to do but you have to try. I don't want to give you any sedatives until I have a clear idea of what is happening so please try to breathe and try not to panic." His voice was calm, careful and utterly terrifying.

"But I'm bleeding." I looked at him in horror as if he could not see this for himself. An irrational part of my mind wondered if the Emperor in my dream had somehow been real and in trying to tear my baby from my womb with his bare hands was responsible for what was

happening now but when I looked at my abdomen all I saw was smooth, unblemished skin.

“I know.” He said in a serious tone of voice all the while never stopping what he was doing. “Have you felt the baby move today?”

“What?” I shook my head trying to process his question, trying to remember. “Yes, maybe?” Suddenly I wasn’t so sure. I couldn’t think straight, “I don’t know. I thought he kicked earlier but maybe not, it felt strange but it was hard to tell...I don’t know.”

He nodded. “Was there any spotting, anything unusual at all?”

“No spotting but unusual?...I don’t...I don’t...,” I shook my head, panic was clouding my ability to think straight. “I don’t know, no I don’t think so.” I was suddenly so afraid. “I just felt off today but I thought it was normal.”

He nodded, “Well an off day isn’t unusual, especially given the circumstances that you live with here.” He said calmly, “I meant did you have any unusual pains?”

“No... well my back hurt but I thought that was just me...oh no...I should have come to you but I didn’t want to be a pest...this is my fault, I should have....”

He didn’t let me finish my sentence. “No, you did nothing wrong.”

“But this isn’t right, is it?” My voice trembled.

He looked at me for a moment but he didn’t say anything and I understood through his silence that my worst nightmare was coming true.

“It’s too soon,” I shook my head in denial, “It’s too early.”

“Yes.” He replied all the while never pausing in what he was doing.

“Can you stop this?” I asked as the med droid at his side helped me to undress and redress in a gown that tied at the back.

He did not answer my question. He just gestured for me to lie down. And I did so I winced as another wave of pain undulated through my abdomen. He set the auto scan in motion, the expression on his face was both neutral and grim all at the same time. I stared up at the ceiling, wiping the tears off my face trying to will myself to wake up except I was awake and there was nothing I could do about it. A sudden and tearing sensation and the terrible need to push made me cry out in pain. I struggled to sit up and was shocked when I did to see red spreading quickly beneath me on the sheet.

“Doc?” My voice sounded so small and far away to my ears that I wasn’t even sure it was me that was speaking.

He swore under his breath. “Prep room one now!” He barked at the medical droid while guiding me to lie back down. Now he was no longer calm, now he was agitated and worried. The tension in the room had ramped up several notches.

“How bad?” I looked up into his face as he worked and saw the answer to my unasked question in his eyes when he glanced away from the readout to look at me.

“I’m sorry.” He said gently as he prepared a hypospray. “You need surgery right now.”

“No, please no...” I shook my head and began to fight against him as I succumbed to my panic. No amount of words, gentle or firm, from him could calm me down. He did the only thing left to him so that he could work, he sedated me fully. I felt the warmth of the drug spider its way into my system and within a few seconds the bright medlab lights, noisy machines and the hovering droids slid away into a dark void along with any hope I might have had that this would turn out okay.

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The world came back to me in bits and pieces, the steady bleep of a machine, the hum of a droid’s servos and the swish of the main door opening and closing. I let the sounds wash over me. Slowly I became aware of voices speaking in low, hushed tones near me but I my eyelids were so heavy I could not open them.

“How is she?” It was a woman’s voice, Syal’s voice.

“She’s doing well all things considered.” The doctor answered her. He sounded tired.

“What happened? Voss was not specific in details, he just said it was an emergency.”

He sighed, “She went into preterm labour with complications that required emergency surgery.”

“The baby?”

“There was no chance. He was stillborn. There was nothing I could have done for him.”

“Oh no.” Syal’s voice was full of sorrow. “She’s going to be devastated.”

“You’re her best friend. I thought it might be good if someone other than me was here when she woke up.”

I listened to the words being spoken around me but they didn't really sink in. I was still too dopey to register everything that had happened but I knew I had lost the baby.

"Will she be ...alright?"

"As I said, there were some complications and she lost a lot of blood but she will make a full recovery physically. How's she's going to cope mentally, Syal, I can't tell you." He sounded terribly sad.

"Does Thrawn know yet?"

"I sent word to the *Chimaera* as soon as she came out of surgery. He was already en-route to the base; he will be here as soon as he can."

"Can I see her?"

"Don't expect much." He said. "She's heavily sedated."

The curtain around the bed moved and I felt the warmth of someone's hand taking mine in theirs. "Merly?"

I moved my head and opened my eyes a little to see Syal sit next to the bed. I opened my mouth to speak but Syal hushed me.

"Shhh," She whispered, stroking my hair.

"Syal?"

"Just rest, everything will be okay." She said quietly, telling me the lies that all best friends tell when nothing would ever be alright again. So I closed my eyes and allowed myself to fall backwards into the abyss what ever sedatives were still in my system, comforted by the touch of her hand.

Time spun outwards, allowing me small, strange glimpses of a reality I didn't fully understand. A dream world stole me away but nothing I saw made sense. I awoke feverish and delirious with some sort of infection. Pain and sorrow mingled with delusion and resentment leaving me bewildered and unable to stay coherent. The doctor, the med droids, as well as what felt like too many other people, hovered around me but it was all white noise and a blur. I knew that I wasn't well and people were worried but I did not care. The drugs I was being fed intravenously swept all the anxiety and fear away leaving only a strange sense of being out of time and space.

The next time I woke the fever had broken and my mind was clear. Everything that had happened came flooding back and the memory of it was excruciating. My hand went to my abdomen and I choked back a sob.

"I'm here, you're safe."

I turned my head to see Thrawn sitting near the bed, half in the

shadows. He had been watching me sleep and by the looks of him he had been there for some time. He was out of uniform and he looked tired. He got up and sat on the bed by my side. He stroked my face with the backs of his fingers.

"How are you feeling?"

"Empty." I said, "Exhausted, and thirsty."

"The last part I can help you with." He said as he poured me a cup of water and helped me sit up to drink it. When I was done he set the cup aside and, pulling the chair closer, sat back down in it. There was a long silence I didn't know how to fill it. It felt to me that Thrawn was also unsure of how to proceed. I looked into his eyes wondering if hated me, if he blamed me for what happened.

