

Daughter of the Empire

Book 3

by Fiona Messer

Chapter Eleven

The Things We Leave Behind

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Thrawn came and went like a tusken in the night. His infrequent returns to the base were cloaked in secrecy and terse conversation. He spent most of his time wrapped up in meetings or down in the subbasement on his projects that he refused to speak about. When we managed to share some time together it wasn't enough.

"I'm sorry, tekari. I know this is difficult to you." He said as I rested my forehead against his chest. His hands were warm on the back of my neck as he stroked me. With a sigh I broke away from him and poured more brandy in my glass.

"It is difficult but what's even more difficult is your attitude." I said as I took a generous sip of my drink. "Last time you were here you barely said two words to me and this time you can't wait to..."

"The last time I was here I had much on my mind." Thrawn interrupted.

"The last time you were here you barely wanted to touch me." I snapped, annoyed. "You said I distracted you from your mission, that you needed space and time to think! When I asked you to come to bed you pulled away from me as though I were a dirty rebel and you were not wearing your bracelet, the one Navaari made for you."

Thrawn's lips tightened slightly and then he drew a deep breath. "I can continue to apologise to you for my behaviour and you can accept that there will be times when this campaign has to take precedence and I will be distant or we can continue to fight and waste what little time we have together."

I heaved an overly dramatic sigh. "Do you have to be so standoffish when you're busy? It feels like you try to shut me out completely."

"It is a little more than *just busy*, my dear." He said, "And I have to make sure that I have my mind completely focused on the job at hand. Do you want me to fail? Those dreams of yours, you want them to come true?"

"My dreams? What do they have to do with you being a...an arrogant bastard."

"I told you I have a plan and that you need to trust me. If that means there are times when I am distant and cold then that is how it must be." He shrugged out of his uniform jacket and pushed up the sleeve of his undershirt so that I could see the sheen of the metal band around his wrist. I reached out and traced the warm metal with the tips of my fingers. He nodded slightly, "You should know by now that my feelings for you run deeper than words can express. You really need to learn to trust me. I have

this well in hand and these pockets of time we have together will be rare after this night so, really, do you want to fight or do you want to come to bed with me and remind me of what I shall sorely miss while I am off saving the galaxy from itself?"

"So last time was just an act?"

He regarded me for a moment then pulled off this shirt completely. "The last time I was on this base there was a great deal of work to be done." He took a step towards me. "The last time I was on this base I was dealing with a highly delicate matter concerning the cloning project and as I have asked you to keep your distance from this project you can understand my behaviour."

"You're hiding something." I said, standing my ground as he closed the distance between us.

His smile was sly and feral. "My dear, I am always hiding something that is the nature of my work. Now enough of this verbal fencing, stop wasting precious time in pointless argument and allow me to make up for one set of bad behaviour for another."

I let him manoeuvre me to the bed. "And after tonight?"

He smirked. "I think I have found a way to keep you occupied." He peeled off my dress starting with the shoulder straps.

"Wonderful." I said making a face and then allowed him to make me forget why I was ticked off with him in favour of a more pleasant method of combat.

Much later after enough energy had been spent that I was too tired and too relaxed to fight with him I asked what he had in mind to keep me busy.

He shifted in the bed to lie on his side, his head propped up on his arm then said with a smile. "It will be a surprise."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You know how I feel about surprises. Out with it. What is going to keep me so busy I won't have time to worry about you?"

"Not what who."
My eyebrow arched in impatience. "Who then?"

"Larsen, Ged Larsen." And then he smiled because he had just rendered me utterly speechless.

After he had dropped his bomb about sending me back to work on the *Virulent* under Ged the conversation had been cut short when a comm call had come through which required his immediate attention. He had left me to lie in bed and consider all the reasons for his decision, especially given what had happened the last time I had been on board Ged's ship but I fell asleep before he returned. When I awoke the next morning he was already up and had breakfast ready. I ignored him to go and shower first to clear the sleep from my brain. After I had dressed and then joined him at the table we ate in our customary quiet. Mornings were never big conversation times for us. He preferred his quiet and I was usually still waking up. Only after we had finished with food and were sipping our caf did the conversation begin.

"Where's Rukh these days?" I asked. "Usually he's trailing you around like a creepy shadow."

It was not the first question he had expected from me and it irritated him. His eyebrow arched slightly and the almost imperceptible tick at the corner of his mouth let me know Rukh was not a topic he really wished to speak about so I was surprised when he answered.

"He has remained on board the *Chimaera*. It did not seem appropriate to have him follow me here unless of course you wish to have an observer to our nocturnal activities."

I gave him a tight smile. "No. I rather like to keep that private." I replied then before he could move on to a different subject, "But you're unhappy with him."

The slight twitch at the corner of his mouth turned into a slight smile. "I do so often forget about your rather remarkable talents for observation. No, it is not that I am displeased or unhappy with him but shall we say I am finding the loyalty of his people questionable. He and the Noghri are great warriors but I do not need his talents here, after all my dear, I have you."

I sipped my caf and regarded him from over the brim of my cup. "Not for much longer, you're sending me away remember?"

"You do not have to go but I do think it would be better if you did." He countered. "The last time you, Ged and I were on the same ship I do believe you had what the Doc would call a major meltdown. What is to stop that from happening again?"

"As you are so fond of pointing out I have nothing to be jealous about and Admiral Larsen has requested your presence. He feels you can be of use to him."

"Doing what exactly?"

"That, my dear, you will have to ask him when you see him."

I made a face and poured more caf in both our cups trying to decipher what it was he was not telling me then, after a lengthy silence, said. "You're not coming back to the base once you leave this time, are you? That's why you want me somewhere else, somewhere safe and kept busy."

"The campaign has reached its critical point. My work here, for the time being, is done and yes, you are right, I do not plan on returning until after Coruscant has been retaken."

"Were you going to tell me this or were you just going to ship me off and leave it at that?"

He drew a deep breath. "Yes, I would have told you but now I do not need to." Then he added, "I have learned that it is unwise to try and hide such things from you. It tends to lead to you going off and doing something foolish."

His answer felt wrong somehow but I just nodded. Sometimes pressing the point got me answers but more often than not it just led to an argument and I wasn't up to arguing so instead I asked again. "So what is it that I am going to the *Virulent* to do?"

"That is entirely up to you and Admiral Larsen although he did mention that he would not be unhappy to have another capable mechanic on the ship. I am quite sure you will not be bored but you are also free to refuse and remain here, as I have said."

I gave him a withering look. "The fact that you keep giving me this option means it would be better that I don't."

He smiled.

"Besides," I added, "I would drive everyone here crazy."

His smile turned into a slight smirk. "Yes, you would."

"I do have to wonder why being on board the *Virulent* would be safer than being here. Won't Ged and his fleet joining your campaign?" I asked.

"No." He said. "Larsen has different orders and I would take it as a kindness if you would not ask me anything further on this topic."

“Okay.” I said. I figured I could ask Ged about that later, he was far more likely to give me an answer anyway. “When am I supposed to meet him? Is he coming here?”

“I’ve arranged for you to rendezvous with him at Bastion. I’d like you to take the *Ahnkeli* *Su’udelma*. I think it would be better for you to travel in a civilian ship rather than an Imperial one. I know you like the lambda class shuttle but right now is not a good time to be flying around in one of them. Given the options I’d prefer you take that rattletrap of yours instead.” He teased.

“I like my civilian rattletrap ship. It was a gift and I’m rather fond of its quirks” I retorted.

Thrawn smiled. “Then it’s settled. You leave early tomorrow morning which will give you enough time to sort out what you need to here and make the rendezvous with some time to spare should you run into trouble.”

“Then I guess I had better get my day started then.” I said getting up from the table. “Will we have some time together later on?”

“Of course my dear. Barring any unforeseen complications I should be done by twenty-hundred-hours. I had hoped we could share an evening meal and then....” he shrugged ever so slightly and smiled.

“Then I shall see you here later.” I said as I kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Now I have to get my ship ready!”

“Try not to pester my Quartermaster too much.” He replied lightly. “He has quite enough on his to do list as it is.”

“As you wish.” I grinned and left, heading to the hanger bay to make sure the *Ahnkeli* *Su’udelma* was in good flying shape.

I spent most of my day crawling around the ship’s engines making sure all the systems were in perfect condition. In spite of Thrawn’s request I did drive the quartermaster to distraction with my requests and questions but he was more than used to this from me. I wanted to be certain that I was ready for every and all eventualities that may occur. I had been caught out once before and it had almost cost me my life. By the time I made it back to the quarters I shared with Thrawn I was covered in engine grime which meant that by the time Thrawn was done for the day I was soaking in the bath.

Our time together was short but full of passion and tenderness. This time he made certain to remind me of what I would be missing once we went our separate ways and it was bitter sweet. When we had finally

fallen asleep I had been plagued by terrible dreams which left me sad and uneasy when I awoke.

In the quiet of predawn I threaded my fingers through his as we said our goodbyes in private. Deep down inside of my soul I had a terrible feeling of finality. Suddenly I didn’t want to leave him or to have him leave me but I knew nothing I could do or say would change the inevitable so I said nothing but that did not mean he could not see what I felt written all over my face.

“I am quite certain that Larsen will keep you apprised of the campaign advancements and I promise to send word when I am able to do so.” He said gently.

All I could do was nod and look away. My eyes filled with unwanted tears and as much as I did not want to cry I couldn’t help it. This parting had such a feeling of finality to it that it terrified me.

He lifted my chin upward with the crook of his finger. “I promise. I have taken every precaution. We will not fail.”

I nodded.

He brushed the tears off my face. “You worry too much. You place far too much faith in these dreams of yours and far too little in me. Once this final push is over we will have time together but until then you need to trust that I know what I am doing and I promise to trust that you won’t run off with Admiral Larsen.” He said with a teasing smile and before I could find any sort of suitable answer he kissed me long and hard pushing any retort far out of my brain.

“Now go and stay out of trouble.” He said giving me a little shove away from him.

I did as he asked. I walked toward my ship with a heavy heart and, although it was considered bad luck by the Dantassi, I looked back over my shoulder to see him watching me with an expression I couldn’t decipher but definitely didn’t like. This all felt horribly wrong final somehow and suddenly all I wanted to do was turn around to run back to him to never leave his side again. Instead I boarded my ship and began the obligatory pre flight check.

If Thrawn stayed to watch me leave I never knew and once I was on my way I tried as hard as hell to exorcise the feeling of dread in my heart. If I was going to work with Ged Larsen I was going to need my wits about me. He was charming and intelligent and I had almost fallen for that once. That wasn’t going to happen a second time. I had a two day trip to ready myself, plenty of time I hoped, to shake off the terrible feeling that something awful was going to happen to Thrawn and that I would never

see him again. I was certain that all women who had stupidly attached themselves to military men felt the same way every time their loved one left to fight on some war but somehow this thought didn't make me feel any better.

The trip to rendezvous with the *Virulent* felt like one of the longest I had ever experienced and I was very glad when I landed on board in one of the smaller docking bays to be met by a sour faced officer and a rather nervous looking ensign.

"Welcome on board the *Virulent* Miss Gabriel. Admiral Larsen apologises for not meeting you in person but has asked me to extend every courtesy to you and to show you to your quarters. So if you will follow me." The officer said tartly. The young ensign simply gathered my bags in silence.

I wanted to tell him to go away and that I needed to sort out my ship first but the look on his face said that even if I had tried to argue with him it would be in vain. I nodded and let him lead me through the vast ship to the quarters that Ged had chosen for me. At least this time they were more spacious and pleasant than the last time I had been stationed on board this ship.

"The Admiral requests that you remain in your quarters until such time as he can debrief you." The officer whose name I didn't know or care about said.

Again I nodded. I was too tired to argue. Seeing that I wasn't going to give him any grief the officer left curtly and the ensign who had carried my luggage did the same. Once the door had closed I went over to the viewport and stared out at the planet below. Bastion, one of the Empire's secret places, spun beneath us like a coloured jewel. I felt rather than heard the destroyers engines rev up and marvelled as we left the planet's orbit. Once we were out of the gravity well we jumped into hyperspace. I had no idea where we were going nor did I much care, suddenly I was exhausted so rather than sit and wait for Ged to show up I decided to take a nap not really expecting to sleep but I did. Hours later the chiming of the door woke me up and looking like something a jax had dragged in I answered it to find Ged standing there with a grin on his face and a protocol droid at his side bearing a covered tray.

"Welcome back Merlyn." He said as he walked in uninvited to my quarters motioning for the droid to set the tray down on the table and then leave. "I thought you might be hungry and I brought some tea. We have much to discuss and not a lot of time."

Still trying to blink sleep out of my eyes I stared at him. "Did you cut your hair?" I asked stupidly.

He just grinned. "See I knew you couldn't resist my charms for long and yes, I did." And with that he motioned for me to sit down on the small couch while he poured tea.

"I'll just skip the small talk okay?" He said. "I have a job for you, for us both actually and I need you to listen carefully."

"I'm listening." I said accepting the steaming cup he handed me carefully.

"How well do you know your way around Coruscant's Imperial Palace?"

I frowned. "Well enough I guess. Why?"

"Well enough to get in without anyone knowing?"

"I think so but it's been a long time and who knows what the rebels have changed." I said as the dopiness of the nap left me to be replaced by a slow feeling of dread. "Why?" I asked again.

"Because I need you to help me break into the palace grounds without being caught or seen."

"What? Why would you even consider doing that?"

"I'm mounting a rescue mission and since no one else seems to be able to get the job done properly I am doing it myself, with your help."

"Rescue? Who are we going to rescue?"

He grinned. "Your friend Jarack Behl."

And that was when I choked on my tea.

"Are you utterly out of your mind?" I asked once I could catch my breath.

Ged smiled and settled back in his chair. "No, I don't believe so."

"You can't expect me to believe that you seriously want to go to Coruscant to infiltrate the Imperial palace to look for secret prisons?"

"Belief or not it needs to be done. Extracting Jarack Behl is not just something I want to do it's something I must do."

"Must?"

"He is one of our best covert agents and he has information vital to my mission."

“Which is?” I interrupted.

“That’s need to know and ...”

“And what...I don’t need to know?” I finished for him. I got up to pace around the room and sighed. “You know what Thrawn told me I would be doing here? He told me that I would be fixing ships not flying into enemy territory. If you want me to go with you on some crazy hell bent mission of mercy I had better damned well know why.”

“I thought that you knew Jarack?” Ged asked ignoring my sarcasm. “Thrawn told me you were close with the man.”

“Does Thrawn know what you want to do? What you want me to do?” I avoided his question because he was right.

“No I felt that given how shall I put this, how protective of you he is it would be better if he did not have this to worry about while he was trying to reclaim the Empire.”

“Great.” I muttered under my breath. “Ged, you cannot seriously be planning this.”

“I can, I am and I am asking for your help.”

I stared at him for a very long time assessing his words and weighing what he was suggesting with just turning around and heading back to Nirauan. I knew he was right about Jarack and that he was also my friend, a friend whom I had given up for dead was really alive and imprisoned by the enemy. While I might argue loudly I had already made my mind up but I also knew that Thrawn would not be happy about this, not at all. He had sent me here with the idea of keeping me out of harm’s way not so that I could fly straight into the heart of enemy territory.