"I am so sorry." I whispered when I could no longer stand the heavy quiet.

Thrawn shook his head. "You have no need to apologise. This was not your fault. Thomas said the problem lay in incompatible genetics; the baby's heart stopped hours before you started to miscarry. There was nothing you or he could have done to change that." His jaw muscles tightened as he clenched his teeth. "You are lucky that it was not worse. If you had waited before calling for help things could have gone very badly for you."

I heard his words but they were meaningless. "I was his mother, he was growing inside of me I should have known something was wrong, I should have seen it coming. I should have protected him."

"How?" Thrawn asked, clearly puzzled by my words.

"All those terrible dreams I had, they were clues...."

Thrawn sat back from me and scrubbed at his face with his hands. "They were dreams nothing more. You are not a seer or a goddess with infallible powers. You are...." But I didn't let him finish.

"I was his mother." I said again as if it would make any difference.

Thrawn nodded, "Yes and I was his father and I, too, was powerless to prevent this tragedy." He spoke quietly. I looked away from him fighting back a sudden anger I didn't understand. He reached over and gently guided my chin so that I faced him again. "I am also sorry that I was not here for you. I am so sorry you had to go through all of this alone. We both feel loss, we are both mourning. Our child is dead, yes, but none of this is your fault." The sorrow in his voice was real and painful to hear.

"Our child is dead." My voice shook as I repeated Thrawn's

words. It hit me then and I could not stop the terrible knot of pain that suddenly stuck in my gut. I felt as though I could not breathe and clutched at my chest gasping for air. I felt as though I were drowning.

Thrawn shifted again to sit on the bed so he could pull me to him and hold me tightly. His hand held my head to his chest while he rubbed my back with the other. "I know." He said quietly.

I wanted to cry but I couldn't. All my emotions caught in my throat and I could not let them go. "I can't... I can't...." I gasped, "I can't...."

His hand never stopped caressing my back as I hyperventilated. "Breathe out slowly, just breathe."

I shook my head trying to get the words out, trying to find release for the terrible anguish bottle-necked within me. "I can't...." I couldn't finish any sentence I started. The ache of loss was overwhelming but there was no way to let it go.

Thrawn kissed the top of my head as he pulled me even tighter. "I know tekari, give it time, just give it time."

He held me in silence until my breathing returned to normal and I began to drift back to sleep, laying me gently back against the pillows, handling me as though I were made of fragile glass. "Rest, I will be here when you wake up. I promise."

I nodded, closing my eyes, feeling him shift off the bed and move away. The curtain moved as he closed it behind him to give me privacy.

"Thomas, how long does she need to stay here?"

There was a moment of quiet. "I see no reason why she cannot return to your quarters in the morning. It will do her good to get out of this medlab to a more private, comfortable place." There was another moment of quiet and then the doctor asked, "Was there something else?"

"I'm moving the time frame the Wayland project ahead. I need you to finish what we started tonight so that we can move on to stage two as soon as possible."

"Tonight? You cannot be serious?" Doctor Thracer asked.

"The schedule has changed. The priorities have changed. I need you to set it up now with no more discussions and no more arguments. I understand your feelings on this matter but they are irrelevant. The current project must end and the new one started before I return to the *Chimaera* at all costs." Thrawn's voice was low and hard.

"And when will that be?"

"Just as soon as I have concluded my business here, Thomas." Thrawn's reply was sharp but the doctor's tone matched it.

"And Merlyn, is she part of that business? Have you told her what is going to happen? What you have planned? What about her future? She needs you now more than ever."

"I am aware of her needs and her future is not your concern at this time, her health is." Thrawn's voice was as hard as stone. "When the time is right she will be apprised of the situation."

"She has friends on Coruscant. I hope your plans include keeping them alive too because right now the last thing that young woman needs is another loss."

"I am well aware of that Thomas and you need to learn to trust me." Thrawn replied icily, "Now you have your orders, please carry them out."

If there was an answer I never heard it as sleep mercifully claimed me.

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Thrawn was as good as his word and when I woke up he was there at my side. With his help I got dressed and returned to our quarters, moving slowly through the corridors. I was aware of the pitying stares from the people we passed. The news had spread that I had lost the baby and everyone knew. I felt as though I had let not just Thrawn and our unborn child down but everyone on the base who had placed hope on the birth of this child as well. It was a heavy guilt that weighed on my shoulders and I didn't know what to do with it.

When we reached our quarters I was never been more grateful to hear a door close behind me than at that moment. As I looked around the rooms, I found it strange how everything was the same yet utterly different. How in the blink of an eye the world had shifted sideways and nothing would ever be as it was. I had mourned deeply after the death of my father but that pain seemed strangely less intense to the terrible emptiness I experienced now. I felt the gentle touch of Thrawn's hand on my back guiding me to sit down. I looked at him, moving as though I were sleep walking through some terrible holo-drama I couldn't turn off.

"Will you be alright here alone? Shall I call Syal and see if she can spend some time with you?" He asked.

I shook my head hugging my arms around my body. The last thing I wanted was to have to be social in any way shape or form. "No, I will be fine." I told him.

“If you need anything....” He started but I shook my head again.

“Just go, I know you’re busy. I don’t need a babysitter.” I told him flatly. “I just need to be left alone.”

He reached out to caress my face then but I side stepped him and moved away. I did not want to be touched or comforted. “Please don’t.” I whispered, wearing my sorrow like a shroud.

He nodded, withdrew and without further word left me to my own devices.

In the quiet aftermath of his departure the quarters we shared seemed claustrophobic and oppressive. The memory of what had happened was still too fresh, too great. I went into the small suite of rooms he had first given when I moved to Nirauan and entered, locking the adjoining door behind me. I had known loss my whole life but nothing had prepared me for this and I had no idea how to cope with it.

Two days passed and in that time friends came to see me although I could not really fathom why. Their expressions of sympathy fell on my ears like snow on an open field in the middle of nowhere. I didn’t hear them and I learned to hate the strange pitying look in their eyes as they tried to say how sorry they were. After a while I refused to answer the door and eventually the visiting stopped.

Doctor Thracer showed up to check up on me at Thrawn’s request and told me in detail what had happened and why. In the end, after telling me it was not my fault for the third time he just said, sadly, that sometimes these things just happen, and more often than not there was no singular reason.

“The very fact you were able to conceive and carry for as long as you did is an excellent sign.” He added. “We learned a great deal from this pregnancy and next time will know what to watch for.”

I looked at him, “Next time....” I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to go through this again.

“Yes, next time.” His words were forthright, kind and well meaning but they flowed through and over me. I could hear him speaking but none of it made any real sense. I knew he was worried, I could see it in his eyes but it all felt very far removed from what ever reality I now found myself in.

He paused for a moment and then he informed me that body of my son had been cremated and kept safe until I decided what to do with them. I just stared at him as though he were suddenly speaking a language I had never heard before.

Thrawn, who had remained quietly at my side for the doctor’s visit, kissed the top of my head gently as though that would make everything all better. “He did this at my request tekari, in accordance with Dantassi burial laws so that we may perform the rite of O’kuri’dai in the appointed time.”

I frowned at Thrawn’s words. I had only witnessed the O’kuri’dai once before. When a young couple I had been friends with at the enclave on Hjal had given birth to a still born child. It had been heartbreaking to watch as the parents had held the ashes of their baby’s body in their palms for the wind to carry off. It was a way of giving back to the earth to allow for a rebirth at a later date. I had clung to Navaari as we had watched the young couple struggle with their grief yet the ceremony had given them closure. I did not want this.

I shook my head at Thrawn. “No, no I don’t think so.” I whispered.

“Merlyn, you must....” Thrawn started but stopped when the doctor interrupted.

“Admiral, a word?”

The two men glanced at each other then headed to the other end of the room to discuss the current topic at hand, me. I listened to them talking about me in whispers as though I were a ghost in the room.

“I’m worried about her, now is not the time to discuss funeral arrangements.”

“As am I, but the O’kuri’dai must be performed by both parents, it is tradition.”

“Tradition or not, now is not the time, look at the state she is in.” The doctor was angry.

“I can see that Thomas but you know what she’s like, she internalizes everything and shuts the rest of us out. She will have to go to the end of this darkness in order to get past it.”

“And if she doesn’t? As I recall the last time that happened and you waited to intervene it didn’t go so well.”

“Yes, however the circumstances were very different. At that time I was also not in a very good state of mind and I was unable to help her.” Thrawn’s sigh was loud and heavy.

“And you are able to help her now? You are barely here and when you are you spend most of that time in the subbasement working on your projects and experi....”

“Do not start that here.” Thrawn’s voice was soft and dangerous as he cut the doctor off mid word. “I have responsibilities I cannot ignore no matter what the circumstances. You would do well to remember that you have sworn secrecy and I count on your discretion. You are also the only person capable of aiding me so for the sake of peace between us do not bring this up again unless we are alone.”

“You should tell her.” Doctor Thracer hissed. “And you should talk with her, be with her.”

“I know you are worried, as am I but I would prefer, in this case, to give her the time she needs. Now she has friends here, she is loved and cherished. I would prefer not to force the issue and neither should you.”

“Well then, I will keep an eye on her while you are away.” Doctor Thracer said but he sounded skeptical. “But I disagree with your assessment of her ability to deal with this.”

“Your disagreement is noted.” Thrawn snapped, then relented, “I think even she did not realise how much she wanted this child.” Thrawn said softly. “Children have been a difficult subject for us, the timing has always been an issue, being a couple in secret never helped and she never thought she could conceive a child with me and now this....” His words had faded off as he seemed at a loss for what to say.

“The good news is she did conceive. If it happened once, it will happen again but right now her body needs to heal and so does her spirit. She’s been through so much already and I....”

I had turned around then to look at them both. “For sarlacc’s sake, if you want to discuss me with out including me in the conversation then you can bloody well go and do it somewhere else.” I snapped.

They stared at me for a moment and then left the room. Whatever else was discussed I was not privy to it, nor did I much care. From then on I refused to let anyone else into my quarters, not even Syal who came repeatedly to see me.

In the end Thrawn performed the Rite of O’kuri’dai, alone and in private, sharing his son’s ashes with the wind. Neither the Dantassi nor the Chiss believed that the soul entered the body before birth so the child had no name, it was a broken vessel which needed to be given back to the universe it came from. There would be no grave to visit, no place to make the child’s passing. On Tatooine there would have been a burial and a marker but here there would be only memory. I did not go with Thrawn to perform this rite even though he had asked me to and it widened the gulf between us further. I couldn’t face it because that meant facing the truth

of what had happened and I wasn’t there yet. I wasn’t sure I ever would be.

Afterwards, when Thrawn was on the base, I barely saw him. He was busy with projects he kept quiet about and the base was in a strange state of flux There were under currents, that had I been more aware, would have worried me a little. I probably should have paid more attention but I was so wrapped up in my own grief that I failed to see what was going on, much less care.

Thrawn tried his best with the time he had to be there for me but I just shut him out preferring to sit in my own room in the quiet and the dark. We would have fought if I had had the energy or the will but instead I shrugged him off, cringing when he tried to touch me, becoming withdrawn when he tried to talk sense into me. I did not understand how he could continue to work as though nothing had happened. I felt a terrible and inexplicable sense of betrayal which I let him know.

“It is my job, tekari.” He said simply. “I cannot stay permanently based on Nirauan. I am the leader of these fleets, these men and women. They rely on me and I cannot just let all of that go, no matter what I feel.”

“Our child is dead and you act as though nothing has happened.” I told him flatly.

“No, I do my work and I mourn in private.” He explained. “I am leading a war. I cannot afford to appear weak in any form so tell me how should I go about it Merlyn? How?”

I shook my head, “I don’t know.” I whispered.

He drew a deep breath, “I need to know that you will be okay while I am away because as it stands right now I am concerned. You look like a ghost.”

I gave him a look, “Doctor Thracer says I am just fine.”

“No, what he told you was that physically you are healthy but that was several days ago and since then I doubt he would come to the same conclusion if you were to actually go and talk to him as I have suggested.” He replied, “You barely eat. When you are not asleep you sit alone, locked in your private rooms and I do not know how to help you. You will not let me share your grief and I cannot drop what I am doing to sit along side you in the dark.”