“So you have a plan?” I eventually asked.

“More or less. It will depend on your knowledge of the palace.”

I nodded, “Okay well then I need to get some things from my ship and I will need a data pad.”

Ged smiled picked up the one which had been sitting on the tray and handed it to me. “It has already been coded to you.”

“How wonderful.” I took it. “Give me an hour.”

“I have some work to attend to anyway so let me know when you are done. We can meet for supper in my private dining room. It’s so much

more civilised to discuss plans over good food, don’t you think? We have an excellent chef on board. Do you have any preferences?”

“No Corellian spiced cake.” I told him.

He gave me a smile that lit up his whole face and I suddenly remembered how handsome he was. He opened his mouth to say something then thought the better of it.

“What is it?” I asked.

He pursed his lips for a moment then said, “I wanted to say I was sorry.”

“For what?”

“I heard from your doctor when he transferred copies of all your medical files about your miscarriage. I’m sorry.”

“Ah.” I said suddenly having to swallow down a sharp pang of sorrow.

“You should have told me you know.” He pressed. “That the reason you refused the mission I was offering was legitimate.”

I felt a little flash of anger. “I should not have to justify anything to you. I am a civilian. I do not have to do anything you ask me nor do I have to tell you about any private medical information. My just saying no is a legitimate answer and if you don’t like that then you need rethink your strategy about having me help you.”

He stared at me for a second and then nodded. “Yes, of course. Forgive me.”

I looked at him. “You need to know I would have refused to help you regardless of being pregnant or not. I made a promise that I wouldn’t just run off and do stupid stuff anymore so what you are asking me to do is not only save a friend but betray a promise I made to my bond mate.”

“I understand.” He drew a deep slow breath then nodded slightly. “All the same I am sorry about your child.”

I had to clamp down on my sudden and inexplicable fury. “Ged, I like you, I really do, but you need to listen to me and really understand what I am about to say okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do not bring up the topic of my baby again, do you understand me? Not ever.” I spoke through gritted teeth and my fury rolled off me in waves. I know he felt this because he took an involuntary step back from me.

“Understood.”

“Okay then.” I said relieved. “Now if you’ll excuse me I need to get to work.” And before either of us could say anything else I spun around and stalked off to the docking bay furious without knowing exactly why.

Later after I had retrieved the data from my ship’s on-board computer and had unpacked my stuff into my new quarters I made my way to Ged’s dining room mentally preparing for dinner.

The meal was very good and the conversation polite and inoffensive. Once we were done eating, the dishes all cleared away and the stewards dismissed leaving us with a large caraf of fresh stim’caf we got down to business.

I placed the datapad on the table and turned it on. “These are blue prints of the Imperial palace including the hidden passages and secret places.”

“Do I even want to know how you came by these?” Ged asked.

“They were a gift from the late Emperor.” I told him flatly.

Ged gave me an ‘are you kidding me’ look.

“It’s a very long story and maybe one day I will get drunk enough to tell you but not now.” I said shuddering at the memory of the man who had once terrified me.

Ged nodded, “The intel that I have says that there is a secret prison somewhere deep under the Imperial palace and that is where the rebels detain their most highly prized prisoners.” He said. “We at least had the good grace to keep ours in a secret prison ship somewhere other than the palace.”

I shot him a look but kept my opinions on that to myself. “I don’t recall any secret detention centers but that doesn’t mean they are not there. It could be the rebels converted space in one of the subbasements for that use. I thought they were touting themselves as the good guys. Don’t they have this big campaign about not being like the Empire?” I couldn’t keep the bitterness out of my voice as I said those words.

“The good guys?” Ged snorted. “There is no such thing. Every government gets their hands dirty. You think these guys are any different?”

Maybe on the outside they all seem squeaky clean but somewhere in the halls of the hallowed principles there are shadowy figures with very grubby hands.”

I tapped the datapad. “There are passages that go under the main buildings. They lead to a lot of different places including the Jedi temple and Lord Vader’s main Coruscant residence. There are a number of subbasements as well as secret passages in between the walls and in the middle of the palace there are also some pretty big secrets. I am willing to bet the rebels haven’t figured half of them out yet.” I said. “So how do you know about Jarack anyway? I mean I thought he was on some super secret undercover mission and no one knew where he was or how to reach him?”

“I have agents on the ground and all of our agents have a tracking chip implanted.” He said. “I knew when Behl went missing because his reports stopped. I have people looking for him because his chip is still sending transmissions this means he is alive but he’s too valuable to leave in the hands of the enemy.”

“Thrawn said he was looking to uncover a possible rebel agent here?”

Ged’s jaw tightened. “That was part of his work. Information was getting off this ship that shouldn’t have been. His job was to find out how and it led him to a cell on Coruscant. His last transmission stated that he was close to finding the leader and that was the last I heard of him. After that I had my people on the ground start looking for him.”

“Your people on the ground?”

“I have spies everywhere.” He said with such a grin I wasn’t sure if he was kidding or not. “Really, it’s part of my job.”

“So what does that mean that you are the spy master?”

This made him laugh. “I suppose that’s one way to put it.” Then he took a sobering breath. “I have intel on where Behl could be and intel on his last location.” He said as he input the data into the pad. “So that puts him somewhere here.” He tapped the pad again and the image enlarged to show me. I synched the information and laid it over the blue prints I had.

“So, in theory, he should be somewhere here.” I said pointing to the general area. I looked at the blue prints and recalled the palace layout. “I can get you in there if things haven’t changed a lot and providing that Vader’s residence hasn’t been torn down. It would be easier to go from there than to try and get into the old Jedi Temple. I am pretty sure that Luke Skywalker has made that place more difficult to get in and out of.”

Ged looked at me and then he proceeded to tell me his plan. After about half way through I held up my hand to stop him.

“You really are out of your mind.” I said more rudely than I had planned. “If we do as you suggest we’ll be caught in seconds. Your whole demeanour screams Imperial officer and if you think taking a disguised shuttle is going to get us past Coruscant Space Control you have another thing coming.”

“Well then, do you have a better idea?” He asked folding his arms across his chest in that manner men do when their pride has been bruised.

“As a matter of fact I do.” I said and began to lay it all out for him. When I was done it was his turn to shake his head.

“And you call me insane?” He said.

“It will work and it’s way better than pretending to be smugglers in a stolen imperial shuttle.” I replied gathering up my datapad.

He thought about it for a bit and then nodded. “Very well then I guess this means you are in charge.”

I smirked. “Aye aye Admiral.”

“So can I tempt you with a brandy?”

I smiled as I picked up my datapad. “No. I’m tired and I have a lot to think about.”

“Of course.” He said as we both stood up. “We will have plenty of time together on the flight to Coruscant.”

I didn’t say anything to that as I left the dining room but I was pretty sure that Thrawn would be unimpressed by this entire situation and suddenly I missed him so much it hurt.

Three days later we were ready to go.

“Are you sure this thing can fly?” Ged asked for the tenth time and I went through my preflight check.

“Are you sure your ship can run without you there?” I countered. “This pretty unusual you know.”

“I have capable officers and a very capable captain they can do without me for a few days.” He answered dryly.

“Uh huh.” I said. “Flight this is the *Ahnkeli ’Su’udelma* requesting permission to clear docking.”

“*Ahnkeli ’Su’udelma* you are cleared.”

“Roger that. See you in a few days *Virulent*. Try not to wreck the ship while we’re gone.” I grinned shutting the com off before Ged could say anything about my unorthodox chatter and flew out of the docking bay into the beauty of space. As soon as I could I set hyper drive in the direction of Coruscant and then we vanished into the eerie light of hyperspace.

Coruscant had not changed much at all. It was as busy and as cluttered as ever. We cleared through customs with an ease that made Ged raise his eyebrows at me.

My answer was tart. “I told you so.”

He nodded. “Yes you did so I owe you a drink.”

For much of the trip he had questioned the plan I had put into place because it wasn’t military or strategic enough. I had told him that the last thing we needed was anything that smacked of either military or strategy. Civilians in an old beat up civilian ship would not have any idea of military strategy of any sort. We needed to seem harmless and somewhat clueless. It was not so easy to convince a man with Ged’s brilliance to act like a moisture farmer from Tatooine on his very first trip to the core. Eventually he gave up arguing, especially when I told him that the ship’s various disguises had all be previously set up by the best there was. “Trust me, “I had said, “No one is going to look twice at us, they have bigger banthas to chase.”

I navigated the ship through the traffic and landed quietly at the building Thrawn and I had once lived in. I had contacted Shiv to let him know I was coming for a visit and he had let me know that the codes had not changed but that both he and Ynyth would be off world. I was sad to miss them but at the same time it would make things a lot easier for Ged and myself. At least I would not have to explain Ged’s presence to Shiv because that would have been difficult.

As we stepped into the flat I was both happy and sad to be there. It had changed significantly. All vestiges of Thrawn’s personality had been replaced by Shiv and Ynyth’s and it was lovely. On the dining room table was a note which said “*Food in the fridge, spare room all set up you, useable cred chip the desk drawer for you if you need it, you know where everything is. Make yourself at home. Sorry we won’t be there but it’s a family thing so we can’t get out of it. Have fun. – love Shiv and Ynyth*”

I watched as Ged dropped his pack on the floor and looked around. "Nice place."

I smiled. "Yes it is." I glanced around. There were a lot of memories tied up here and most of them were extraordinarily happy ones. I glanced at the chrono on the wall and took note of the time.

"We should eat before we head out. Where we are going doesn't have a decent cantina." I said as I unpacked my gear and laid it all out on the floor, looked it over then repacked it again. "We have two choices, we can order out or I can cook and I don't recommend option number two. If it's still around I knew a really great Zabradi place that delivers."

"I keep forgetting you used to live here and Zabradi sounds good." He said sitting down and hauling out his datapad.

"When are you meeting your contact?"

"In just over an hour."

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"Yes very. He's taking a risk meeting me as it is and your face was once splashed across all sorts of holo and news vids along with Grand Admiral Thrawn's and you have a memorable face Merly no matter what you might think or what your crazy uncle did to delete you from the records people here knew you so no you don't get to come with me." He said. "Now order us some food and we can finalise the plans. I do not want to spend too much time on this planet. If we can't find Behl or can't get him out within the next forty-eight hours then we need to make sure we don't get caught here ourselves."

"Why the strict deadline?"

He wavered for a second and then said. "Because I don't want to get caught and I need to get back to my ship." He spoke the truth but he was hiding something behind it. He watched my face carefully and knew that I had caught him.

"I don't know how Vader or Thrawn ever put up with you; just take my word for it we need to leave here in forty eight hours."

I sighed and he glared at me.

"Okay, okay." I said giving him a mock salute and went to order food, which felt familiar and strange all at the same time. While Ged checked his own gear and changed into clean clothes that would help him blend in, I set the table and tried to shake the weird sense of having done this all before as well as the feeling of impending doom. I was quite certain

that Thrawn, Uncle Vahlek as well as Navaari would have some choice words for this plan and my involvement in it but they were not here and I was and, as Ged had pointed out, Jarack was someone I cared about, never mind all the other secret spy stuff that made it an imperative to get him back. When the food arrived we ate in silence, locked in our own thoughts preparing for what it was we were going to try and do.

On the flight to Coruscant we had discussed the plans so much I could recite them in my sleep. It had seemed simple on paper but not so simple now that we were here. We had an approximate time of Jarack's disappearance, and a fairly good guess about where he was being held but apart from that there wasn't much to go on. Ged's people on Coruscant had begun a search on the quiet, looking for clues and possible indications that the rebels, or better to call them, the New Republic government, really did have some sort of secret detention center and they found it or at least they believed they had found it. Now it was up to me and Ged to confirm it and rescue Jarack because anyone else going on this crazy hair brained mission was not something Ged would allow. Apparently a couple of agents had already attempted a rescue mission and had failed spectacularly. Ged would not give me any details which meant it must have been a complete and utter mess. These had been trained professionals who had failed at their job and now he had chosen me instead to back him up. I wasn't worried about this or anything, no not at all.

"How long will you be?" I asked as Ged got ready to leave.

"I don't know."

"You'll need this to get back in here then." I handed him a card-key.

"Thanks." He said with a nod and then he left.

I left out the breath I felt I had been holding since the moment we had arrived on the planet and sank down into the couch. It had been well over two weeks since I had said goodbye to Thrawn and now I was here on Coruscant, right back where I had started.

The last I had heard about Thrawn's campaign was that it was advancing. He had been successful in taking Generis and had been planning his next move which was rumoured to involve Bilbringi but I didn't know what that was and Ged had been taciturn about the entire subject on the trip to Coruscant. I had been kept out of the loop for most of the campaign and while sometimes I wished I knew more, for the most part I was almost glad I didn't.

Thrawn's entire campaign had been a series of hit and run style attacks. He knew he did not have the manpower to just come in and sweep

the galaxy clear of the rebels so he devised a different tactic. It was only after he had recovered much of the lost Katarn fleet and found success with the cloning facility on Mount Tantiss that things started to speed up. Now I knew he was planning his final push although I didn't know when or exactly how only that he would be headed here and when that happened I hoped I wasn't on the planet or anywhere near it. I must have drifted off to sleep because it was late and dark when Ged came in.

“Grab your gear.” He said shaking my shoulder. “We need to go now.”

I woke up instantly, grabbed my satchel and before I even had time to really think about it we were out the door and on our way to catching public transport. We had dressed to blend in and we did, slipping into the crowds like ghosts. It was odd to be back on the planet, even stranger to see how much things had changed and yet had stayed the same. The Emperor had been dead for over nine years and Coruscant had been under New Republic rule for six. There were remnants of the Emperor's rule to see if you really looked for them but they were far and few between. The government had changed and people had accepted the change and moved on with their lives. It was exactly as Thrawn had once told me, as long as things worked and people were warm and fed they didn't really care who was in charge.

We took one of the more crowded commuter shuttles that routed through the industrial part of the city before heading into COCO town and then onto what used to be known as the Imperial Center. It was a roundabout way to get to where we wanted to go but if anyone was watching us Ged thought this would confuse them. I kept my senses wide open but I never got the feeling anyone cared about us or what we were doing. To the rest of the world we looked like two ordinary people heading home from work. I guessed it was a good thing I had gotten so little sleep on the flight to Coruscant, it added to that overworked, stressed out all I want to do is go home and sleep look I was sort of going for.

We got off the red line shuttle a few blocks from where Lord Vader's residence had been and walked the rest of the way. I was surprised when we found the building still standing; I was even more surprised that it appeared to be unused. Prime real-estate on Coruscant usually did not lie empty for long.

“People think it's haunted.” Ged whispered as though he had been reading my mind. “They tried developing the building for apartments and it didn't quite work out they way they had hoped.”