“How can I share this?” I asked, “You cannot possibly know what it is like to carry life and then to lose it, you have no idea!” My anger spilled into my words like poison.

He regarded me for a long time, his expression closed and unreadable and then he nodded, "Yes you are right. I have no idea of what you experienced or how it feels." He drew a deep breath, "I can only tell you of my own sorrow. I can only tell you that you are not the only one here who lost something precious and you are not the only person grieving but none of this is enough is it?"

"So what? Do you expect me to just get over this like you? Do expect me to be emotionless and cold? I am not a machine!" I avoided his question altogether in favour of picking a fight and being mean.

He didn't take the bait and answered me softly. "No, no I do not. I expect you to share your grief with me, not shut me and everyone else who cares for you out so that you can become a shadow swallowed whole by this terrible thing that happened. You need to weep and mourn for the loss but then you need to get past it and move on. It is as if you also died and I do not know what to do about it."

I turned my back on him but he was short on time and patience. He caught my arm gently and turned me around to face him again; he caressed my face tenderly and said. "Nothing and no one can replace what we lost but there will be other children, I promise you." He said.

It might have been the right thing to say but it wasn't what I wanted to hear. I pulled out of his grasp angrily, "Go back to your war games and leave me the hell alone." I said coldly and walked out of the room to lock myself in the fresher where I sat for hours willing my tears to come but they never did. It was truly as if, with the death of the baby I had carried, I too had died.

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Depression ate at my soul like a black hole and I gave in to its seductive lure. It was easy not to feel anything, in fact I welcomed the blankness. I spent most of my time asleep or dozing in the bedroom with the shades down and the lights off. I lost all sense of time and space and knew only a strange half world full of twisted dreams and unavoidable guilt with nothing in between. I had become the void.

Thrawn tried to break through my self imposed exile with kindness and patience but I shut him out at every turn, hating him for

everything without any valid reason. Eventually he left me alone but it did not escape my notice that, for the moment, his current work kept him on the base and close by. We might have gone on like that forever had it not been for Syal who decided, after nearly four weeks, that enough was enough.

She had come to see me many times but either I had simply not answered the door or Thrawn had turned her away. The last time she had argued with him, her words had sounded hard and angry through the walls, but he had been firm and I had been grateful. I could not face anyone least of all the one person on the base with several children and more sympathy than I could handle.

"She's worried." Thrawn had said after Syal had left, coming into the bedroom to stand leaning in the doorway.

"I don't care." My reply had been the same, always the same, sullen and dead.

"A'myshk'a...."

I had flapped my hand at him. "Do not start." I had snapped and then had returned to bed.

That had been three days ago and she had not come back since. Thrawn was at a loss with what to do with me and I just didn't care. We slept in the same bed because when I had tried to sleep in my own room he had gone ballistic and the fight had been exhausting. I had given in to his request because it was easier than fighting but the gulf between us was wider than the light years between Tatooine and Csilla.

Thrawn buried himself in his work and I tried hid in sleep but I tended to spend much of my time lying in the darkened bedroom lost in a daze of self loathing and guilt. I counted time around his coming and going so that I could prepare for him coming to bed by pretending to be asleep. So I was awake when the doorbell rang. I heard Thrawn move to answer it and strained to hear who was there and since we had already had our daily yelling match I could not imagine who would want to visit us.

"Good afternoon Syal." Thrawn said.

"Is she here?" She asked bluntly. I heard the door shut.

"She's sleeping. She's...." he never got to finish his sentence because she cut him off.

"She's always sleeping and I know for a fact that no one sleeps that much and I also know she wasn't sleeping a few hours ago because my sons and I were going to stop by and visit and we could hear the yelling half way down the hall. Now where the hell is she?"

“Syal, I told you she is sleeping.”

“In here?” She asked and then tried to open the bedroom door.

“It’s locked.”

“She does that when she wants to be left alone.”

“She’s been left alone enough.” Syal was angry. “It hasn’t done her any good.”

“What does that mean?” Thrawn asked coolly.

“It means that she’s not getting better, she’s depressed and she’s drowning in it. It’s been nearly four weeks since she miscarried and I’m worried sick about her. So should you be.”

“You think I am not worried?” Thrawn asked and I could hear the edge of anger underneath his voice.

“I think you are hiding in your work and avoiding the real issues at hand.”

“Which would be?”

“You both lost a child.”

“I am aware of that. What is your point?”

“My point is you don’t deal with it at all, neither of you do. You bury yourself in this war and what- ever insane projects you have going on the subbasements meanwhile Merlyn, who has never learned to deal with death properly, feels guilty about losing the baby and that guilt is killing her.”

“Guilt?”

I heard Syal sigh. “You are such an idiot, you have no idea.”

“No idea? What do you think I am doing here?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.”

“I am trying to help her.”

“By doing what?”

“Giving her space. Being here if she needs me.”

There was a pause before Syal spoke. “What she needs is for someone to actively take control of this situation. She’s a billion light years from her home and what’s left of her dysfunctional family. She just lost a baby, a baby she was told she would probably never have and you think you are helping her by leaving her alone?”

“It’s what she wants.”

“She doesn’t know what she wants right now, between her grief, her guilt and the deadly cocktail of hormones in her body she’s more screwed up than ever before. You, of all people, should know her track record with grief but you do not seem to learn.” Syal retorted angrily.

“What would you have me do then?” Thrawn’s words were clipped and tight.

“Open this damned door.” She banged on it for emphasis, making me jump, “You’re the base commander so I know you can override the lock.”

Thrawn did as Syal asked and I heard the door to the bedroom slide open. It was dark so Syal went to the windows and opened the blind letting the daylight spill in. I rolled over, away from the light and buried my head under the covers.

“Merly?”

“Go away.” I mumbled into the covers.

“Merly, please get up.” She asked gently, sitting on the bed beside me. I felt the touch of her hand as she stroked my hair. It was dirty. I couldn’t remember the last time I had washed it. “Merlyn, I’m not going away so please turn around and look at me.”

I heaved a huge sigh and did as she asked. She could not hide her shock at my appearance although she tried.

“I take it back,” she said to Thrawn, “You’re not just an idiot you’re a complete m....”