“Good for us.” I muttered under my breath and led him to the one door I hoped no one had bothered to mess about with much. I held my breath while Ged looked around us to keep watch and punched in my code. I nearly jumped out of my skin when the door opened with an

audible thunk. Not waiting to hang around and see if we'd set off any alarms I grabbed Ged's sleeve and yanked him inside allowing the door to shut tightly behind us.

The place smelled musty and unused. I switched on a small flashlight and took a few seconds to remember the layout of this place in my head. “Come on, this way.” I whispered.

If looters had ever come here hoping to find anything of value they would have been sorely disappointed. Lord Vader had lived sparsely in this place. It had been one of the things I had commented on when he had been in a sociable mood which had never been very often. Jix Wrenga, one of Vader's go-to guys, had also joked about the lack of decor with me whenever he was around, commenting that it was such a waste of space to not fill up with clutter like the Emperor. Now I was grateful for Vader's sparse decorating style it meant less to trip up on and fall over in the semi darkness.

We walked quickly and kept quite. Conversation could wait until we had reached the underground passageways that led from this building to the Imperial Palace. We did not want to attract any unwanted attention. I kept all of my senses open but felt nothing unusual or strange. No one had been here for a long time and somehow that made me melancholy. While I had never been overly fond of this place I had liked the man who had lived here and in that moment I suddenly missed him even though he had been dead for over nine years. Ged, who always seemed to have the ability to pick up on my feelings, touched my hand lightly with his.

“Are you alright?” He asked in a hushed voice.

“Old ghosts.” I explained and kept on moving.

Through a series of hallways and stairwells we eventually reached the entrance to the series of tunnels that led to the palace. I had always thought that calling them tunnels was a misnomer since they were more like back alleyways through a variety of hidden passages that went through parts of buildings no one knew or much cared about. At the height of the Empire, when Vader actually spent time here all, of the surrounding area was mainly used by imperial workers and housed offices, now I wasn't sure what they were but I was certain no one had figured out the incredibly labyrinth of passageways that utilized the entire area.

I guided us down through the one I remembered being the least used. It was small and over the years a lot of dust had gathered telling me that I had made the right choice this time and after what felt like an eternity we found our way into the Imperial Palace.

To say that the Imperial Palace was huge would be an understatement. People had gotten lost in the building only to be found

year later after having died. When I had lived here I had loved it but now it was like returning to a beloved home after many years to find it had been taken over by a new family and changed.

I led Ged through a series of maintenance tunnels which appeared not to have been used in a very long time. They had their own turbo lifts leading down into the basements and subbasements so that workers could go about their business without disturbing the palace dwellers or people who worked there. I had used this system of tunnels before and the memory of that wasn't an overly happy one. When we were deep enough into the building that I was sure no one would discover us we stopped to drink some water and rest a bit.

"Okay, so tell me what happened with your contact?" I asked as I studied the data-pad with the blue prints.

"He said they were planning on moving all the detainees tomorrow night. There have been some problems at the palace a break in or some such nonsense; attempted kidnapping of Leia Organa Solo's babies and security has been increased. The people in charge of the detention center apparently don't want anyone stumbling on their dirty little secret. So if we are going to accomplish the mission it has to happen now."

"Nothing like a deadline to make a person motivated." I said making a face. "You really think he's still alive?"

"I sure as hell hope so." Ged said with a snort. "The last good intel I had said he was, but of course that could have changed and totally accurate information is difficult to come by. The rebs have some good security here and already they've managed to ferret out three of my agents."

"Maybe your agents are just bad at their jobs."

"Well these days good help is hard to get." Ged replied flippantly. "Actually it's more like I still have traitor issues to deal with. Okay so what's next."

I tapped the data-pad. "We need to go here. Isard had her offices here and here there should be a small intelligence prison complex." I said, "But the problem is we'll have to actually cross some more open areas to do so but at this time of night and so deep down into the building I doubt there will be many people around. Then, if your people's information is correct, we should be looking at finding those detention centers somewhere here, if they still exist. All of the infrastructure needed to detain and interrogate people would be in place and not that many people would ever come down here. Isard made sure that this part of the palace was difficult to get to and well guarded."

"Okay, let's get on with it." Ged said and we did.

We walked quickly; keeping quiet and, as we crossed areas more open to scrutiny, we stayed in the shadows with our eyes open. I was surprised at how deserted the palace now felt. When the Emperor had been in place it had bustled with workers, droids and all manner of beings, now there was no one and nothing around, not even any cleaning droids to see and if the dirt and dust that lay around was anything to go by no one had cleaned down here in a good while. It felt as though we were gone for days, wandering around in circles although that was not the case. We knew when we'd found the right place because suddenly, according to the sensor readings on the data-pad Ged had there were people nearby and I had a really bad feeling about it all.

I studied the readout for a long moment and then looked at Ged. "Now what?" I asked.

"Now we go find our man and get him the hell out of here." Ged replied.

The detention area was large and complex and, in theory, full of security but nothing showed up on the scanners to indicate where any of the guards were, just there were life forms in what appeared to be cell blocks. We were in one of the small maintenance tunnels that lead to the detention area but from where we were hiding it was impossible to see anything clearly.

"There should be a main control console near the entrance to the cell blocks." Ged said quietly studying the layout from the datapad.

"It may be guarded."

He nodded, "Yes, probably, but they don't expect anyone to come barging in so we have an advantage. Looking at this there is probably only one life form guarding the area, though this won't tell us how many sentry droids there are."

"So what are you suggesting? We just storm the area like a couple of mad banthas?" I said crossly.

Ged smiled. "You're very cute when you're annoyed, you know that?"

I made a face. "I get annoyed when there's no solid plan with no solid backup. Look, something here feels off."

"Can you be more specific because I don't sense any danger and usually my instincts are spot on."

“No, I can’t. It just doesn’t feel right.” I shook my head. Wondering, not for the first time, what the exact nature of Ged’s own force talents were, because while we both knew we were force users our exact abilities were something we had never directly discussed.

He sighed, “We’re breaking into a detention area so of course it doesn’t feel right. Look, I’m happy to listen to any suggestions you have but just having a bad feeling doesn’t count as a suggestion.”

“So then what, do you have a plan or are we just winging it?”

“If we can hone in on Behl’s tracking chip then we could bypass all need for logging in to the system. The less invasive we are the less likely we are to trip any alarms but you know the risks as well as I do.”

I waited with a nagging sense of annoyance and unease.

He fiddled with his datapad for far too long and then cursed softly.

“What.” I demanded.

“I can’t seem to find him. They must have disabled his tracking chip.”

I frowned at him. “Ged, did you not check that before we left?”

He just shrugged. “I was rather hoping it was a proximity issue. My contact assured me that Behl was being held here.”

“So we’re doing this the hard way.” I made a face. I pulled off my satchel and gave it to him. “Take this, keep it safe.” It held my lightsaber and I didn’t want to run the risk of getting caught with it in case I was right and this mission went south.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“To find out where Jarack is. The main console should be here,” I said tapping the data-pad, “I think I can slice it, maybe, if they are using the existing mainframe or I can get into it through a backdoor using one of Lord Vader’s codes. I’m happy to hang back here though if you think you can do this better. Can you do this?”

“Slice the data? No. I can do a great many things but slicing is not one of my big skill sets.” He replied. “How is it that you can?”

“Well I had some help and it’s a long story but let’s just say that working for Lord Vader had its advantages.” I nodded. “So I go, you stay.”

“Don’t get caught.” He chided.

“That’s not my plan but my plans don’t ever tend to go the way I hope they will so if I’m not back in about five minutes then it’s your turn. Just don’t leave me here because Thrawn will kill you if you do.”

Ged grinned.

“I’m not joking you know.”

“Merlyn....” Ged started but then stopped because I had already slipped away from him into the shadows.

Isard’s palace detention complex, while not as huge as the Lusankya facility had been, was still big enough to get lost in if one wasn’t careful. Luckily for me the design had been based on the same sort of layout used on an ISD. One had to admire the Imperials for their streamlining of things. This meant a main room with a central computer to control all the cells, locks and live security camera feeds.

I moved quietly, the way I had been taught by Master Kjestyll, stretching out with the force to feel for danger but there was nothing. Whatever was happening here it was being done on the quiet by a pretty nonexistent skeleton crew. I drew a deep breath, finding my center, and then stepped into the main room. I had a rough idea where the spy-cams were and tried to stay in the shadows. I was hoping that if I actually ran into a real person I could manipulate them with the force power Lord Vader had called mind trick. It wasn’t my best ability since I so rarely used it but it would do in a pinch.

The entire detention area was shaped like a fan. The main processing area, a large semi circular room which housed the computers and the offices had three long corridors branching off it with detention cells, interrogation rooms and other facilities lining them. I stood for a moment in the shadows trying to sense if there was anyone around at all, it all felt strangely devoid of life and I began to wonder if Ged hadn’t made some huge miscalculation. Against my better judgment I stepped out into the main room and made my way to the central control panel. This was all way too easy.

I glanced around to make certain I was alone and started to tap into the computer system. The database was there but it was empty. There were no prisoners listed, in fact there was nothing listed at all. Puzzled I dug deeper using all of the tools I had been taught to slice. The coding was clever and I wasn’t nearly good enough to wade through it all but what I did find was enough to know we had made a terrible mistake. I swore under my breath as I backed away from the console. Alarms suddenly sounded loud enough to make me jump. Two seconds later I stood face to face with a rather grim faced man holding a blaster aimed at my chest.

“This is a restricted area.” He said. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“I was looking for the fresher.” I said slowly, reaching out with the force, sensing his mind and giving it a shove.

He frowned slightly. “This is a restricted area.” He said again slowly, looking puzzled.

“I work here and I was looking for the ‘fresher.’” I said again re-enforcing the force push.

The man shook his head ever so slightly as though he were fighting off a drug and I knew that he was fighting me so I did the next best thing I knew how and I kicked him as hard as I could in the groin. The blaster in his hand clattered to the floor as he sank to his knees in agony. I used the force to bring the blaster to my hand.

“Are there more of you?” I hissed shakily pointing the blaster at him but the guard remained silent and grim faced. I should have been more concerned that he didn’t seem too worried.

“Ged! We’re going to have company!” I yelled.

“No need to shout, I’m right here.” Ged swore yanking the blaster out of my hand to shoot the man who was kneeling in pain on the floor in the chest. The blaster had not been set on stun.

“This is a trap.” I hissed as Ged did a quick search of the dead man’s pockets, pulling out a card key. “There’s no one here. No prisoners, no people, no one. Wherever Jarack is being held it’s not in this place.”

“Your ability to state the obvious is brilliant.” He snapped. He turned and blasted the lock at the main door. “That won’t hold for long. Can you get anything useful out of that?” He nodded at the console I had been using.

“The program is too sophisticated for me. Someone really good set that up. The minute I sliced into it they knew we were here.”

“So it’s useless then?”

I nodded. He shot it sending sparks showering everywhere. I glanced as the entrance to the detention center began to open.

“Come on.” He tugged my hand to lead us back into the maintenance tunnels. “We need to get out of here right now. And then we need to find a place to hide and rethink our strategy.”

I was about to argue when the sound of a blaster fired very close by. They had found the service tunnel entrance. Ged shoved me ahead of him and turned to fire back. The smell of scorched metal and flesh filled the small service tunnel making me sick. He was an extraordinarily good shot and when it seemed he had managed to kill everyone who had entered the tunnel to follow us he yelled at me to run.

“Go!” He yelled. “There will be more on the way and they will have better scanning equipment!”

I wasn’t going to disagree. Using my memories of being here before I led Ged through an impressive maze of small maintenance tunnels and secret passageways. It took longer than it should have. The entire palace was now on alert so there were many more open or easily accessed tunnels and areas we had to work hard to avoid. Eventually we found ourselves at a place I was all too familiar with. I pushed Ged through the force shielding and we slipped into the secret room which had once housed the Emperor’s treasures. No one had been here since my last visit, touching the door panel had told me that. Once the door had shut behind us I let out a sigh of relief and sank down to the floor.

“Well that didn’t go quite as planned did it?” I said trying to catch my breath. “What the hell happened?”

He looked at me angrily as he paced the room. “I do not know. This was not how things were supposed to go.”

I shook my head. “They knew we were coming. How is that possible? I didn’t tell anyone so who did you tell, who knew?”

Ged stopped and looked at me. “My informant was the only person apprised that I was here, who knew anything about this mission. No one else was told the exact nature of what I was planning. I didn’t trust anyone else.”

I nodded, sighing with heavy resignation, “And there’s your double agent. Did he know about me, did he know I was with you?”

“No. I never mentioned you but if they caught your face on the security holos they know you are here now. If there is any record of you at all, they’ll know who you are.”

I didn’t need him to tell me what that would mean if we were to get caught.

“Is Jarack even still alive?” I asked after a lengthy silence. “Or was that all a lie as well?”

Ged shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“This agent of yours, you trusted him?”

“Yes. Absolutely, I’ve known him for years, we were in the Academy together and, “He added angrily, “we were friends.”

“Who is he?”

“Lee Vander.”

“Admiral Kel Vander’s son?” I could not keep the astonishment out of my voice. “The ace pilot? I had heard that he had been killed at the Battle of Yavin.” Jorae had talked about it a lot, Lee Vander had been one of his heroes.

He nodded. “Yes. That was the story fabricated so that he could move into the black ops service.”

I sighed and scrubbed at my face with my hands. I could still hear alarms wailing away in the distance. I really hoped this room was safe. Only a force user would ever be able to get past the Emperor’s strange force block and as far as I knew there were not so many of us around anymore but a lot of things had changed since I had last been here. I wasn’t that secure about how secret this room was any more but it had been the only place I could think of to go. I looked at Ged and motioned for him to pass me my satchel. I dug out the water bottle I had and took a sip then handed it to Ged who shook his head.

“No thanks.”

The silence in the room grew heavy so I broke it. “Forty eight hours you said.” I drew a deep breath. “What happens in forty eight hours?”

“It was the amount of time I gave us to get in and out.” He said evasively.

“Why?”

He sighed. “Because in seventy two hours, give or take, this planet will be under attack if all goes according to the Grand Admiral’s plan. I wanted to be well away before that happened.”

“Well, this is just great.” I said. “Can I say I told you this was a bad idea now?”

“If it will make you feel better.” He replied, “So where exactly are we now? I don’t recall this room at all and I thought I knew a great deal about the palace.”

“This is one of the Emperor’s secret collection rooms. His private treasury.” I said and then before he could ask I told him the entire story of how I knew this place was here.

“Wow.” Ged breathed. “You do lead a charmed life. I thought you didn’t like the Emperor.”

“I didn’t. He scared the hell out of me.” I retorted, “But he seemed to like me.”

“He took you under his wing.” Ged said. “He must have seen something remarkable in you.”

I stared at Ged for a long while and then realised what I was hearing in his voice was sadness. “I’m sorry. You were close to him and I am being insensitive.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I have some talents he felt would be of use to him. I was of the opinion that I did not want to be used. I was Lord Vader’s girl not the Emperor’s.”

“What sort of talents?”

I stared at him for a moment and then using the force I pushed at him, invading his mind, showering him with a taste of the anger I was feeling at him for getting me into this situation.