“I get the idea Syal.” Thrawn said quietly from his place by the door. “You don’t need to say it again.”

She got up off the bed and rounded on him with a fury I would never have expected from her. “She looks like hell. How could you have not noticed? When was the last time she ate or bathed? How could you have been so blind?” He drew a deep breath but she did not let him say a word. “Go make yourself useful, make tea and fetch her something to eat, something light. Take your time, I think a bath is in order here and I want some time to talk with her before you get back.”

“Tea and food it is.” He said through tight lips and then, with a glance at me, left quietly.

Syal vanished for a moment and I heard the sound of water running. When she came back she had my bathrobe in her hands and without warning me she pulled back the covers. I complained as cold air hit my bare legs but she ignored me and pulled me up.

“Get up and go have a bath. You smell like a jawa.” She bullied.

“Syal go away.”

“No I will not so stop saying that to me. Enough is enough. Now will you get up before I drag you out of this bed and toss you in the tub.”

I gave her a look.

“Don’t try me Merly, I wrestle young boys into submission, you’re a lightweight by comparison.”

With a sigh of defeat I took the robe from her outstretched hand and did as she asked. There did not seem to be any point in fighting with her and I didn’t have the energy. The bath filled up and bubbled, scenting the fresher like pascha flowers. I stared at it until Syal turned the water off and nudged at me.

“Don’t make me undress you like I do with my boys either.” She said.

I turned to look at her. “Why are you here?”

“Because I love you, because my sons love and adore you and we are all very, very worried. Now get in the bath and get clean so that you can start smelling like a girl again.” She left the fresher and went back into the bedroom. “Trust me, you need this.” She yelled as she began to open the windows.

I nodded at no one in particular, slipped off my night clothes and then stepped into the tub. I gasped at the sensation of the hot water on my skin. I had forgotten how nice it felt to sit in a warm bath. I had forgotten a lot of things.

“Too hot?” She asked as she walked back in to the fresher.

“No,” I said. “It’s fine.”

“Lean forward I’ll wash your hair, it feels like you have a year’s worth of grease in it.” I did as she asked and gave myself into her hands. She was gentle and motherly. It was somehow comforting and frightening all at the same time. I didn’t want to be loved or cared for but I didn’t fight it as she washed my hair for me. I was a grown woman but in that moment I felt like a child in her hands.

“I’m sorry about the baby Merly. We all are but you can’t hide away like this.”

I didn’t say anything as she poured water over my head to rinse out the soap. I just sat in the hot bubbly water with my knees drawn to my chest hugging them tightly.

“What happened was terrible, I know how you must feel....”

I snapped my head to look at her. Water sprayed from my hair in a silvery arc. “You know how I feel? How can you possible know how I feel? How? You have three beautiful, healthy children. So how the hell can you tell me you know how it feels to lose a baby like this?”

She sighed and drew a long thoughtful breath. “Yes, I have three healthy boys but the very first time I got pregnant I miscarried. I was

twenty weeks along, I was alone at home and Tir was away. I have an idea of how it feels.”

I felt a sudden deep, deep self loathing slice through me for being so mean. “Syal I’m....”

She cut me off. “You didn’t know, I’ve never told anyone so don’t feel guilty about this, you already have enough guilt choking you to death as it is. I didn’t tell you this to add to it. I told you because I wanted you to know I get it, I do understand what it is like to miscarry and lose a baby, to lose that hope. You are not alone. Maybe I don’t know exactly what you are going through, no one can but I share the experience.”

I nodded listlessly and let her rinse my hair off. When she was done she stood up, drying her hands on a nearby towel.

“I’ll leave you to get out and get dressed. I am sure that man of yours has wasted as much time as he can without going mad and will be back any moment with tea and food.” And with that she vanished.

I submerged one more time under the water and relished the sensation of utter quiet then I heaved myself out of the bath and wrapped myself in the big towel Syal had left for me. I found some clean clothes and made my way to the sitting room where Syal and Thrawn were waiting. I looked from one to the other and sat next to Syal on the couch. She poured tea and handed me a cup, then she poured one for Thrawn and herself. Then she continued talking as though there had been no interruptions.

“Tir and I were newly weds when I learned I was pregnant. He was deployed when I got the test results but I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to worry him. I was new at being the wife of a renowned Imperial pilot. I felt it was a wife’s duty to be supportive and not do or say anything that would distract him from his work. He was supposed to be back before I hit my fourth month anyway and I wanted to surprise him with the good news. Instead I miscarried and it nearly tore us apart.”

Thrawn arched an eyebrow and glanced at me. “Syal, I’m sorry. I do not know what to say.”

“There isn’t anything to say.” Syal said. “It happened. It was devastating and it nearly wrecked our marriage because I was so wracked with guilt that I couldn’t talk to him about it and he didn’t know how to treat me, how to speak with me. I shut him out, spent far too much time alone because I felt guilty for not letting him know in time, I felt guilty for losing the baby, I felt guilty about everything and it damn near destroyed me.”

“I remember your wedding on the holonews but I never heard anything about you losing a baby and Soontir has never mentioned it.” Thrawn said gently.

“I was lucky enough to not be in any public place when it happened and I could afford a clinic that prided itself on privacy. Tir does not speak of it because he can’t. It is a hurt that cuts too deeply still. He felt betrayed I think but also he felt his own brand of guilt for not being there when it happened. He could not help or protect me when I needed it the most and for a man that’s a difficult situation to reconcile with.” Syal replied matter of factly.

Thrawn nodded as though he understood exactly what she was talking about. “How did you get through it?” He asked all the while looking at me.

“Eventually I got help, we got help and I started to talk about it. Then I, we, mourned and finally, when I was able to, I threw myself back into in my work.” She said quietly. It gets easier with time, not that you ever forget, but it gets easier ... in time.”

I shook my head. The weight of the loss sat heavily on my shoulders. “I just ...” I shook my head for a moment, “I keep thinking there might have been something else I could have done.”

“Why?” She asked pointedly.

“Why...?” I echoed her word as though it were an answer.

“Why do you feel you could have stopped this?” She asked.

“Women miscarry all the time, it happens far more frequently than anyone wants to believe and you had an especially high risk pregnancy, why should you have been able to change any of that? You were already doing everything possible to safe guard the baby anyway. None of this is your fault.”