He stiffened and then in a move so fast I did not see it coming he whirled around to come at me, grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet pulling me close to his body. “Get out of my head!” He snarled in my ear.

I just stared at him reinforcing the link until he slammed it shut with a brutality that reminded me of Lord Vader. It hurt.

“Ow!” I pushed him away from me and rubbed at my temples to try and ease the sharpness of the pain I had felt.

“Vader used to try that trick with me, trying to dig out information and while you have some talent you are nowhere near as good or as strong as he was!” Ged said angrily. “Palpatine taught me how to counter attacks like that easily. Do not ever do that again.”

“So you were his student?” I asked sliding back down the wall to sit on the floor again.

He glanced about the empty room as if trying to decide how much to tell me. "He felt there was some merit in teaching me to use my talents wisely."

"You never speak of it in any great detail." I said, "I mean I know we're chatted about this stuff but we always skirt around the details."

He shrugged slightly. "What is there to speak about? Palpatine is dead and the force has been usurped back into the domain of the jedi." He spat that last word as though it burned his tongue just to utter it.

"So what can you do aside from shutting me out and hurting me?" I asked.

"The usual, move things, get a sense of feelings and so on." He replied. "And this..." he smirked a little as he held up his hands and for a brief second blue electricity seemed to writhe and dance about his fingers.

I gasped. "Force lightening?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you use that in the tunnels?"

"It's very draining and I need all my energy to keep you in line."

"Ha very ha."

He looked at me for a moment and then asked, "So aside from what you just showed me what was it that made Palpatine so intrigued by you because I know it wasn't just the usual list of force powers that had you on his watch list."

I studied my nails for a long moment listening as the klaxons continued. "I can tell when someone is lying to me." I said.

"And?"

I sighed. "I can read the memories off objects."

Ged regarded me for a very long moment. "Well that might have been useful to know a few hours ago." He said digging into a pouch on his utility belt. He pulled out a small data chip and tossed it to me before I could say anything. I caught it out of reflex.

I sucked in my breath as I was bombarded with everything the datachip had to tell me. Once it was over I let out a gasp and swore in cheunh loudly.

"I take it that means you saw something interesting?"

I nodded trying to sort out everything I had been shown. "Jarack is dead." I said not bothering to fight back the tears in my eyes. "Your friend killed him."

Ged stared at me for a second and then his temper exploded as he hurled the data-pad he had been holding across the room where it shattered against the far wall.

"What else did you see?" He demanded.

I shook my head. "It's too hard to try and put into words, it's all images and a lot of them I don't understand."

He drew a deep breath. "Share them with me then, with your mind, through the force."

"You told me not to ever do that again."

"I'm making an exception. Just do it." He said squatting down in front of me.

He opened his mind up to me and felt it as though the sun had suddenly come out from under a cloud. I gasped at the sensation and he hissed. "Hurry up."

I reached out, cupped his face with both hands pressing the datachip against his cheek, and drew him to me so that our foreheads touched and did as he asked and while holding onto the small data-chip I flooded everything it showed me to him in real time. He grunted with the weight of it and this time when I was done he severed the connection between us far more gently. When I handed him the datachip back he just slipped it into his pocket without looking at it.

"Oh Merly," He whispered, his voice husky with sorrow, "I do not envy you this talent."

I looked up at Ged. "He set you up and you walked right into his trap."

"He was my friend." He said simply as if that explained it all.

I just sighed, closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. "I know, I'm sorry."

He nodded and stood up slowly. "Speaking of traps, Merly how do we get out of here? I get the impression that this place may not be as secure as it might have once been."

I got up and pressed the panel on the wall which opened the secret entrance to a turbo lift.

“I don’t have the codes to make the lift go anywhere but all the way down.” I said as we stepped into it. “At the bottom is a shuttle line that goes under much of the city. There are two stops still in the palace, one where Xizor’s palace used to be, one at the museum and the one at the end, in The Works district, is the medical facility that the Emperor once used to ...fix...Lord Vader.”

The door closed silently and we stood across from each other, leaning against the walls. He studied my face intently making me self conscious and shy all at the same time.

“Anything else at the bottom I should know about?” He asked eventually breaking the awkward silence.

I shrugged, “Last time I was here it was just the shuttle car and the tunnel.”

“So we could be headed down into another trap?”

“We could be, if anyone knows about this room and all its secrets, though I doubt it.”

“Are you certain of that?” He asked checking that the blaster he had taken off the guard still held a charge.

“No.” I fished my lightsaber out of my satchel. He looked at it with a smile.

“Do you actually know how to use that thing without hurting yourself?” He teased.

“I can hold my own.” I retorted crossly.

“Alright then, shall we see if there’s a party waiting for us?”

I sighed and brushed my fingers against the control panel and the turbo lift moved down with a soft jolt.

“You know, I wasn’t joking.” I said, “If anything happens to me Thrawn will kill you.”

Ged gave me a look I couldn't read and reached out to stroke my face. “Then I shall not let anything happen to you, shall I.” His touch was oddly comforting but I moved away from his hand anyway.

He just grinned, “Once we get back to the *Virulent*, you and I are going to have a long discussion about your force talents and I want to see just how good you are with that thing.” He smirked as he showed me his own lightsaber that had been hidden beneath his jacket.

I just shook my head. “How can you be so calm after all that’s happened?”

“I’m not calm, Merly. I’m angry but I’m saving the fury up for when we find Vander so that I can kill him with a minimum of fuss.”

“Wait, we’re getting off this planet! We are not going after anyone.”

Ged’s only answer was a feral smile and then the lift stopped.

The moment the turbo-lift door opened I ignited my lightsaber but the only things it destroyed were the speckles of dust floating in the air as we stepped out onto the platform. The area was empty and silent. The same shuttle I had used when I was last here was sitting, waiting as though we had been expected. I sighed and swore under my breath making Ged raise an eyebrow at me.

“Problems?” He asked as he looked around.

“No, but the last time I used this thing it wasn’t exactly friendly to stopping when I wanted it to.” I replied. “It was the Emperor’s personal shuttle. He used it to traverse under the palace in secret. I don’t have the codes and I can’t slice it, I tried that once before.”

“Well that’s useful then isn’t it.” Ged muttered, stepping into the shuttle. I followed him, looking over my shoulder to make sure that no one was lurking somewhere behind us but there was nothing. As soon as I entered and sat down, the shuttle flickered to life, the door closed and it moved forward with a soft jerk.

“It appears to like you.” Ged said. He was staring at the control panel trying to figure out how it worked.

“The system is automated with motion sensors, nothing more.” I suddenly felt exhausted. “But unless you have magic codes or something to change how this thing works you might want to sit, it takes a while for it to get to the end destination.”

“Hmm.” He stared at the control panel until I thought he would burn holes in it and then he tried what I tried the last time I was here. He punched in various codes and he pushed all the buttons he could see. I just

sat there watching him in sleepy amusement until he made a noise of disgust and hit the panel with his fist.

“Like I said...” I told him again, folding my arms across my chest and suddenly feeling exhausted. “You should just relax.”

He gave me a look which I interpreted to mean something rude and then paced the short length of the shuttle car and back. When he returned he sat down across from me and took out his data-pad. “I found the fresher.” He said without taking his eyes off the pad he was fiddling with.

“The Emperor spared no expense when it came to his comfort.” I replied with a shrug.

“So where exactly is it we are headed?”

I gestured for him to give me his data-pad and I called up the map of Coruscant. “This is the palace,” I said pointing at the dot on the map, “And this is the medical facility in the Works District.” He watched as my finger traced a straight line from one point to the next. “The shuttle stops here, right under this building. The whole trip takes just over an hour; this shuttle thingy is very fast. This was the Emperor’s private medical and research facility. It was here he saved Lord Vader’s life after he was almost killed on Mustafar by General Kenobi. It also housed his cloning facilities and other laboratories.” I explained.

“Why does it only go there?” Ged asked staring at the pad as it would suddenly give him better answers.

I shook my head. “I think that’s what the Emperor had programmed it to do, all I know is that’s where it took me when I was here last and there wasn’t much I could do about it.”

“I thought you said you could slice.”

“I have some skills but I’m not a genius. I learned how to bypass and slice ship systems but not this stuff.” I gestured in the direction of the control pad by the shuttle’s door. “This is all protected by codes only the Emperor understood, I tried and I am not that good. Even the codes I have from Lord Vader can’t bypass this stuff. The only reason I ended up here once before was because that was what the Emperor wished to happen.”

That piqued Ged’s interest so I told him what had taken place the last time I had come this way. I left out the whole conversation I had had with the ghost of my dead jedi mother because I didn’t think that Ged needed to know that but I told him everything else. When I was done there was a lengthy, heavy silence between us and then Ged shook his head.

“I don’t understand, he was already dead so why would he lead you here with these strange clues? I mean if he had wanted you he would have just taken you when he was alive, you obviously have skills he was intrigued by.”

“It’s complicated.” I growled.

He gave me a look which said ‘*un-complicate it for me*’.

I sighed heavily. This was a conversation I didn’t really want to have.

“Merly out with it, now!”

“He didn’t think he was going to die at Endor. He thought he was invincible. He had this whole plan laid out about how he was going to destroy the rebellion, kill Lord Vader and take Luke Skywalker to be his new apprentice. He totally miscalculated the love between a father and a son, he completely screwed up.” I retorted.

“Vader betrayed him.” Ged spat.

I closed my eyes and bit back on the sudden sorrow I felt. “No,” I said shaking my head, “Vader protected the last link he had to the woman he had loved more than anything else. Palpatine was the one who had betrayed Lord Vader.”

Ged took a deep breath not wanting to get into this with me. “We can debate this at another time. Just answer my question.”

“I think the Emperor waited before cornering me because it was more useful to have me where I was, doing what I was doing rather than trying to bend me to his will against my own. I would have fought him hard enough that he would not have been able to get what he wanted from me, the way he wanted it.”

Ged just sat back and watched my face, waiting for more.

“Don’t you see? He didn’t want to break me in the usual way because I would have been useless to him like that. He wanted bend me in such a way that I had no choice to do what he wanted; he wanted to use me, to twist me and warp everything I knew into something else and still have it feel as though it had been my choice to go down that path. That was his power, he manipulated everything and it was all just a game to him. I think he enjoyed the fact that Lord Vader had taken some sort of liking to me, there was an attachment there the Emperor could use and then when Thrawn ...” I choked on his name, remembering the bitterness of Thrawn’s supposed disgrace and had to stop and take a deep breath. “Well he used that as well and it was all very public and messy.” I stopped

before anger overrode my common sense. “The Emperor had learned about what I could do earlier but he left it alone. Let’s just say I was of more use to him as I was, at least until Endor and then things changed.”

“Changed? How?”

I heaved a very deep sigh and then told him what had happened to me on the second Death Star and when I was done he was silent for a very long time. When he finally spoke his voice was gentle and full of sorrow.

“No wonder you hate him so much.” He shook his head slightly, “I never understood why because to me he was like a father. He took great interest in my career from a very early age and he helped me often. He was my mentor in so many ways I can’t even count them. I knew that he could be ruthless but I never experienced his cruelty first hand.” He reached out and placed his hand over mine and I welcomed the warmth. “I’m sorry he did that to you but why at Endor, why wait so long to use a gift that would have been of great use to him?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know. I’m sure he had his reasons.” I said quietly. “It’s not a talent I enjoy having and for a very long time I managed to shut it out. It was something that I had little control over and it wasn’t a strong gift, or so I thought. Under the training I received that changed. As I learned more about how to control the force so this delightful little gift grew too. It’s a trait found in the Kiffar people. My birth mother was from Kiffu and she was a powerful jedi. I inherited this from her. I kept it a secret for as long as I could and although Lord Vader and Thrawn eventually learned about it they did not tell the Emperor, he discovered it by himself. He set a trap for me and I fell right into it. I assume he was waiting until I was strong enough to control it properly before he decided to make use of it.”

“So exactly when did he find out about this gift of yours?”

“Shortly after the battle of Hoth.” I shuddered at that terrible memory and Ged didn’t press for more. “A secret such as this is almost impossible to keep secret for long, especially from someone like Palpatine. It was only a matter of time and he wanted that time to perfect.”

“Does the Grand Admiral find your talent of use?”

I made a noise of disgust, “Thrawn doesn’t need to use my force tricks Ged, he’s brilliant all on his own.” I snapped. “And besides he knows what it does to me, he doesn’t feel the need to put me through that just to find out information he can get from more reliable sources.”

“He certainly has a different way of doing things, I will give him that but none of this answers why you were led here after the Emperor’s death.”

“I don’t think he’s dead.” I said simply.

If I had ever hoped to see surprise on Ged’s face that was the moment I had been waiting for. “What?”

I opened my mouth to explain about my dreams and my theories about the Emperor’s cloning projects but before I could speak the shuttle car shuddered suddenly and began to slow down. Ged looked at me sharply. I just shook my head and shrugged.

“It didn’t do this the last time I was here.” I said.

“Hide.” He hissed at me readying the blaster.

“What? No! I can fight, there’s two of us and we can...”

He pulled me up from the seat and shoved me hard, “Go! Hide now. That is an order!”

He didn’t need to tell me again but looking for a place to hide wasn’t so simple. I ended up ducking behind one of the plush seats near the fresher, waiting what felt like forever for the shuttle car to finally screech to a violent stop. For the longest moment there was nothing then the shuttle doors opened. I heard blaster fire and shouting, the sounds of a fight and then silence. My heart thudded so loudly in my chest I was certain the entire planet could hear it. I fought against the fear and calmed down as I had been taught but it wasn’t easy.

“Come on out.” An unfamiliar voice yelled. “I know there are two of you here so if you do not come out now I will kill this man and then I will kill you.”

I hesitated to see if this was some sort of a trick and a bolt from a blaster seared the air above me. I didn’t wait for the second one to maybe miss the air and hit me instead. I got up from my hiding place slowly with my hands up. There were two bodies on the floor, Ged was on his knees with two men flanking him, one held a blaster to his head, his hands had been bound in front of him and there was blood on his lip where someone had hit him. He stared at me without any emotion on his face and when I tried to reach him through the force I was met with resistance. I thought for a moment about fighting back, I had my lightsaber in my satchel but calculated that by the time I had fished it out Ged would already be dead and as much as he annoyed me I didn’t want to see him hurt.

The third man of the group stepped forward and smiled as he watched me.

“Well well, come here little bird, I won’t hurt you.” He said with a gentleness that didn’t fit the situation then he looked down at Ged. “You didn’t tell me you were bringing such lovely company.”

I made my way down the aisle to stand in front of him, “Lee Vander I presume?” I said staring into dark blue eyes and sounding calmer than I felt. He was tall and shockingly handsome, even with the vivid white scar that ran diagonally across his right cheek and I remembered that at one time in his life he had been the poster boy for the Imperial Navy although then his hair had been shorter and there hadn’t been any scars.

He smiled but it never reached his eyes, “You know of me? How delightful. I, however, do not know who you are. So why don’t we start with your name?”

I hesitated.

“Name. Now.” As he spoke I understood that behind the handsome face and beguilingly calm manner was a man who would give no mercy, take no crap from anyone and would kill without a moment’s thought. Something in his life had changed him from grinning Imperial pilot to a stone cold killer. It made me sad and I was glad that Jorae was not alive to see what his hero had become.

“I will not ask a third time.” He said softly.

“Amyshka.” I said defiantly, pronouncing it with galactic basic intonation instead of how it should have been spoken. “Amyshka Pavjaska.” Out of the corner of my eyes I saw a flicker of emotion on Ged’s face. He had not been expecting this but the name Merlyn Gabriel had been known so I decided to use my Dantassi name instead. I could have sworn I saw Ged smirk, just a little.

“Well Amyshka you made the right choice. It would have been a shame to kill something as pretty as you.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Wow, you’ve been watching far too many Holloway holo-dramas.”

Ged laughed and it earned him a smack to the head with the butt of a blaster rifle.

“Pretty and mouthy. Ged you bring me all the fun toys.” Lee Vander replied.

“You bastard!” I swore at him.

Lee Vander just gave me a mirthless smile and then pointed his blaster at my chest. Before I could say or do anything else he shot me.

I woke up slowly and wished I hadn’t. I was lying on my side, curled up on a memory-foam mattress. My head pounded, my body ached and my hands were tied together in imperial binders. I was grateful they had not tied them behind my back but my shoulders ached anyway. I opened my eyes and blinked hard until the blurriness cleared. I was in a moderately sized, moderately lit room. Aside from the mattress the room was empty. I realised that there was no chem-toilet or wash-sink which meant whatever Vander had planned for us, it wasn’t long term. I sighed, struggled to sit up and swore as my head pounded viciously. I could not believe that I had once again been abducted and locked in a room somewhere, at least this time I wasn’t alone.

“Welcome back to the land of the living.” Ged said as he helped me to sit up beside him.

“What the hell..?” I asked trying to get past my throbbing head.

“Vander shot you.” He explained, “The stun’s effects should wear off soon.”

“Lovely!” I rubbed my temples. “How the hell did he even find us?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. But the datachip he gave to me might have been trackable.”

“Why did I not see that when I touched it?”

“Your little talent is not perfect?” He winced as he touched his head where he had been hit by the blaster butt. “And technology can be tracked easily enough.”

I nodded. “Are you alright?”

“You were not the only one on the wrong end of a blaster stun and my head isn’t immune to being smacked around either.” He said tartly. “And don’t ask me what time it is, they took my kit, chrono and your satchel.”

“So you have no idea how long we’ve been here for?”

“No, but stun blasts tend towards short term not long term so I’m thinking only a few hours maybe, unless the stunned us more than once, then it’s anyone’s guess.” Ged replied.

“Why did not he just kill us?” My mouth was dry and my chest hurt where the stun blast had hit me. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against his shoulder.

Ged shrugged ever so slightly, "Oh I'm sure he has his reasons. He's a black ops agent, Mer... Amyshka, nice name by the way." He turned his head to look at me, "He was trained by the very best and he's been in the field for twice as long as most of my agents. We're alive for a reason and you can be sure it's not a good one."

"Fantastic." I hissed. "What the hell does he want from us anyway?" I asked, "Because none of this makes sense."

"He wants something from me. You are just collateral damage."

I lifted my head up to look at him, made a face and a gesture of distance with my thumb and forefinger. "You know right now, I hate you... just a little bit."

Ged grinned and stroked the side of my face with the backs of his fingers which was not so easy to do with his hands bound together. "I know and it's really cute."

I made a noise of disgust, "Why are you not more concerned about this situation we're in?"

"Because nothing has happened yet that we need to be concerned about." He answered.

I stared at him for what seemed like forever. "He shot me!"

"Only on stun."

"This day just keeps getting better and better. Seriously, if Lee Vander doesn't kill you, I swear I will."

He just chuckled. "Well, that will be a lot of fun but it will have to wait." He said as he stood up. "Come on, you need to walk off the effects of the stun blast because I need you clear headed and focused, so get up." And before I could tell him to go away he had pulled me to my feet and I found myself walking around the small room in circles until I felt dizzy while he kept studying the walls.

"Ged....what are you doing?"

"Shhhhhh." He shushed me, leaned into me and whispered in my ear all the while slowly backing me into the corner furthest away from the door. "I'm getting us out of here so turn around, look at me and try to pretend you actually like me."

I did as he asked and before I could stop him he looped his arms over my head and pulled me to him in an awkward and uncomfortable embrace, uncomfortable because my hands were still bound in front of

me. I pulled them up to my chest with my hands under my chin because holding them straight down would have been even more awkward and embarrassing. He smirked.

"Here is what is going to happen." He said in a hushed voice, glancing around, "I'm going to kiss you now, just so you know, and it would be a really good idea if you moved in tightly to me and didn't touch the wall. I don't want to hurt you." he whispered, "And it would also be nice if you would try to make it look like you enjoy kissing me back because I want the guards to think this is just what it looks like and not something else." and then before I could argue with him or ask what 'something else' meant he did exactly as he said he would except, instead of holding me tightly with his hands, he braced them on the flat of the wall behind us.

The last time Ged had kissed me he had taken me by surprise and the desire he had stirred up had been a shock. This time, even though I had been warned, the feelings that bubbled up inside of me still took me by surprise. I gasped at the rush of sensations that washed through me. Even with his warning I wasn't ready for this. Instead of just planning a big kiss on me, he teased me slowly, seductively with gentle lips, tasting mine with the tip of his tongue and it surprised me. I stared at him and a slight smile curved the corners of his mouth. For a split second the world stopped and then, seeing he had my interest he kissed me again but this time with heat and I gasped. It was so deliciously easy to get lost in what he was doing because he was good at it and I enjoyed it even though I knew this wasn't right. I could feel the force well up between us in a rush of lust that might have drowned me except that he suddenly nipped my neck painfully with his teeth bringing me back to my senses sharply.

"Stay focused." He hissed in my ear.

"That would be easier to do if you weren't shoving your tongue down my throat!" I growled back. "And I know I'm not the only one affected by this." I glanced downward and he grinned at me some more.

"A pleasurable side effect is all." He smirked, "And so much better than the alternative."

I raised both eyebrows in question. "Oh really?"

"Sweetheart, if you still want to play with me later I'm all yours but right I need you to stay focused and I need your help with what I am about to do so stop messing about and help me here." He smirked and before I could argue or retort he kissed me again but this time I mostly ignored the wash of sensations that were running rampant through me in favour of figuring out what it was he was actually doing.

I could feel my skin tingle but realised the sensation wasn't because of Ged's kisses but rather through his use of the force. He was drawing power around, through and from me. Once I understood what he was doing I stopped fighting him and started to help him. I gathered the force through me and I fed it to him the only way I knew how and smiled inwardly when I heard him gasp. He wasn't the only one who could create desire and I knew for a fact I could pull up a lot of power with it. That was what he wanted; power and I did my best to give it to him.

"Is that being helpful enough?" I growled as wild energy surged through us both.

He sucked in a breath, "Oh it will do." His voice had taken on a warm husky tone, "Now shut up so I can concentrate."

I could feel the sparkles of electricity run through him as he took all of the energy we were creating and focused it to flow through his palms which were flat on the wall behind me. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck stood on end and everything prickled. Flickers of reflected pale blue light danced from his hands. I could sense the path of the force lighting flow through the wall and around the room as he directed it and one by one he blew out all the surveillance equipment. When he was satisfied the cameras were broken he let out the breath he had been holding, I could feel the power withdraw like a waning storm. It left me shaky and momentarily exhausted and I understood that what he had just done was very, very difficult.

"Wow." I whispered in awe when he relaxed against me for a moment to catch his breath.

He drew back to look at me and smiled. "Oh you have no idea what you are missing. We could be amazing together." Then he kissed me lightly on the forehead.

"I was talking about your little force trick!" I snapped tried to pull back from him but his cuffed hands were still looped around me trapping me in a tight circle. "Now what?" I asked trying to get myself back into some sort of normal. I did not like the conflicts he stirred up in me and I felt all kinds of guilty about what had just happened.

"Now we pretend to make out some more until the two thugs who are outside come in to see what happened to all their spy equipment. They'll see us still making out as though nothing had happened and hopefully believe we had nothing to do with it. Then we make our move, do you think you can handle one of these jokers on your own if I can't get a blaster in time?"

"I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

"Oh and I don't suppose you can use that delicious little trick of yours to distract one of them could you?"

"You need to buy me a little time," I told him, "That *little trick* also takes a bit of work and I'm a little out of breath."

"Oh you really do know how to make a man feel good about himself." Ged murmured in my ear then moved just enough to avoid the kick I aimed at his shin. "Feisty!" He grinned.

I made a face and hoped that the guards he was expecting got here sooner rather than later because I was getting a cramp in my neck and my chest hurt where the edges of the binders around my hands dug into me. Luckily for me I got my wish. I was already in a heightened state, tapped into the force along with Ged so when the two armed men came in to see what was going on with the security system I knew exactly where they both were in the room without looking. Ged nuzzled my neck using it as a pretence to see what was happening. He could feel me tense and his teeth grazed my skin, reminding me to wait. He shifted slightly lifting pulling his arms over my head so I was no longer trapped, "We'll only get one chance to get a clean shot at this." He whispered in my ear "After that it will be messy. I don't like messy."

I was about to give him a rude retort but he put stop to that with another passionate kiss. I felt as though I had suddenly been drafted into a very bad holo drama but it did its job. For a long moment no one moved or spoke and then one of the guards laughed in that slightly embarrassed manner people do when they walk in on a couple making out. He watched for a moment and then he started making jokes with his partner about taking turns with me next. This had been Ged's plan all along, sex put people off balance and turned men into idiots which was exactly what Ged had wanted.

I reached out with the force and showered the closer of the two guards with a blast of lust. I knew it had worked because I heard him suck in his breath and let his gun clatter to the floor. The change in mood took his partner's attention away from us for a moment, but a moment was all Ged needed.

He spun around, pushed me back, force pulled the gun to him and opened fire. The two men were dead before they even knew what had hit them.

"Well, I'm glad one of us knows how to use that thing." I told him.

For a second neither of us moved and then he was all business as he went through the pockets of the two dead men. He found what he was

looking for, used it and the binders which cuffed our hands fell open with a soft snick.

“You really should learn, while they are not as elegant or beautiful as lightsabers they do come in handy sometimes.” Ged replied as he removed the ID tags and key-cards and then started stripping off the clothes of the guard closest to his size.

“Thrawn said the same thing once. I don’t like guns, they’re too loud.” I said taking one of the card-keys he held out to me.

“Too loud?” He just shook his head. “You never cease to surprise me, you know that?”

“Lucky me.” I replied dryly. “How long before what you did gets noticed?” I asked watching him strip off and change into the clothes from the man he had just shot.

“I don’t know but I don’t think we have time to dance if that’s what you are asking.” He said once he was dressed. “What do you think?” He asked modelling his new look as one of Lee Vander’s thugs.

“I think the colour is crap and that coat makes you look like a scoundrel from a Corellian smuggler bar.”

He grinned at me. “What’s the matter you don’t like scoundrels?”

“No.” I replied tartly. “I’m not a big fan of the scruffy and unpredictable.”

This made Ged grin even more. “So what you’re saying is I looked better with no clothes on?”

“You’re impossible!” I snapped.

“I get told that a lot.”

“So now what?” I asked picking up the second weapon, looking at it as though it might bite me.

“Here, that’s a modified carbine, it’s a good weapon. I guess Vander hasn’t completely gone rebel, this was an Imperial issued weapon.” Ged said and he showed me how to hold the blaster and where all the right switches were. “Safety, stun and kill. If you have this on kill try not to point it at me.”

“I’m not taking this!” I said trying to give it back to him.

“Yes, you are. This is not a good place for close hand to hand combat, no one else here will have a lightsaber so fighting with one, especially in a place like this, is like bringing a butter knife to a gunfight.”

I looked the weapon over. “Are you still taking the other one?” I asked hoping he wasn’t relying on me to be the shooter in this game because if he was we were lost.

He nodded. “It never hurts to have more weapons.”

“Me with a gun sounds like a really, really bad idea to me.” I grumbled. I turned the weapon over in my hands trying to decide where to put it.

“It goes over your shoulder, like this.” He said showing me.

So I slung the carbine over my shoulder and scowled at it. It was extra weight and unfamiliar but he was right, you could never have enough weapons and this was a fight against unknown enemies.

“It could be worse.” He said, “We could be facing an army. So far the only people who seem to know we are here are Vander’s and I think he’s gone rogue, running his own mission off any official grid.”

“Okay, do you have more brilliant plans?”

He grinned, “Do you want to pretend to have your hands tied behind your back or do I need to put the binders back on?” He asked as he dangled a pair of binders from a single finger.

“If you try to put those binder-cuffs on me I will kick your ass all the way to Tatooine.” I told him sweetly.

“So being tied up not your thing?”

“You’ll never know!”

“It could be fun!”

“Keep that up and I’ll actually learn how to use this thing by using you as target practice.” I tapped the blaster in my hands.

He laughed. “Okay so pretending to transfer you as a prisoner is out but do keep it in mind because I’m not wearing these clothes for the fashion statement and we might need a ruse if there are people around.” Ged said with a grin. “Come on, we need to go.”

“You have a plan? A different plan? One that doesn’t involve me in hand-binders backed into a corner making out with you?”

“As I said, doing that was better than the alternative.”

“Really?” I raised my eyebrows at him but he didn’t elaborate so I pressed the point. “So a plan? Do you have one?” I pressed.

“Yes, find that traitor Vander and kill him then get the off this planet before all hell breaks loose.”

“How do you even know where to go to find him?” I asked.

“Because I know exactly where we are and I know him. He will probably find me.” He replied as we walked out of the cell into the small detention processing area. He spent a few seconds at the computer then searched the small desk and smiled when he found my satchel along with his lightsaber and his chrono. He tucked his lightsaber into an inside pocket of the coat, put on his chrono and tossed the satchel to me. “This is yours I believe?”

I did a quick inventory and was relieved to see all my stuff was still there including my lightsaber. “Care to enlighten me?” I asked.

“This is the special operations command centre. It’s hidden deep under the palace. It was part of the Ubiqtorate.” He replied quietly as he checked to make sure the corridor outside of the room was empty. “I helped design this place when it was renovated.”

I glanced at him in surprise. “What? You what? How?”

He smiled gesturing for me to follow him. “Did you not ever think about why everything I did was cloaked in secrecy? When you lived here did you ever wonder why you so rarely ever saw me on Coruscant or why neither I nor my people have joined overtly with Thrawn’s fleet? Or did you really just think I was the Emperor’s pretty boy wonder?”

“Well, no, yes, maybe.” I shrugged, “It sometimes crossed my mind, especially when I was on board the *Virulent*, but I assumed Thrawn and you had your reasons and he gets testy when I bug him too much about all this secrecy, cloak and sabre stuff.” I replied. “Mostly though I just thought you were another annoyingly, arrogant Imperial Navy guy with a nice ass and a cute smile.”