I shrugged unable to answer.

“Guilt will destroy you and it’s useless, that much I’ve learned. Why won’t you let us help? We want to be there for you, help you through this and you shut us all out, all of us. My boys love you and they ask every day how you are doing and they want to see you. They miss you, they want to somehow help you after what happened but you don’t let anyone near you any more.”

I felt a lump of sorrow deep in my throat. “They know?”

“Their father is an Imperial pilot; they live in a world where death is a possibility. When they asked what was wrong and what had happened I did not lie to them. They knew that you were pregnant; you know that,

you involved them in your pregnancy. They laid their hands on your belly to feel the baby move. When they asked what had happened, because news on this base travels faster than light speed, I told them the truth, I told them that the baby you were carrying died. They understand what death means in as much as they can. They know your baby is gone and they know you are sad.”

“Is that what you told them? That I am sad?”

“Aren’t you?” Syal asked clearly confused.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t feel sad.” I said, “I don’t seem to be able to feel anything. I feel dead.”

“Dead?” Thrawn’s head tilted as he asked. I glanced at him and then went back to looking at Syal.

“Did you cry?” I asked, “When you miscarried?”

“Yes, all the time for almost a month. I couldn’t stop.”

“Well I can’t.” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I cannot cry. I’ve tried but it’s as if someone has taken a mole miner and gutted me from the inside out. I feel nothing except a terrible blackness.” I sighed as I tried to explain, “Every death I have experienced I mourned. I cried, I was angry and it hurt, it hurt so much sometimes I didn’t know what to do with it but it was a feeling, you know I actually felt something but this...I don’t understand. I have never felt so empty before.” I shrugged. “It’s as if I stepped out of the normal universe into someplace else where there are no emotions, no feelings nothing just some strange and surreal void.”

“Why have you not told me this before A’myshk’a?” Thrawn asked quietly.

I looked at him. “What is there to tell? I don’t know how to get past this and you can’t help. It is as if I am stuck in some sort of vacuum and you cannot possibly understand so what is the point in trying to explain it?”

“Thomas would have helped, you could have gone to speak with him if you felt I was not the right person to talk to.” He said. There was a dreadful pain under his words.

“There are no drugs in the galaxy to make me cry.” I said crossly.

“No, I guess there aren’t and it actually shouldn’t surprise anyone you feel this way.” Syal nodded.

Thrawn gave her a look which said ‘explain’.

Syal glanced at him but turned to speak to me, “Given the number of terrible losses and awful things that have happened in your life it seems to me that it’s no wonder your brain and body have just shut this out. How much can one person endure? You lost your mother, then your identity by learning you were adopted and that your birth parents were a jedi and a clone soldier who killed the woman that gave birth to you I mean that alone is a complete mind-fuck, then you lost Lord Vader whom against all odds you were close to and liked by, then your father died thanks to someone you once cared about. You thought you had somehow killed your uncle and your friend Navaari and on top of it all for the last decade plus you’ve been dealing with a psychopathic moron that you used to love, who you ended up having to kill on a forsaken planet after crash landing because he refused to take no for an answer. And for all of this you seem to somehow feel guilty, as though it were all your fault. For the love of all Corellia Merlyn it’s no wonder you’ve gone off the deep end. There is only so much guilt a person can shoulder and I think you’ve cornered the market.”

I didn’t know how to answer her but I couldn’t deny what she had said either.

“You need to talk to someone who could help you, maybe the doctor?” She suggested with a small shrug.

“And what’s he going to do? He can’t make me feel, he can’t make me suddenly change or all better, none of you can. There is no on-off switch for my emotions. You keep trying to get me to move on but move on to where? There is no place left for me to go. So what am I supposed to do?”

“Talk to us?”

“Talking doesn’t do anything.”

“Maybe you just need to start letting people in.” Syal said softly.

I stared at her as though seeing her for the first time. “Why?”

She opened her mouth to answer but then closed it again and looked to Thrawn as though he would have a better solution or a suitable answer for my question. Worry was etched on her face but it felt very far away to me, as though I were watching everything through transparasteel or as a holo-vid. As if none of it was happening or had happened directly to me. I wondered what would happen when this bubble I was in burst. I didn’t think that was something I actually wanted to be around for.

“Oh Merly,” She finally said softly, stroking a lock of damp hair off my face. She glanced at Thrawn and got up off the couch. “I’m going to

go check on my boys before they drive their babysitter completely mad. You,” she said talking to Thrawn, “see that she eats and drinks. I will be back in a bit to make sure neither of you have killed each other. Can I trust that won’t happen?”

“I believe you can.” Thrawn replied carefully never taking his eyes off me.

“Right, I will be back in an hour or so. If she’s gone back to the dark hole of a bedroom and that food’s not been touched I will be cross.”

Thrawn’s lips twitched slightly. “I will endeavour to avoid that, you are remarkably fierce.”

“I am the wife of Soontir Fel would you expect anything less?” She said as she left.

The silence in her wake was deafening. For a very long time I sat cradling the cup of tea while neither of us said a word. Then Thrawn broke the standoff. “I am so sorry.”

Why? You didn’t do anything.”

“Exactly.”

I frowned and sipped at the tea.

“I have been a consummate strategist for as long as I can recall but your methods, your way of dealing with things defies all logic. Just when I think I have an idea of how you react you do the opposite. I thought that you needed solitude and time alone to come to terms with this, that you would seek out your friends to find solace and comfort. This was a mistake on my part. I didn’t understand that you did not want comfort or kindness. I did not understand that you have been punishing yourself and that what you needed was absolution which is something I can’t give you, only you can do that. You have to forgive yourself, there is no one to blame for this especially not you.”

“How? How can I do that?”

“You have to let it go which is something you have never learned how to do. I should have understood, the signs have been there all along but I didn’t. I should have seen that you have been living with death your whole life, just as Syal said, and no one has taught you how to say goodbye. You have carried the weight of guilt since the death of your mother and you’ve never let that go, every time someone you care for dies this weight doubles. For reasons I cannot fathom you feel responsible for it. So listen to me, tekari, you are not to blame for the deaths of Lord Vader, your friend Cati or your mother and father just as you are not to blame for this miscarriage. Sometimes terrible things happen and there is nothing you

can do to prevent them. Please learn to forgive yourself and let this awful weight go before it destroys you once and for all.”