“You think I have a nice ass?” He shook his head at me in amusement then serious shifted in his features. “I ran a division of Imperial Intelligence that specialized in off the books black ops for the Empire when the Emperor was still alive.”

“The Bureau?” I whispered in awe. “You ran the Bureau?” The Bureau of Operations had been a very hush hush part of the Ubiqtorate that specialised in covert and black operations. No one spoke about the

Bureau, the people who were in it or what they actually did openly or in any detail. They were like ghosts in the machine. Suddenly I looked at Ged through completely different eyes.

“Not the entire Bureau, no, I headed up the infiltration and counter intelligence divisions. I helped design this facility to augment our operations, with the Emperor’s approval.”

“Really for real?”

Ged nodded, “Really for real. Now I run the secret operations aspect of what is left of the Empire, what we’re now calling the Imperial Order. We had hoped to infiltrate the New Republic and deal with them on two fronts with Thrawn on the visible offensive and us behind the scenes” Ged explained while walking quickly with the security of a person who knew exactly where he wanted to go next.

“So what happened then, I mean you’re here and Jarack is dead.”

“Vital information started to get out from what should have been a closed system.” He replied, “Behl was the agent on lead, trying to ferret out the leak. We thought it was a rebel spy who had somehow managed to infiltrate us not the other way around.”

“So why did Vander turn against you?” I asked.

Ged’s jaw clenched tightly as he shook his head and I understood that whatever it was it was personal and I would not learn about it now.

“Okay then, I have another question.”

“Why am I not surprised.” He looked at me sideways and offered a slight smile. “Shoot.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?” trotting to keep up with him.

“That’s easy, it was need to know only and you did not need to know.” He answered as we made our way quietly down the corridor.

“So if you’re really this all important super spy master why couldn’t you override the shuttle car controls?”

Ged just gave me a grin and waited for me to work it out.

I stopped dead in my tracks, “Oh I am so going kill you when this is all over! You let him capture us didn’t you? You knew at some point he’d figure out where we were and he’d find us. You knew that chip was trackable!”

“He is a traitor and he needs to be eliminated. He knows too much.” He said simply, his hand at the small of my back pushed me back into motion. “It was easier to allow him to take us than spending time to tracking him down.”

I gave him a look and decided to try again. “We have a deadline to keep to, remember?”

“I am well aware of that.”

“He should have killed you, killed us when he first had the chance but he didn’t so what does Lee Vander want from you?”

He looked at me for a moment and then said, “Codes.” He said, “He wants me and my command codes so that he can gain access to the mainframe. The mainframe contains all the information on everything we’ve ever done, all the missions, all the agents and double agents, everything. It would be invaluable to the New Republic and incredibly damaging to Thrawn and myself. He needs me and he won’t kill you because he thinks he can use you as blackmail to get what he wants from me.”

“Why doesn’t he just slice it? I mean I thought you trained your super sneaky spies to deal with that sort of thing?”

Ged laughed quietly, “You do have a way with words.” He said, “Because if he tries to do that the entire mainframe will self-destruct and he wants the information intact. When I designed the system I had the very best coders create it but the Emperor added something which no one else knew about to make sure it was virtually impossible to bypass the standard security.”

I suddenly remembered what the Emperor had done with the entrance to his secret museum room. “He added a force activation element didn’t he?”

Ged nodded, “Even the very best slicers in this galaxy would not be able to bypass the security. Only a force user can do that and only one with the right codes. And I am the only one left who fits these criteria. Vander is a brilliant agent but he is not force sensitive.” We came to a turbo lift. Ged punched a long code into the keypad and the door opened.

“Come on.”

I shook my head. “No way!” I hissed. “This is a trap waiting to happen, a trap, men with guns, a hoard of angry fuzzy things with sticks and stones and sarlacc knows what else could be waiting at the other end of where ever that thing stops!”

He shook his head in annoyance. “Oh, we do not have time for this!” he muttered and grasped my arm, yanking me into the waiting turbo lift. “Get in and shut up.” He said standing beside me in the lift, the door closed softly and before I could protest he punched in another lengthy code into the control panel and the lift jolted downward quickly.

“What the hell!” I snapped. “Did you not hear me mention all manner of nasty traps waiting for us?”

“I heard you.”

“So what you like getting hit in the face, tied up and stunned?”

“Not on my favourite things to do list.”

“Then why are you walking into a trap?”

“We’re not.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, “Because you didn’t know your best friend and super duper secret special ops guy had turned against you!”

He rolled his eyes and smiled, “Good point, but this time trust me it’s not a” He started but he didn’t have time to finish because the lift door opened and we stepped out into a dimly lit room full of computers and we were not alone.

I turned to Ged and punched him hard on the arm. “See? Trap!”

I swung the blaster I had a death grip on upwards but before I could pull the trigger Ged grabbed a hold of the barrel with one hand and gently pushed it back down. “Oh no you don’t.” He said, “You’re not so skilled with that thing and I would hate to see you hurt someone who is actually on our side.”

The man who had been standing by the large row of databank and computer system stepped forward and saluted Ged smartly. “Sir, it is good to see you again.”

Ged returned the salute and nodded, “You too Morrish.”

“Morrish? The *Virulent’s* captain?”

The man stepped forward and shook my hand. “Yes, although I’m no longer the captain of the *Virulent*, she’s in Captain Wulfman’s capable hands now. It’s nice to see you again Miss Gabriel.” He politely ignored the blaster in my hand and the fact that I had just aimed it at him.

Ged turned to me and smiled slightly at my shock. "You see you should learn to trust me a little bit more." He said then turned back to Morrish, "It's Vander and he's tracking us, how much time do we have?"

"About ten minutes unless they've changed how their tracking equipment works."

"Right then let's get started...." Ged began.

"Tracking? Tracking how?" I interrupted, feeling as though the world had just shifted sideways and I had been bounced into another universe with no road map.

"In the satchel you're carrying." Ged replied as he went to the computer consoles to study something Morrish was showing him. "You don't think they'd really leave our things so easily accessible without a reason do you? They put a tracking device in your bag."

I began a frantic search of my satchel but Ged's sharp command to stop halted me in my tracks. "Leave it! I'll need it to find Vander. They can't locate us here it's protected by a scrambling shield so they'll think we're in a service tunnel. We'll have about ten minutes before they will get suspicious."

"Your orders sir?" Morrish asked bringing us back to the problems at hand.

Ged didn't answer him directly. "Is the *Lightning* in orbit?" He asked.

"Yes sir, cloaked and waiting."

"Merlyn come here." Ged said. I did as he commanded. He had become someone I didn't recognise. Someone I didn't argue with.

"Put your palm on this will you?" He gestured to a number pad. I looked at him and he made a face which said *just do it we don't have time for games*.

I did as he asked and sucked in my breath. "Wow."

"You know?" He asked.

I nodded. "I do."

Ged sighed. "Damn it." He swore and took a deep breath, "Morrish, change of plans. We'll need a secure uplink to the *Lightning* and then I want the entire database uploaded as quickly as possible. Forget copying

it. After that, wipe and destroy the mainframe completely and spider mine this place."

"Yes Sir." Morrish nodded as he started to work on the computer system, "Sir, if may ask did you find Behl?"

Ged glanced at me and then shook his head. "He is believed dead."

"How sir?"

Ged glanced at me and then said, "Lee Vander executed him and should you or your men see Vander you are to use extreme prejudice. He must not escape."

"Understood sir." Morrish nodded but there was sadness in his eyes. "I'm sorry about Behl sir, he was a good man."

"Yes, he was so do me a huge favour and get yourself and your team the hell off this planet in one piece on schedule. I do not want to lose any more of good people."

Morrish grinned. "Yes sir," he repeated, "The rendezvous point?"

"Remains as planned."

"And you sir?"

"The Grand Admiral has ordered that I escort Miss Gabriel home safely back to the *Virulent*. We have an alternate way off the planet. We will meet with the fleet at the rendezvous as planned."

I rolled my eyes.

Morrish gave me a grin this time. "Understood sir."

Ged looked at his chrono, checking the time "Okay, we need to go now." He said dragging me by the arm, across the floor to the wall opposite the turbo lift. He touched an invisible panel and a narrow opening appeared. "Come on." And before I could protest he pulled me into the narrow, dimly lit passageway.

"What the hell was that all about?" I hissed wriggling my palm at him.

He sighed slightly, "I would like to assume that Vander doesn't know what you can do, that he believes you're this Amyshka Pavjaska, which was a nice touch by the way, and that he doesn't know who you really are but I cannot take that risk. You saw the access code when you touched the panel right? You know how to get into the mainframe?"

“Yes.” I nodded.

“If he had known, if he thought for a second you could get him what he wanted this would be a very different scenario right now and if there are more people who can do what you can then I am not taking any risks. The information on that mainframe is far too important for that.”

“Why was it still here? I mean the rebels could have found it at any time.”

Ged shook his head. “No, that room is not in any blueprints or plans. Unless you know what to look for and have the right access codes it is virtually impossible to find. Vander knew of the mainframe’s existence but not its exact location or how to get there. This place is built like a maze for a reason. He was hoping I would lead him to it by letting us escape and tracking us.”

“He let us escape just so you would lead him to a computer?”

“Didn’t you think that our get away was just a little too easy?” Ged asked giving me a look.

“You had to kill two men and what was that whole suck face with Merly make out session all about if it was so easy?”

“Well if it had been too easy...” He started to explain but I flapped a hand at him shutting him up.

I glared at him. “I really hate all of this spy stuff.”

“You have so many wonderful talents Merly but being a covert agent is definitely not one of them.” His chuckle annoyed me even more.

I ignored his insult. “Did you plan for all of this?”

“Plan is not exactly the word I would use, but I worked around some of the given eventualities. No plan is set in stone but probabilities can be calculated when one knows all the players involved, unless of course you happen to be with the party. I would not have found out about Vander until it was perhaps too late had it not been for you. You, my dear, are a wild card.”

“You sound like Thrawn.” I grumbled.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, the man is a genius although how he manages to keep you in line is beyond me.”

I wanted to argue with him but thought the better of it; this wasn’t the right place or time, “So now what?” I asked with a sigh.

“Now I get you out of here and I go and wait for Vander to find me.”

“Not on your life!” I said standing still. I suddenly had a very bad feeling about all of this and knew that whatever was going to happen it did not involve leaving Ged on his own, that was not an option.

“Merlyn come on!” Ged hissed. But I didn’t budge.

I folded my arms across my chest and stared at him defiantly, “No, either I come with you or I stay right here take your pick but I’m not leaving you alone and nothing you do or say will make me. You brought me along for a reason and I don’t walk away in the middle of a job.”

Ged weighed his options and then shook his head. “Come on then but you have to do exactly what I tell you, no deviations. Are we clear?”

I nodded.

“No! I want to hear you say it. Our lives depend on it.”

“Okay.”

Ged made a face.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Yes sir. I will do exactly as you tell me.”

“Alright then, now maybe we can get out of this alive. Let’s go.”

The small passage came out into a quiet hallway that looked as though it had not been used in some time. We walked quickly until we reached a set of stairs and another turbo lift. I didn’t argue with Ged when he chose the stairs. We moved up them quietly, leaving through the exit door like ghosts. He led me through a maze of hallways until he found a room he felt was suitable and once we were there he dug the tracking chip out of my satchel and tossed across the floor.

“If you have to you use this.” He said showing me again how to fire the blaster. “No messing around. Okay? Aim, pull the trigger just like I showed you just... try not to shoot me, okay?”

I held the weapon like he had shown me and nodded. I didn’t like how it felt in my hands but I wasn’t going to argue with him about it. I watched as he moved the table and chairs that were sitting in the middle of what appeared to be a small meeting room to one side. He picked up one of the chairs and placed in the corner on the same wall as the door. “Sit there and don’t move until you have to. Watch for my signal or use

your head but wait until the right moment.” He instructed, setting the blaster he had carried on the floor beside my chair.

“How will I know?”

“You’ll know, you’ve been well trained but you need to trust that I also am very well trained. Do not give your position away too soon.”

“This is going to be messy right?”

“Hopefully not, I hate messy but it does feel that way.” He said cracking the first grin I had seen since we had entered the mainframe room. “I just need them to not see you when they enter the room. There’s a better chance of being noticed if you stand, when people scan a room they do so on a single plane first and they’ll be distracted by looking at me. I am hoping they won’t turn around to see you behind them.”

“How many do you think there will be?”

Ged thought about it for a moment, “If he followed training he’d have had a nine man team with himself included, we’ve taken out four so that leaves four more and Vander. They will come in first protecting him so that he gets a better idea of our defences and where the enemy fire is coming from. He must not know you are there, he will suspect but he won’t know for sure and I hope to keep him distracted enough that he’ll be too busy to wonder, so please trust me when I say I can handle this. I’m very good.”

I swallowed and took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Now let’s make this place more comfy shall we?”

I nodded, sitting down on the chair in corner watching as he used the force to blow out all of the lights except the centre one leaving the corners of the room dimly lit. Once that was done he took out his lightsaber and stood in the middle of the room, directly in line with the door. I watched as he seemed to almost transform. He drew a deep breath and, just like I had been taught, he started the process of finding his centre. It seemed like a good idea so I did the same, tapping into the force which swirled around us like invisible fire. It made the waiting easier and it helped that we didn’t have to wait for long.

They came in hard. I suppose they thought rushing us would be better than being picked off one by one but they were wrong. Ged was right there were five of them in total. It was like watching a blurry dance on fast forward. As soon as the door opened Ged ignited his lightsaber and the brilliance lit up the room in a blaze of purple. The light from his weapon and the fact that he was right in front of them meant no one had time to look around, no one saw me at all as I sat in the darkened corner,

my heart beating so fast I thought it would burst free from my chest and fly away.

Ged had not been joking when he had said he was good at what he did. He moved incredibly fast to deflect the blaster shots back against the first two shooters who went down very quickly creating obstacles right at the entrance. Two more armed men came into the room, shooting and managed to create a certain amount of chaos by ducking low and avoiding the initial reflected blaster bolts. I started to stand up but Ged, glancing my way, shook his head. ‘No, wait.’ I heard him push into my mind so I did the hardest thing in the universe to do, I waited.

He moved with a fluidity that was beautiful, reminding me of water in slow motion. The violet blade of his lightsaber and the brilliant white-blue of the blaster bolts mixed to create a stunning yet deadly dance of colourful fire that reflected all around the room. The air filled with the scent of burning ozone, dust and seared flesh. My stomach churned as I fought to get past the horror of it all. There were four armed men in total and when they were all dead Lee Vander stepped past the mess of bodies into the room to face Ged. He looked pissed.

“You always did like to show off.” He said as he walked up to where Ged stood calmly.

Ged, who did not even seem winded, just stood with his lightsaber at the ready looking strangely relaxed and calm but I knew that was not the case. Lee Vander had been his friend, a close ally and confident and I understood from personal experience what a betrayal on that level could feel like. This fight would be anything but easy no matter how it appeared.