It was a truth I didn't want to hear but he knew me better than I knew myself. I set the empty cup on the table and without asking he refilled it for me but I let it sit there without picking it up. “Stop it.” I whispered. “Just leave me alone.”

“No, no I don't think so. I have listened to you and bowed to your requests for solitude but not any more.”

“Then what the hell do you want from me?” I asked.

“What I want is my bond-mate back. This ghost you've become, this shade who haunts this base.” He had shaken his head at a loss for words. The hardness on his face softened so that the hurt and worry he felt was plain to see. “I don't know how to help you. I can plan a war down to the finest detail but how to get past all these blocks you throw up escapes me. I am at a loss on how to fix this. I cannot turn back time and save you from this pain but if I could I would.”

“How does anyone fix this?” I asked gesturing loosely with my hand.

“Well, for a start you stop trying to hold in everything and stop acting as though the rest of the galaxy does not exist. You are not the only one who lost a child in this relationship and you are not the only one who feels that loss. You are surrounded by people who love you, who can help you but you refuse to let them. At the risk of sounding selfish, for me in this matter there is only you yet as you pull further and further away from me I find myself at a loss and I do not know what to do about it.”

I frowned, puzzled by his words.

He drew a deep breath and paused for a moment to explain what he meant. “I cannot discuss this with anyone under my command. I cannot openly show any feelings or sorrow so where does that leave me? Without you, I am left alone to deal with a grief I also do not have any experience with. You keep shutting me out and I do not have anyone else to turn to.”

“When have you ever needed to turn to anyone?” I asked feeling a subtle deep anger in my gut.

“You might be surprised to learn that I rely on many people. Chiss do not show their emotions in public which you know, but it does not mean we do not have emotions. I may have control over my feelings almost all of the time but even I struggle with this. I deal with it because I have to but the pain is there. Do not mistake my cool demeanour for lack of emotion.” He was angry. “I need you even though you refuse to see it.”

I just stared at him. “Since when have you ever actually needed me for anything other than warming your bed or looking pretty on your arm Za'ar?” The remark, which was meant to hurt, hit its mark fully and he sat back away from me the expression on his face suddenly hard and withdrawn.

“Do you think that is all you are to me?”

“I don't know what I am to you.” I said with a shrug, “I don't know what I am to anyone anymore.”

He opened his mouth to answer but then changed his mind instead he got up and paced around the room. After a few moments he spoke.

“From the first moment I ever laid eyes on you I knew there was something remarkable about you, the waif from Tatooine whom Vader had chosen to keep at his side. You were one contradiction after the other and that was an attraction I had not yet had the pleasure of at Palpatine's court. It did not take me long to understand that here was someone who didn't see me as alien, or strange or even as an outsider of lesser worth. You just saw me as rude. It was quite an eye opener I must admit. I had been called many things but rude was not one of them.” He paused to stare out of the window for a moment then he turned back to me.

“The attraction was there from the start I think, you're a beautiful woman but it takes more than just physical beauty to turn my head. You were like a painting I could not tear my eyes from, let alone understand and explain. You have a fire and a passion that is infectious as well as creates a powerful desire yet you see yourself as ordinary, even mousey. You love without condition, giving your whole heart and soul to people, even those who have done nothing to deserve such a gracious gift and yet you expect so little in return that it surprises you when someone does something nice. You are as fierce and as capable as any Chiss warrior yet there is a vulnerability and a fragility to you which touches me deeply creating a dreadful need to care and protect even when I know you do not wish it. You ask me what I need from you but I cannot define it in a few words. You bring out emotions in me I never knew existed for good and for bad. How else could I explain the insane jealousy I feel when other men vie for your affections or the irrational fear I feel when you suddenly vanish and something terrible happens to you. There is no way for me to describe the joy you bring when you smile, or the indescribable passions that engulf me when we bed each other. There are just too many ways in

which you have altered my life for the better for me to list so let it be enough to tell you that without you in my life I would be a lesser man. If I have made you think or feel that you do not matter to me then I am truly, truly sorry.”

I just stared at him. It was one of the longest speeches I had ever heard him make and the closest he had ever come to actually saying he loved me out loud. For the first time since losing the baby I felt an ache of sorrow that came from somewhere very deep down inside of me. I didn't like it and I didn't want it because I was certain that feeling empty would be far more preferable to the pain which was lurking beneath the surface.

He paused for a moment. “I am so very sorry.” He said again as if I had not heard it the first or the second time.

I got up off the couch and walked away from him.

“I'm sorry.” He said again.

I wheeled around suddenly angry. “Stop it.” I said. “Stop saying that.”

“No I will not because it needs to be said and you need to hear it.”

I snapped. “What I need is to be left alone. What I need is for the pity and the sympathy to stop. If I hear the words *I'm so sorry for your loss* one more time I will kill someone. They make it sound as though I misplaced the baby. He died. He's dead and gone. You just don't understand so please leave me the hell alone.” I said sounding far sulkier than I had intended.

“You think I do not understand loss? You think I do not understand *this* loss?”

“What I think is irrelevant.” I snapped turning to stare defiantly at him.

“Merlyn, I performed the O'kuri'dai alone.” He spoke softly. “Do you have any idea how difficult that was for me?” He paused, the muscles in his jaw clenching, “You should have been there with me, for our child, but you were not.”

I shook my head. I did not want to listen to this.

“You were not there to say goodbye and it's destroying you.” He waited to see if I would answer but I didn't so he continued. “As was tradition, I stood alone outside at dusk letting the ashes of our child brush through my fingers to vanish on the wind. I spoke the words to speed him on his way. He was a child born too soon; there was no soul to free only a

body to return to the universe so that the next time it will return healthy to house a soul and join our family.”

I trembled under the weight of his words. “Stop it.” I whispered. He did not.

“We should have been there together to do this but I was there alone. He must have been so very tiny because there were so little of him left for me to give back to the world.” He held out his hands as if he were back at that moment in time, staring at them with an expression I could not decipher. “Do you have any idea how that felt?” He almost whispered.

I swallowed down the sudden ache of pain mingled with shame and shook my head.