“You should have walked away from this Lee.” Ged said breaking the silence between them.

“I can’t. The Empire is dead, it died with Palpatine. You and that alien purporting himself to be a Grand Admiral cannot save it; I don’t even know why you are trying, yet here you are, Ged Larsen the idealist.” Vander spat.

“I am here because the alternative is so much worse.” Ged replied softly sending a shudder down my spine.

“There is no phantom enemy coming to get us from far away!” Lee snarled, “That is a lie Palpatine fabricated to keep his power to himself and everyone else in the galaxy scared.”

“You are an idiot if you believe that.” Ged shook his head. “So now what, you want me dead? Will that make it all better? Will killing me help you find a place with your new friends?”

“You just don’t get it do you? After all this time how is it that you still do not understand?” There was such anguish in Lee Vander’s voice that it almost broke my heart to hear it.

“Then enlighten me.” Ged hissed through gritted teeth. I could feel his ire and anger rising, stirring the force around him and it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“I should have been informed before you made the decision to slaughter hundreds of people. You should have given me access to the mainframe. I could have stopped them, I could have prevented their deaths. You should have trusted me to do what was right. You should have listened to me!” Lee yelled.

I saw sorrow flicker across Ged’s face. “Is that what all of this is about?” He shook his head in disbelief. “All this time and you still carry the weight of a command decision that was never yours to make.”

“I was right! You should have listened to me! Because of you hundreds of good men and women died. People I cared about, people who trusted you.”

“You think the rebels you now serve were any better? They blew up two manned space stations and killed thousands. For people trying to assassinate one person they went a bit overboard don’t you think?”

“They did what they had to do to get the job done. You had a choice, if you had only listened....”

“I did listen, Lee. I read the reports and I understood everything.” Ged replied softly “I had all the information I needed but it wouldn’t have mattered I could do nothing but let events take place as planned. And I’d do exactly the same thing again if I had to.”

“Which is why I can’t let you live or lead anymore.” Lee said as they began to circle each other, looking for weaknesses and mistakes. Jyrki and I had done exactly the same thing but we had both been force users this was very different.

I listened to the conversation without context or understanding, hearing the undertones of regret, sadness and hatred in the words of both men. Suddenly I understood what Ged had known all along, there was no going backwards and every moment led us closer to whatever it was that destiny had in mind for us. It was unavoidable and suddenly my heart ached for Thrawn.

“I suppose you tried to turn Jarack Behl into betraying me as well?”

“He was there! He barely made it out alive. He had every reason to hate you but instead he chose not to. He simply could not see reason. He was blinded by his loyalty to you.”

“So you executed him?” Ged said flatly.

Lee’s answer sent chills down my spine. “He made his choice. It was the wrong one.”

“So you decide who gets to live or die based on whether or not they agree with you? How does this make you any better than me?” Ged asked masking the sadness in his voice with anger.

Lee didn’t have an answer instead he went for his weapon and I saw the surprise in Ged’s eyes as Lee pulled out a lightsaber from an inside pocket of his long jacket and turned it on. It was a brilliant white-blue in colour and from the way he swung it around he had been well taught to use it. “You think just because you use the force you have exclusive right to this kind of weapon?” he asked. “You think you are special? You are nothing!”

Ged didn’t answer. He just took a breath, using his fury and anger, drawing the force and readying himself. He let the fight begin as Lee Vander made the first move mistaking Ged’s calm for hesitation.

The art of combat using lightsabers as weapons is a long and time honoured one. It was an intriguing weapon really, when one thought about it because there were no edges, only energy and all parts of the blade cut, sliced and killed. The weapons had been in use for centuries, if the stories I had read were to be believed. Most jedi made their own lightsabers, it was a sort of rite of passage.

Lord Vader had once shown to me how they worked, explaining that high levels of energy were generated by a power cell directed through a series of focusing lenses and energizers which converted that energy into plasma. This was directed through focusing crystals which lent the blade its properties and allowed for the adjustment of blade length and power output. Once focused by the crystals, the plasma was sent through another series of field energizers as well as modulation circuitry within the emitter matrix which focused it even more, making it into a coherent beam of energy projected from the emitter. For a fairly small weapon it was pretty complicated and I had been very happy that I didn’t actually have to make my own.

It was, Lord Vader had said, considered to be an elegant weapon and it became a symbol of the Jedi who had been seen as peace keepers for centuries during the time of the Republic. After the fall of the Old Republic the Jedi fell into disgrace and the lightsaber became a weapon of myths and children’s bedtime stories. I had never seen one until I had

watched Lord Vader practice with his and that had been a delight. I could see the appeal of it when compared to more conventional weapons; it certainly had its uses, especially when it came to not making a mess. A lightsaber blade cauterized what it cut so there wasn't a lot of blood even when the wounds were grave; the down side was the stench.

I wondered as I watched Ged and Vander fight if that was what it would have been like to watch Jyrki and me, or Lord Vader and his son duel. The dance of whirling light must have been glorious to see. Not for the first time did it occur to me that using lightsabers was more of an art than anything else and watching these two men was more like watching a dance of light than a duel between enemies. The arcing of light as the blades swirled around in semi circles crashing together and then separating again was truly beautiful but every time the blades clashed together the sound set my teeth on edge.

It took a fairly high degree of skill and training to use a lightsaber well, well enough not to end up slicing one's own arm off or worse. Lee Vander was strong and had been well taught and as I watched him I realised I knew the style of fighting he was using with an intimacy that was unnerving. It reminded me so sharply of my Bunduki Master that I had a sudden and surprising pang of longing for a teacher who was long gone. Lee had been very well taught and I recognised some of the moves he was making.

They fought like caged tigers just waiting to let their true natures loose, both holding back to see when the other would make a mistake. They were surprisingly evenly matched. For every attack Ged made Lee had a counter attack and it went on and on until I could see Ged's anger flash across his face as he started to draw on his dark side powers.

The air crackled as Ged went on the offensive and began to hammer at Lee with a ferocity that scared me. With the combination of force power and skill there was no way that Lee could maintain his defence so he switched his own tactics and with his left hand he drew out a second weapon from his coat. I suddenly got a sickening feeling in my gut that things were about to turn. At first I thought it was a blaster of some sort but then I realised that was not the case.

It reminded me of a weapon known as a t'on-fa, a sort of rounded stake with a short perpendicular handle at one end, looking a lot like a nightstick that the Coruscanti police used to use. This one, made from a dark material, was unusual because one end had been sharpened to a vicious point. Lee braced the length of the weapon against his arm like a shield and thrust it upwards defensively as Ged swept his lightsaber down in what would have been the killing blow.

The purple blade came crashing against Lee's arm but instead of slicing through the stake and cutting Lee's arm in two the lightsaber's

blade spluttered and failed. I quickly covered my mouth to stop myself from yelling out.

Cortosis. Lee had a bunduki defence weapon made from Cortosis ore, a very rare, brittle and fibrous material whose conductive properties caused lightsabers to temporarily short out on contact. This lovely attribute made it an incredibly useful material for creating anti-lightsaber melee weapons even though the effects of cortosis never lasted very long, a minute or two at best, nor did it permanently damage the lightsaber in any way. Sometimes one of two minutes makes the difference between life and death.

I tensed watching as Ged, suddenly distracted, hesitated for just a second to look over at where I was, where the second blaster lay at my feet, leaving Lee enough time to swing his lightsaber around for the kill. Even if Ged wanted to he would not be fast enough to force pull the blaster to him and then fire it at Vander.

I didn't even think I just brought the carbine I gripped tightly in my hands upwards, aimed and shot, hoping I didn't hit Ged by mistake. The energy bolt blasted Lee's hand, hitting his lightsaber. It shattered, sending a shower of sparks all around, forcing him to let it go. Useless, it clattered to the floor loudly.

For a moment no one moved and then Lee snarled, swung the cortosis weapon around, point facing towards Ged and thrust it upwards just as Ged managed to ignite his own lightsaber again. He swung the blade around with all his might, stepped in as close as he could and drove the blade through Lee's chest. For a second the two men stayed in that eerie embrace then Ged staggered under Lee's weight before finding his balance to take two steps back as Lee's body crumpled to the floor, the cortosis blade rolled from his hand and clattered on the polished tile.

"Nice shot." Ged gasped, bending over to catch his breath.

"I was aiming for his head." I replied looking at the blaster in my hands as though it would suddenly bite me.

Ged shook his head and grimaced. "Either way, it was a good shot." He switched off his lightsaber and the room was plunged into dimness again.

"We need to get out of here." I told him staring at the body of Lee Vander.

He tucked his lightsaber back into the inner pocket of the coat and pulled it tightly around him. "There's a hidden service lift over there." He said nodding to the far wall. I suddenly understood why he had chosen this room.

I went to pick up the second blaster which had been sitting on the floor but he shook his head. “No, leave it,” He nodded, “I’m hoping we won’t need it and one should be enough now come on!”

And before I could ask him why he didn’t want the gun, we were slipping into the small turbo lift, the ride down felt as though it lasted forever and when we stopped Ged winced. “Turn left, go straight. It should lead to a service entrance on the south side.”

“Is everything alright?” I asked. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, fine. I pulled a muscle that’s all.” He hissed. “Quickly, we can’t stay here.”

I nodded and did not call him on the lie he had just told me because we had other problems to deal with. We made our way as quickly as possible to the door which was exactly where Ged said it would be. It was locked so I used my lightsaber to open it and we stumbled through the doorway into a small courtyard. I swore as the air filled with alarms.

I looked around, the courtyard was empty and quiet but I recognised this part of the castle and smiled. “Stay here.” I told Ged and before he could argue I ran to try and find a speeder. It didn’t take me long and luckily for us it was an open top, maintenance vehicle which was easy to slice into.

“We’re going to have to do something about your criminal tendencies.” Ged joked laughing to himself which turned into a coughing fit. I frowned at him but he shook his head.

“Come on, get in so I can get us to my ship and get the hell off this planet before someone comes to find out why this door triggered the alarm system!”

He moved awkwardly as if he were in pain. When I offered my hand he shook his head and drew strength from the force. I felt its pull and gave him a glare. Once he was in seated beside me, I slammed the speeder on full, not really caring about traffic or anything else. We nearly crashed into several speeders and a taxi before I got into the right lane.

“Merly you drive like a mad rebel, slow down you’re going to get us killed.” Ged hissed as he gripped the speeder’s sides with hands that showed white knuckles. “I can’t believe I let you fly us here in that rattletrap of yours but you’re even worse in a speeder.”

“Complain, complain, complain!” I snapped.

The trip through the back lanes of Coruscant took us a little longer than I had wanted and by the time we made it back to the building where my ship was Ged was pale and quiet.

We ditched the speeder at the landing pad and made our way quietly to where my ship sat. The relief that flooded through me when I saw she was still there, intact and untouched was so great it almost made me physically ill. I unlocked the door and we boarded as soon as the ramp hit the ground. As soon as we were onboard I closed the door only to watch Ged suddenly slump against the bulkhead clutching at his side.

“It’s nothing, a bruised rib or something. Just go!” He said through clenched teeth waving me off before I could see what it was that was wrong. “Move! We have to go. Get this bird in the air now. That is an order.”

“You are not the boss of me, you know.” I told him as I headed towards the cockpit with him in tow.

He chuckled. “I will try to keep that in mind. But trust me when I saw we need to get off this rock before anyone decides to track that speeder!”

I turned to look at him. “Tell me something I don’t know!”

“Just get us in the air!”

With a shake of my head I slipped into my chair and fired up the manoeuvring engines. I skipped the pre check and ran the quick start procedure. The ship hummed to life. We slipped into Coruscant air space quietly, just one of many. I contacted the air traffic control and gave them our fake id and fake flight plan. The controller who gave me the ok to go sounded bored.

I listened to the radio chatter of Coruscant air space-control but nothing was out of the ordinary. I almost felt sorry for the New Republic, there was a storm coming and they had no idea what would hit them. Only once we had passed the Coruscant security grid and planetary shield marker did I let go of the breath I had been holding. The planet, a sphere of light and dura-steel, quickly receded as we pulled away. I should have admired its extraordinary beauty but the only thing I could feel was relief.

I looked at Ged who was standing behind me using my chair for support. He was pale and breathing hard. “Set these co ordinates.” He said and I punched the numbers he gave me into the nav computer. “How long until we can jump?” He asked.

I looked at the computer and the map, “At this speed we’ll be out of the planet’s gravity well in a few minutes.”

He nodded. "Use the back ways Merlyn. I don't want to get stuck on one of the main Hyperspace lanes."

"That will add more time to the journey." I said setting the new directions into the nav computer.

He nodded. "I know. My people don't expect me to arrive the same time as the *Lightning*. Thrawn asked me to keep you safe and this is as good a way as any."

"Oki-doki." I said and as soon as the nav computer beeped to let me know we could jump into hyperspace I punched it. The stars around us swirled and spun, then elongated and vanished. I set the auto pilot on and then got up out of my chair just in time to catch Ged who sagged against me.

He let out his breath. "Okay now I think I need your help. I need to lie down." And he drew back the coat he was wearing to show me and I sucked in my breath. His shirt was soaked in blood. "The cortosis blade." Ged explained, "I couldn't avoid it."

I swore. "You are a bloody idiot!"

"You got the bloody part right." He grinned then hissed in pain.

I helped him up, got him to one of the crew bunks and helped him lie down. When I looked at the wound I winced for him. It was a nasty looking piece of business. Gingerly I touched the area around it he grunted in pain, laughing the way people do when they don't want to scream in agony. For a second his eyes rolled back into his head and the sudden whiteness of his skin scared me. I smacked his face.

"Ged!" I yelled at him.

His eyelids fluttered and he looked at me. "Ow." He muttered.

"Don't you dare die on me!" I told him as I got out the med-kit.

"Not my plan." He grimaced. "Don't hit me again that hurts!"

"Stop being a big baby and lie still." I started to cut the shirt carefully and peeled it off him as gently as I could. The wound, just under his ribs, was ugly and there was a lot of blood. Unlike a lightsaber the cortosis blade had not cauterised the wound and all the movement from fleeing the Imperial palace had not helped the matter. I waved the small medical scanner over it and for the first time felt a sense of relief.

"How bad is it?"

"You must live under a lucky star Ged Larsen." I said digging through the medical kit for bacta injections and wound cleanser. "Lee's blade missed everything important. It looks a lot worse than it is and it's not as deep as I thought so we won't need to find an emergency medical ship. You'll have a lovely scar though."

Ged struggled to sit up but I pushed him back down, pinning him to the bed by as he fought against me. "I don't find this lucky at all. You're undressing me and I can't even enjoy it." He struggled against my hold on him and it made him wince.

I made a noise of disgust. "Men, don't you ever think of anything else?"

"Occasionally." He replied, still trying to sit up. "But it's difficult when a pretty woman is stripping you out of your clothes."

"Well make the most of it fly-boy it's the only time I'm doing this." And I said those words I realised it was the truth. As much as I liked Ged and as much as when he kissed me he could make me shiver, I did not want anything more from him and when, just for a moment our eyes met, maybe he understood this as well.

He gave me a smile and went to say something but instead he hissed in pain through tightly clenched teeth and writhed when I touched the wound with gauze to clean it.

"Stay still damnit! I need to clean out the wound and it will hurt."

"I can deal with the pain. Give me that I'll do it myself." He said reaching for my hand.

I rolled my eyes, slapping his hand away as grabbed for the gauze I was holding. I shook my head in disgust. "Men. You always want to play the tough guy. Just for once will you listen to me?"

"Oh Merlyn," he whispered with a grin, "You really are a force of nature."

With a sigh I sat back and stared at him. "And you are a bloody pain in the ass." I told him and before he could protest I pressed the hypospray to the side of his neck and sedated him. He fought it until the sedative won and sleep took him. I sat for a second to catch my breath.

It had been Navaari who had shown me the right way to treat wounds such as this. Out on a hunt there were no medical droids or facilities so one had to be self sufficient and animals tended to either bite or claw in a fight. I could hear his voice in my head, assess the damage, clean the wound, staunch the bleeding then repair everything you can and

bandage it all up well. This was not the first time I had helped a wounded man but I really hoped it would be the last.

Once the puncture in his side was thoroughly clean I pumped it full of bacta. It never ceased to amaze me how quickly it started the healing process. For a moment I waited to be sure it was working then I closed and bandaged the wound. Once that was done I just stared at him, stroked a stray lock of hair from his face, and covered him with a blanket. Sleep softened his features making him look even younger than he really was.

Suddenly exhausted, I sat back with my head against the bulkhead listening to the thrum of the engines and the sound of Ged breathing, allowing myself a few moments of rest before I cleaned up the mess. I took one last look at Ged to make sure he was really just sleeping and then left him to rest. I made my way to the fresher to wash up then went to my cabin to change into more comfortable clothes. Once that was done I felt a lot better.

I sat at the little table in the galley with my hands cradled around a cup of hot tea wondering about everything that had happened. It felt very surreal and I did not understand the half of it. I hoped that when he felt up to it Ged would explain more but I somehow doubted it and in any case he would be sedated for a good long while, the wound needed time to heal and I knew him well enough to know if he was awake that would not happen. Weary, I suddenly found myself missing Thrawn above all else and a stab of guilt at what had happened in the palace detention room made me sigh. I didn't even know how to begin to explain any of what had happened and I was pretty sure Thrawn would be furious with me for getting into the mess in the first place, never mind the whole kissing part.

Since there wasn't anything else to do and nowhere to go I got up, poured another cup of tea, grabbed a book from the small book shelf near the table and made my way back to the cockpit. I settled into my seat with my feet on the dashboard but I couldn't seem to concentrate on the book in my hand. The slow route to the rendezvous point would take just over a week and I was glad I had enough fuel and supplies for a long run on board although we could stop at Tatooine if we needed to. I wasn't worried about that. I was more concerned with what would happen once we returned to the *Virulent* and eventually have to tell Thrawn that Jarack was dead because one of the Empire's finest black-ops agents had turned traitor amongst other things. He wasn't going to like it, he wasn't going to like any of it at all.

My ship had been a gift or, better to say, a reward for a job well done. She was really the only thing that was truly mine and I loved her. Lord Vader had named her after his long dead wife and Thrawn had translated that name into his native language. I had lost count of many hours I had logged in space in this ship but she was my second home, I

stored my most precious belongings in my ship and I knew almost every nut and bolt, shimmy and whine of her engines.

While Ged slept and recovered, I spent a fair amount of time in the engine room. It was warmer than the rest of the ship and it gave me something to do. There was nothing wrong but I liked to check and double check everything all the same. When I wasn't messing around in the engine room I was in the cockpit reading or studying star charts. Lord Vader had been almost an encyclopaedia of knowledge about star system and their planets and I had learned from his example. All knowledge was worth having Thrawn liked to say and he wasn't wrong.

I missed Lord Vader greatly. He had been unpredictable, bad tempered and often harsh but I had learned to see beyond all of that. I had learned to love him, after a fashion, and his death still left a gaping hole in my life which surprised me. It felt to me that my entire life had been marred by the deaths of people I loved and now I mourned for Jarack as well.

When Thrawn had confirmed that it was Jarack who had gone missing I had hoped for his safe return. Jarack had been a quiet constant in my life for years, delivering letters, playing messenger and becoming a friend whose presence always brightened my day. Seeing his death through the images from the data chip Ged had given me had been like a slap on the face and now that I had time to process it I cried for his loss.

As we travelled through the quieter hyperspace lanes it felt to me as though the entire galaxy was holding its breath, waiting for whatever was about to happen next to decide the course of history. It was a turning point and I sincerely hoped that Thrawn could accomplish because what he was trying to do. I had the feeling that if the Empire was not somehow re-established then chaos would ensue.

We were too far off the main hyperspace lanes to receive reliable holo transmissions so there was no way to know how things were going or what had happened on Coruscant with the arrival of Thrawn's fleet.

I wished I had known more about his plans but he had never one to let me in on his military secrets. I suppose it was his way of keeping his private life separate from his military one but often I felt very left out. There was an entire galaxy of things I didn't know about the man I shared my bed with and, mostly because I was nosey and wanted to know everything, I found this a little frustrating. I prayed that he could retake Coruscant and re-establish Imperial rule so that we could all have some sort of normal life, not that I really knew what normal was but I hoped I could get used to it.

In between the engine room and the cockpit was the tiny galley and it was here Ged found me when he woke up. His presence changed the atmosphere but I tried not to let it show.

He sat down stiffly and gestured to the cup in my hand. "Is there more of that? I'm thirsty."

"You should be resting." I told him as I got up to make him tea and something to eat.

"I've rested enough." He replied. "How long have I been out for anyway?"

"Nearly two days."

"You sedated me for two days?" He asked with an edge of anger in his voice.

"No, you really were just asleep for most of it. I pumped you full sedatives and pain killers so I could clean the wound and stitch you up because you were being a poo-doo head but after that I only kept up with the pain meds, not more sedation. You came out of it a couple of times but only for a few moments. The rest was all you, your body needed time to heal, it happens sometimes after being badly injured with pointed stick thing to the gut." He nodded and accepted the cup of mint tea I gave him. "There's honey in it, drink it all. You're dehydrated."

He cradled his hands around the cup, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." I said as I sat back down. "I hope you like it, it comes from Tatooine."

"No I meant for fixing me up. I didn't know you were a medic on top of all your other skills."

"Oh." I shook my head with a laugh, "No I'm not a medic Ged, I just learned some basic first aid."

"You could have fooled me." He said. "I took a look at the job you did on me and it's pretty good all things considered."

I nodded. "I watched carefully as someone patched me up and I have a great memory." I lied a little, I didn't want to have to explain about my relationship with the Dantassi, that was far too private.

Ged raised his eyebrows at me. "Patched you up?"

I shifted around in the seat and hiked up my skirt to show him the still vivid white scar that adorned my thigh.

Ged swore. "How the hell did you get that?"

"It's a long story." I said smoothing out my skirt again.

"And you don't want to talk about it?"

"Do you want to talk about why Lee Vander went after you like that? Why he turned traitor?"

Ged made a face and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I see your point but you deserve to know some of it at least." He sighed and took a sip from the still too hot tea. "It was a command decision I had to make a long time ago. I can't go into details but it had to do with a ground op that went terribly wrong. I had a choice to make and regardless of how I chose people were going to die. I had to choose how many, I chose the smaller number."

"It was a mess. We all lost people we knew." He drew a deep breath. "Unfortunately, among those who died were two of Lee's best friends and, although I didn't know it at the time, also his lover." He stared into the mug he was holding. "It never occurred to me that he couldn't handle it, that even though he was one of the best pilots and agents I ever had the privilege of serving with, he was trained for these sorts of incidents, trained to kill without impunity and yet he couldn't get past this one incident. How he must have hated me to have carried that hatred for so long and I never saw it. All that time he was lying to me and I never saw it once."

He was suddenly so sad and I didn't know what to do about it. Lee had been his friend but had also betrayed him and that was a difficult thing to reconcile with. I understood that probably better than most. "Sometimes it's hard to see especially from people we love and think we know. Most of the time I think they can be the hardest of all to read." I remarked.

He nodded. "You know, the Grand Admiral knew I planned on asking for your help, you know, to retrieve Jarack Behl. He told me that you were well suited for just such a job although I don't think he liked the idea much."

"I do know," I replied with a small nod, "He mentioned it to me but I wasn't in much shape to go gallivanting across the galaxy on some hopped up rescue mission and in the end maybe that's a good thing, after all now you know who your traitor was and he's been dealt with."

"I had no idea it would turn into such a clusterfuck though. I had not expected that at all. I figured it would be a straight forward in and out job because I trusted my source. I trusted Lee with my life, what a joke that turned out to be. If you hadn't been there I might very well be dead."

Whether you like it or not, that little trick of yours in being able to pull the memories from objects saved my life, saved our lives.”

I wasn't going to argue with him. "I'm sorry about Jarack."

Ged regarded me for a moment and then said, "So, the scar on your leg, how did you manage to get that because a bacta treatment shouldn't have left such a scar."

"I was on the wrong end of a hunt and a dip in a tank was out of the question." I said cryptically.

"A hunt?" He asked with a healthy amount of skepticism. "What the hell were you hunting?"

"I wasn't hunting anyone. I was the one being hunted." I said tightly. It surprised me that I was still angry over what had happened on Myrkr.

Perhaps he sensed that because he didn't press further, "Who patched you up?"

I mulled over my answer for a bit then told him. "Thrawn did." And then seeing the look on his face I decided that perhaps I had better explain a little more. "He was looking for something on a planet called Myrkr and we ended up being hunted by a lunatic named Ormante who thought he could outwit Thrawn. It wasn't pretty and that's where I got the scar on my leg."

"Myrkr? You've mentioned that name once before but I don't know much about the planet."

"No one does really, or at least mostly no one unless you count smugglers and thieves who use the planet as a hide out. The planet was removed from the Imperial Planetary database at Palpatine's request."

"Why?"

I smiled. "Because of what lives there." I said and then tried as best I could to explain about the ysalamiri and the vornskrs.

"The creatures that can repel the force? The ones he has on board the *Chimaera*?" Ged whispered, "No wonder Palpatine wanted that planet kept hidden but what did Thrawn want with them on Nirauan? I remember you mentioned the subbasement was full of them but you didn't say why. I thought he was using them to keep that dark Jedi clone of his in line"

"He needed them for his cloning project. It has something to do with preventing cloning sickness when a clone is grown at accelerated speed."

"That explains his success. I thought he was using pre existing clones while waiting for his own to mature but now I see he was growing his own at an accelerated rate. The only place I can imagine him finding such facilities would be at Wayland."

"Yes, but how did you know?"

Ged gave me a grin.

I sat back in disgust and made a face. "Yeah, yeah super secret spy for the Emperor. Where the hell were you when Thrawn was looking for the co-ordinates to that planet?"

"I didn't say I knew where it was just that I knew of its existence and it isn't as if Thrawn ever asked me about this stuff." Ged retorted, then said more quietly. "I knew Thrawn had access to clones but he was very tight lipped about the details. So how do you know all of this?"

"Because," I said with a shrug, "He showed me his facility on Nirauan."

"He has cloning chambers on Nirauan as well?"

I nodded. "He called it his testing ground but I don't understand it much. All I know is the ysalamiri give me a hell of a headache and I can't think of anything worse than being made force blind by being around them."

"Force blind? Is that what you call it? It's an apt description. It's part of the reason when we meet in person he comes to my ship. I can't stand being in their proximity, that and he likes to keep our meetings somewhat clandestine."

I nodded, "The life of a Grand Admiral, secrets and more secrets followed by still more secrets."

"So how do you know about the cloning facility on Nirauan if it is supposed to be so... secret?"

I made a face and took a deep breath, "Because to satisfy my curiosity and prevent me from poking my nose where it didn't belong, he showed the facility to me." I replied, "But he was smart, he knew the ysalamiri would make me sick, he'd seen it before so he showed me the lab just the once, explained a little about what he was doing, I saw some of his work and then I got the hell out of there as soon as I could. It hurt. I never

understood what it was that made being force sensitive so special until then. He could have told me all the lies in the galaxy then and I would never have known." I rubbed the back of my neck, all of my muscles ached. "It was quite the set up that he had and he was growing clones and not just human ones at that."

"Nirauan, well that makes sense. If he is accelerating clone growth then he would have needed a testing area. If I understand the science correctly from my discussion with the Emperor accelerating clone growth leads to madness, especially if there is any consciousness transference involved. It has to do with the force and its influence on all living things. Remove the force and you can manipulate the growth cycle without risking cloning sickness." He said, "That's very clever."

I made a face. "We are talking about Thrawn remember." I didn't ask what he meant by consciousness transference but it made me shudder and remember the dreams I had been having about the emperor reborn.

"How could I forget?" He said as he reached over to put his hand on mine but I pulled away, fiddling with my cup instead. Suddenly the galley felt too small and the silence that engulfed us was awkward and uncomfortable.

He nodded and toyed with his empty tea cup. "You look tired. When did you last sleep?"

I shrugged. "I napped here and there but"

"You were too busy playing nurse." He interrupted, "Well, I'm fine, the wound is healing well and I even put a clean bandage on it myself. I've rested enough for now so please go and get some rack time. You look like crap."

I looked at him and nodded. "Okay."

"Okay? Just like that okay? No arguing?"

"No arguing, you're right, I'm tired." I stood up and put my cup in the sink, "The ship is on auto pilot with all the proximity alerts set to maximum distance. We're in the middle of hyperspace on one of the quieter routes, I checked the engine about two hours ago and for the first time in ages there's nothing else to do, I do have one question though."

"I'm all ears."

"How did Morrish know you would be there, at the palace? I thought you told me no one else but Vander knew."

"Morrish had been on Coruscant for several days dealing with another matter."

"That room, the one that housed the mainframe? He was there for that right?"

Ged nodded. "He was to copy the data from it so that when we complete our move to the secondary Imperial stronghold we would have complete records of every op, every mission and agent that was available just in case the recapture of Coruscant doesn't go as planned. However, that plan had to change once you told me about your remarkable talent. As soon as I knew what you could do, I knew that no matter what precautions the Emperor had taken to safeguard the information on those databanks it would never be enough. So it became imperative to get to that room. I knew that Morrish would be there if he had stuck to the time frame of the plan we were all working on. That took precedence over everything, which is why we went there first."

"You took an awful risk."

"It paid off and I had a lot of help." He said giving me a sly, knowing grin.

"So the *Virulent* has a new captain?" I asked switching topics, suddenly feeling uncomfortable again.

Ged watched me for a moment then nodded, "A lot has changed since you were last stationed on board. Go and get some sleep we can talk about this when you are more awake."

I nodded. "You're not at all what I thought you were." I said over my shoulder.

"Is that good or bad?" Ged asked.

"I don't know yet." I answered and made my way to my cabin. Sleep when it came was without dreams and I was grateful.