“Tekari, while I do not know what it must have been like for you to carry this baby then lose him too soon and in such an awful manner but I do know what it was like to perform that Dantassi death rite alone for our child. There have been many things in my life I have found difficult but that moment, that moment in time was one of the hardest.”

The knot I had been carrying inside of me suddenly seemed to explode. I could feel the pressure of all the sorrow I had stuffed down inside threatening to engulf me but still I didn't let it go. I turned my back to Thrawn and hugged my arms tightly around me as if that would help, struggling to keep myself together. In all this time I had wallowed in my grief never thinking about his because I had been the one to carry and lose the child. It had not occurred to me that he would feel so deeply about it.

“I'm sorry Merlyn.” He said again, “So please, please come back to me, I do not want to lose you.”

“Lose me?”

“It is as though you are willing yourself to die, as though you are somehow trying to kill yourself slowly.”

“I do not want to die.” I retorted a little too quickly because I wasn't sure he was wrong about what he had said.

“Really? It does not appear that you wish to live either.”

“Then tell me what there is to live for?” I asked suddenly closer to tears at that moment than I had been since the miscarriage. “Tell me, when everything, everyone I love dies what the hell am I supposed to live for?”

His expression softened as he shook his head. “I am not dead.” He said gently, “And I do not have plans to die any time soon so please stop counting me among the casualties already.”

“You are not dead yet.” My voice turned icy. “But I’ve seen your death and even if you do not believe my dreams I do. I dreamed my child would die and he did. Everything terrible that I have seen in my nightmares has happened. You keep repeating me you won’t leave me alone but you will, I know you will. So tell me, how do I live with this?”

“I will not abandon you to this darkness that’s swallowed you whole. I will not abandon you at all. I am right here and I have been right here all along. I am not going to leave you.” He shook his head.

“You will.” I said flatly. “I’ve seen it.”

“I take your dreams seriously tekari, but in the end, they are just dreams, your subconscious mind talking to you. I wish you would stop putting so much faith in such in something so intangible and start believing in me. You *must* trust me. I have things well in hand. There are many safeguards in place. I promise you this.”

I opened my mouth to speak but was interrupted when the door chime rang. I sighed as Thrawn let Syal in with her two elder boys.

“They wanted to make sure you were alright with their own eyes.” Syal explained.

Looking at them knocked the breath out of me. I had not expected her to bring her boys. Davin stood back, always watchful and quiet, ever the more serious but his little brother was not so shy.

“Aunty Merly,” Chak said seriously, “Mommy said you wanted to be left alone but we wanted to see you. It’s been ages and we were worried, like when daddy’s away.”

I looked at the little boy and felt something inside of me break. I sat down on the couch hard and Thrawn sat beside me, carefully, watchfully.

“Mom said the baby inside your belly died and that’s why you’re sad.” Davin said.

I covered my mouth with my hand which was trembling.

“Syal?” Thrawn said quietly.

Syal just made a gesture with her hand that said ‘just watch’.

“Yes.” I answered managing to speak. “The baby died.”

Chak made a face as though he were trying to sort out everything in his mind. “But why?”

“He was born too early and he was too little to live in the real world.”

“Why?”

I glanced at Syal and then at Thrawn. I had not been expecting the boys or their questions. “I don’t know why, it just happened.” I said.

“That’s not fair.” Davin said thoughtfully. “You would have been a great mommy.”

I choked on the surge of emotion. I was not at all prepared for this conversation from Syal’s boys or how it would feel to see their worry and love shining in their faces.

“Me and Davin drew you a picture. So you wouldn’t be so sad any more. So you would always have a picture of your baby.” Chak said seriously and he handed me a small piece of piece of paper. “We don’t want you to be sad. You need to be like a Dantassi, strong and brave because it’s so hard.”

I took the picture from his outstretched hand. My fingers trembled. I glanced at Thrawn and then looked at the little drawing and fought the wave of sadness which swept through me, powerful and unstoppable. Tears welled up in my eyes and my throat burned.

The boys had drawn Thrawn and me in a garden somewhere. In between us they had drawn a small child, whose skin and hair was like his father’s but he had my eyes. It was so simple yet so full of love and meaning that I had to fight back the emotion which threatened to drown me.

“It’s ...” I took a deep breath, “Thank you both.” I managed to say and before I could stop him Chak suddenly hugged me. I could feel the walls which had held my grief at bay begin to crumble and a world of grief began to flood in.

“Don’t be sad, you still have us and we love you very much.” Chak said as he held on to me fiercely.

I began to shake uncontrollably.

Syal gently pulled Chak back from me. I let go of the little boy and allowed Thrawn to wrap an arm around my shoulder drawing me into him protectively. He saw what was about to happen as did Syal.

“Syal, I think perhaps that’s enough.” He said gently.

“Come on boys, I think Merly needs some time.” Syal said gathering her two sons up and shepherding them to the door.

“Can we come back tomorrow?” Chak asked.

“Yeah, can we? You need to tell us about Navaari, we haven’t heard how his great hunt ended.” Davin asked.

“Let’s wait and see shall we?” Syal said.

“But mom....” Chak started but Syal hushed him.

“Come on, Merly and the Admiral need to be alone for a bit. I think we’ve said what we needed to.”

I couldn’t look at her but Thrawn gave her a nod and with that she left. I stared at the drawing in my hands, watching the paper shake with my trembling fingers. Gently Thrawn took it and laid it on the table. He pulled me to him and held me, stroking my hair. “I am sorry.” He murmured. I fought against the oncoming storm and tried to push back from him but he would not let me go. “I am so, so sorry.” He repeated.

“Please stop saying that.” I whispered.

“No, I won’t because it is the truth and you need to hear it, you need to believe it.”

“Stop it!”

“Listen to me A’mysk’a, your responsibility is to the living not the dead. Our son is dead but I am not, those two little boys who adore you and their mother are not and neither are all of the other people here who care deeply for you. I am sorry I let this go on for as long as I did. I am sorry it took Syal to see what was happening and step in. I should have understood but I didn’t.” His words broke me and all I could do was let it go.

“Our son is dead....” I whispered.

He threaded his fingers through my hair as he pressed my head against his chest. Finally my tears came then as he knew they would, as Syal had hoped. I didn’t fight it, any of it and it hurt so much I thought I would die but in difference to earlier I no longer wanted to.